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Óllscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

**“NUN, MARRIED, OLD MAID”:
KATE O’BRIEN’S FICTION,
WOMEN AND IRISH CATHOLICISM**

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SUMMARY

The settings of Kate O'Brien's novels span late nineteenth early twentieth-century Ireland and are concerned with the lives of middle-class women. This thesis argues that O'Brien's rendering of the interiority of the bourgeois family and the inner lives of middle-class women, reveals a site of the public discourse of Church and State. O'Brien's representations of female characters are analysed through the framework of the Family, as well as the social, cultural and religious background of this period, focusing particularly on the influence of Catholicism on women's roles as wives and mothers in Irish society. O'Brien provided a powerful dramatisation of the lives of women that were determined by the particular modes of femininity advocated by Irish society and Church teaching, as specified by Church writings, especially Papal encyclicals, on woman's role in the family. Catholic Social Teaching edicts on women's roles in the family were incorporated into the 1937 Irish Constitution, which in Article 41 especially, defined a woman's role as that pertaining to "her life within the home" (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.2.1).

Chapter One sets the historical and ideological context in which the "struggles" of the characters subsequently analysed takes place. Chapter Two looks at instances of struggle in O'Brien's work for some mother characters, who exemplify State and Church discourses of ideal womanhood, and those around them, while Chapter Three explores the instances of protest in the lives of ideologically-bound wives. Chapter Four focuses on the struggles of single women who are precariously positioned with regard to the family. The common theme shared by O'Brien's female characters is their negotiation of personal desires and energies within and without the structures of the family unit. By focusing on the individual experience, O'Brien questioned ideological perspectives of middle-class women's homogenised acceptance of their prescribed roles in the family and in society, and made the seemingly private, public, a space for ideological analysis and debate.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>A-R</i>	<i>The Ante-Room</i>
<i>Cloak</i>	<i>Without My Cloak</i>
<i>Critical Study</i>	<i>Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study</i>
<i>Flower</i>	<i>The Flower of May</i>
<i>FDA</i>	<i>Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing</i>
<i>Lavelle</i>	<i>Mary Lavelle</i>
<i>Literary Portrait</i>	<i>Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait</i>
<i>Music</i>	<i>As Music and Splendour</i>
<i>Nuns</i>	<i>Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland</i>
<i>OPD</i>	<i>Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien</i>
<i>P.P.</i>	<i>Presentation Parlour</i>
<i>Pray</i>	<i>Pray for the Wanderer</i>
<i>Spain</i>	<i>Farewell Spain</i>
<i>Spices</i>	<i>The Land of Spices</i>
<i>Summer</i>	<i>The Last of Summer</i>
<i>Teresa</i>	<i>Teresa of Avila</i>
<i>Women</i>	<i>Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961</i>
<i>Writing Life</i>	<i>Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life</i>



Reproduction of a portrait of Kate O'Brien by Mary O'Neill.

INTRODUCTION

The Research Subject: “Nun, Married, Old Maid”

In Kate O’Brien’s travelogue, *Farewell Spain*, she wrote about the artist El Greco:

[T]he residue of all emotional experience tends in spirits large enough to be at last of natural and universal value, whatever the personal accidents of its accretion (O’Brien, *Spain*, 146).

Whilst not all of O’Brien’s characters can be described as “large spirits” on the scale of an artist like El Greco, the “accretion” and “residue” of emotional experience drives the plots of most of O’Brien’s fiction. Any reading of O’Brien’s work must ask whether or not “universal value” can be derived from such close attention to emotional patterns or whether each is of an individual cast with little or no relevance to wider truths, and, in the case of this thesis, about Irish women’s lives. In a post-structuralist world, critics are sceptical of claims to universal value, and any attempt to see fiction as a version of history or “truth” must also fail. However, an argument can be made for reading the emotional “accretion” and “residue” of experience in O’Brien’s work as an aestheticisation of her disquiet with ideological perspectives that presumed middle-class women’s homogenised acceptance of prescribed roles. By homogenised is understood here a perspective that assumes that middle-class women had the same experiences, aspirations and access to resources. By focusing on individual experiences, O’Brien’s novels, as the literary critic Adele Dalsimer wrote in *Kate O’Brien: A Critical Study*, “quietly protest against the fates of middle-class Irish women who are sheltered, stifled, and forced into prescribed roles as wives, mothers, or spinsters” (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, xv). The question I ask here is how this “protest” is manifested in O’Brien’s female characters, a query that underpins my analyses of a variety of women in O’Brien’s fiction. My title, “‘Nun, Married, Old Maid’: Kate O’Brien’s Fiction, Women and Irish Catholicism”, provides the framework used to explore O’Brien’s “quiet protest”. The predominant family model in O’Brien’s fiction is patriarchal and the development in the novels from ambivalence to antipathy is complicated by the tension between the security of being in a family, and the family as, more often than not, a stultifying place for women on account of the expected conformity to specific roles.

In her memoir *Presentation Parlour*, O'Brien admitted that she was "never much interested in political deviations and always concerned as to persons and their private decisions" (O'Brien, *P.P.*, 33). Here, I argue that in O'Brien's fiction, these "private decisions" can be read primarily as consequences of personal dilemmas and the resolutions to these dilemmas are made under the influences of the social, cultural, political and religious *mores* of early twentieth-century Ireland.¹ In addition, the contexts of "private decisions" in O'Brien's fiction frequently have wider implications, so I approach the novels as part of the social world that in Ireland included the religious sphere and the historical moment in which O'Brien's texts are located. Thus, I look at how the texts engage with the religious and cultural context of their times, as artists respond to events and issues around them and their work in turn, is also constructed by social and political codes. Much critical attention of O'Brien has centered on whether she was a radical or conservative writer, or indeed, a popular writer of romantic fiction.² Such readings of O'Brien's fiction can be explored by examining how she negotiated the cultural and religious dictates of her day. O'Brien's work is conditioned by warring energies between the individual and society, religious prescriptions and the desire for freedom, as well as the difficulty of inhabiting prescriptive gender roles. While topics such as class and family loyalty can reveal conservative traits in O'Brien's fiction, female autonomy and the questioning of Catholic religious tenets comprise a source of radical engagement, considering the socio-historical context of the period of writing.

In *The Land of Spices*, Anna Murphy, a twelve-year-old pupil of *Sainte Famille* plays the game, "Nun, Married, Old Maid", on a holly leaf during recreation (O'Brien, *Spices*, 118). There is no narratorial explanation of the game, which suggests that the game is a commonplace pastime for young Irish girls in the early twentieth century. I take this game as a template for reading the novels of O'Brien in the context of their powerful dramatisation of the lives of women that were determined by the particular

¹ The timeframe and publishing dates covered by the texts span a period during which different names were assigned to the State of Ireland. The relevant denominations are used in the thesis as applicable: Free State (1921-1937), Éire/Ireland (1937-1949), Republic of Ireland (1949 to date).

² A review of *Mary Lavelle* (1936) in the *Times Literary Supplement* by Patricia Craig in 1984, for instance, cited it as a "superior type of romantic novel" and "unorthodox to just the right – acceptable – degree" (Craig, 623). Craig was an important literary biographer and a novelist. However, her review signals a reluctance to confront the issue of lesbianism. Neither can the novel be termed romantic, as there is no happy marriage at the end, as the genre of romantic fiction demands.

modes of femininity, of “Nun”, “Married” woman and virginal “Old Maid”. Representations of women in each of these roles are portrayed throughout O’Brien’s fiction, with an especial interest in marriage and spinsterhood, and a secondary exploration of convent life and sisterhood as an alternative family structure and experience of mothering. With the exception of Reverend Mother Helen Archer in *The Land of Spices*, nuns are generally peripheral figures, but their symbolic occasions and importance cannot be overlooked. These roles were those advocated for women by Irish society³ in the 1937 Irish Constitution and in Church teaching, as specified by Catholic Church writings, especially Papal encyclicals.⁴ Given the structures of the Irish Constitution of 1937 and Church teaching, marriage was inseparable from motherhood, and mothers figure powerfully, either as a powerful absence or as overbearing presence, or as the literal threshold between life and death itself. While the Constitution focused solely on woman as mother, O’Brien’s fiction explores what happens to women who cannot or do not want to fit this role, and the portrayals in her fiction of nuns, married and single women, challenges the framework of the family, the unit enshrined, in the Constitution, “as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society” (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.1.1). Although often read by early critics as an apologist for the middle classes and as an unambivalent promoter of bourgeois marriage and romance, I argue that O’Brien in fact offers us a critique of the stifling lives married women were asked to lead in the Ireland of the new Irish State, as enshrined in the Constitution and as preached by the Catholic Church. In her fiction, mothers play a pivotal role in family dynamics, either as a domineering presence or as a palpable absence, and this thesis goes on to argue that O’Brien’s treatment of a specific type of middle-class motherhood in a number of different plots is not an endorsement of a certain sort of self-sacrifice, but a political indictment of the family produced by policies that encouraged female self-negation. As the critic Clair Wills argues in “Women, Domesticity and the Family: Recent Feminist Work in Irish Cultural Studies”, “the ideological construction of the familial sphere was intimately bound up with the public image of Ireland as a traditional rural society” (Wills, “Women, Domesticity and

³ The term “Irish” is used to denote the people and institutions of the Republic of Ireland.

⁴ Papal encyclicals are letters addressed by the Pope to the Catholic bishops throughout the world and through them to the whole Church. They are used as a mode of papal teaching to apply Catholic Church beliefs to the contemporary world in the religious, social, economic or political spheres. For a description on the origin and practice of the issuing of encyclicals, see the Introduction to J. Michael Miller. Ed. *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*. Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996. See also <http://www.papalencyclicals.net>

the Family”, 37). O’Brien’s fiction explores the claims of the family on its members and affiliates in rural middle-class society, exposing and challenging the Church and State edicts that framed the powerful discourse of Irish family life in the early twentieth century, in which the private lives of women were rendered a public concern.

O’Brien’s novels are set in the period encompassing the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when Irish Independence was the politically dominant concern. The novels span the period 1860 to 1939, and explore the social, cultural and religious context of the lives of middle-class Irish women during this period and up to the end of the 1950s, when O’Brien published her last novel. There are clear thematic strands that run through O’Brien’s novels, such as the negotiation of familial, gendered and cultural dynamics, love and autonomy, and the importance of education for women. O’Brien was interested in familial codes and she provided in her fiction a powerful dramatisation of the lives of women that were determined by the particular modes of femininity advocated by Irish society and the teaching of the Catholic Church.⁵ These particular modes of femininity demanded the prioritising of the common good over the individual. In the texts, this results in a marked ambivalence, as O’Brien struggles with a commitment to a healthy community and equally with a commitment to a healthy, self-determining individual. Given that the community based on the constitutional family was defined by women’s selflessness, this means that a very fine line, and a difficult relationship between internal and external doctrines, is negotiated. This has resulted in much difference of opinion amongst her readers, with conservative readings able to claim O’Brien as easily as more radical readings. The opposition between the individual and the community, and between the struggle between religious instruction and internal desires and energies, are centred in the body, which acts as a site of ideological inscription of middle-class capitalism against religion, and specifically, a woman’s body acts as the inscription site, and the boundary of a new evolving State. The lines that define a boundary are the same lines that run through O’Brien’s torn protagonists, who exhibit the psychological and emotional distress of being pulled in contrary and often clashing directions by their own desires and instincts and by the ideology that conscripts them for the common good.

⁵ In order to avoid repetition, the term, “the Church”, is used to denote the Roman Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland, without prejudice to the ecclesiastical status of other denominations.

The 1937 Irish Constitution, as a document of the newly re-titled State, Éire/Ireland, serves as a useful framework for reading O'Brien's female characters, and as the literary critic Gerardine Meaney argues in *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics*, its boundaries were rewritten on the bodies of women.⁶ The tenets of the new Irish State and its Constitution are specifically explored in *Pray for the Wanderer*, which was written at the time of the unveiling of Éamon de Valera's 1937 Constitution, and it implicitly provides the boundaries against which many of the female characters are tested in O'Brien's work. The 1937 Constitution was heavily influenced by Church doctrines, as the Articles pertinent to this thesis discussion were directly influenced by views expressed in papal encyclicals, disseminated through Catholic social teaching principles, and later adapted into State discourses and policies. The implications of the Constitution, "now the proffered Constitution of the Irish Free State was before the world" (O'Brien, *Pray*, 30), and the Irish cultural context are explicitly discussed by the characters throughout *Pray for the Wanderer*, and this thesis argues that a preoccupation with the 1937 Constitution can be read as a powerful shadow that underlies all of O'Brien's subsequent fiction, forming a framework for fictionally exploring the ideological repercussions of State discourses for women across all of O'Brien's fiction.

Pray for the Wanderer is markedly different in style from O'Brien's previous work as its remit was influenced by the experience of being a newly banned author, and it is more explicitly political. Through the main protagonist, Matt Costello, O'Brien explains her view of novel writing: "I speak only for myself when I say that my job is to re-create life, not as it is, good God, but as the peculiarities of my vision and desire assume it. I give you life translated to my idiom." (O'Brien, *Pray*, 120) Matt continues: "I take the emotional life of adults for my field... To understand my own subject at all means naturally a great deal of general observation of human behaviour, but emotional growth – and decline – is my quarry" (123). In O'Brien's fiction, love is the emotion that highlights the difficulties between head and heart, especially when love is transgressional, as it generally is in her work. Transgressional is understood here to mean love affairs in the novels that do not endure or lead to the conventional ending of

⁶ See Gerardine Meaney. *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics*. Dublin: Attic Press, LIP Pamphlet, 1991. Reprinted in Ailbhe Smyth. Ed. *The Irish Women's Studies Reader*. Dublin: Attic Press, 1990.

marriage, as a lack of belief in the endurance of erotic love encompasses all the depictions of love affairs, whatever the gender, marital status or class of the love objects. As the literary critic Eibhear Walshe writes in his orienteering literary biography, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life*, O'Brien's "novels are reflections on loss, on love and on the failure of desire and the resultant melancholia attendant on such loss" (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 43-4). The difficulties that transgressional love affairs present are depicted in the context of religious edicts as O'Brien dramatises the negotiation involved when human nature clashes with religious idealism. Although her characters, on the one hand, often express dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church's official teaching, on the other hand, O'Brien appears to side with spiritual love, as the critic Eamon Maher writes in "Love and the Loss of Faith in the Novels of Kate O'Brien": "Human love is imperfect for her because it is wrapped up in egotism and tainted with sin. It compares very unfavourably with the love of God, which is eternal." (Maher, 97) At the same time, O'Brien's work is more likely to show loneliness, pain and inner death as a result of choosing the demands of God's love over human and earthly love. The lives of O'Brien's characters are subject to a religion, as the historian Louise Fuller observes in *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture*, that "as a belief system is given cultural expression in devotional activities and in people's values, customs, mores and behaviour patterns" (Fuller, xvi). While O'Brien's characters are steeped in this culture, throughout the religious and cultural topics runs the crucial issue for O'Brien of freedom: freedom to choose one's role in life, to pursue an education and to experience love.⁷ Accordingly, female sexuality is also explored in the lives of the single and married women in O'Brien's texts, an issue in which the contribution of the Church to constructions of women's sexuality and gender roles is prominent.

As a member of the Catholic Bourgeoisie of the early 1900s, O'Brien's acutely observed questioning of both positive and negative aspects of Catholicism, that pertained especially to middle-class women, dramatises what the feminist poet Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, calls the struggle between self-respect and respectability, with regard to the construction of femininity

⁷ Freedom is examined in the context of pre- and post-Irish Independence, patriarchy and class. The issue of censorship and O'Brien's view of Éamon de Valera's Ireland (a term that has come to evoke a period of a dominating paternalistic, conservative, religious ethos), is confronted in *Pray for the Wanderer*, published after O'Brien's previous novel, *Mary Lavelle*, was banned, and the "alarming signposts" of the newly unveiled 1937 Irish Constitution were also subject to her scrutiny in this novel. Similarly, in *The Last of Summer*, the onset of war provoked the debate about Ireland's policy of neutrality.

and gender roles.⁸ In this thesis, I understand gender according to the feminist critic Toril Moi's useful declension in "Feminist, Female, Feminine" where she distinguishes between "'feminism' as a political position, 'femaleness' as a matter of biology and 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristics" (Moi in Belsey and Moore, 117). As Moi argues, "patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for 'femininity' are *natural*." (123) The naturalisation of femininity as a single register to understand women is evident in papal encyclicals that stress "the law of nature" in matters pertaining to women's roles. For instance, in the pioneering 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ("Of New Things" or "Of the Condition of the Working Classes"), reproduced in Claudia Carlen's *The Papal Encyclicals 1878-1903*, Leo XIII (1878-1903) wrote that "woman is by nature fitted for homework" (Section 42 in Carlen, Vol. 2, 252). In 1931, Pope Pius XI (1922-39) issued an encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno* ("On the Restoration of the Social Order"), as a commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, and when writing about the rights of the worker and the payment of sufficient wages, Pius XI wrote: "It is an intolerable abuse ... for mothers ... to be forced to engage in gainful occupations outside the home to the neglect of their proper cares and duties" (Section 71a in Carlen, Vol. 3, 426). Pius XI's edicts in this encyclical were based on Natural Law Theory which was taken from Greek philosophy, particularly the work of Aristotle and integrated into Christianity by Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-74).⁹ This theory understands world order as a well-regulated, patriarchal, and hierarchical world order, with the community having a more privileged status than the individual. Adherents believed in a fixed divine plan and a static worldview, a view that would facilitate the practice of religion based on rules, and the negligibility of confrontation with a changing, evolutionary world.¹⁰ Thus, as Catholic Church Social Teaching principles,

⁸ See Adrienne Rich. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1986.

⁹ Greek literature was copied and recopied down the ages. Thus, the views and influences of major writers, such as those of Aristotle on Saint Thomas Aquinas, contributed significantly to Western and Christian culture. I am indebted to Mark Humphries, Professor of Ancient History at Swansea University for his helpful comments and advice on early Christianity. For an introduction to the topic, see Mark Humphries. *Early Christianity*. London: Routledge, 2006.

¹⁰ As a result, knowledge was perceived, as Louise Fuller writes, "as existing outside, independent of, and in a sense, superior to, the person. People were supposed to conform to a ready-made corpus of knowledge, rather than question it" (Fuller, 12). This method of teaching, called the Thomastic or Scholastic approach, was the type used in the seminary at Maynooth, the main training college for priests in Ireland. Consequently, this perspective infiltrated crucial areas in which Catholicism held sway, such

informed by Natural Law Theory, were incorporated into the 1937 Irish Constitution, the manner in which the Church and State constructed definitions of sexuality, as well as roles and activities deemed proper for each designated sex, is of interest here. In addition, the historiographer Joan Scott's argument in *Gender and the Politics of History* is persuasive.¹¹ Scott maintains that gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power in that sexual difference is socially organised with bodily differences given established meanings. In this way, it is a useful dimension to employ in historical analysis. O'Brien engages with this concept throughout her fiction by the depiction of various adult/child relationships, thereby arguing that mothers, for instance, are not always the most judicious "natural" carers of their children.

The naturalisation of gendered roles extended to working definitions and State interest in the family. Catholic Church teaching also played a role in the construction of the patriarchal family model that underwrites the Constitution, as expressed, for instance, by Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*. Leo XIII wrote: "A family, no less than a State, is ... a true society, governed by an authority peculiar to itself, that is to say, by the authority of the father" (Section 13 in Carlen Vol. 2, 244).¹² Thus, in Ireland, it can be argued that the public and private spheres are particularly entangled, as women's bodies were policed by both Church and State. This is in spite of the fact that the family itself was deemed private by the Church, who furthermore, brooked no interference by the State in the concerns and rights of the family. While O'Brien's novels are concerned with time and place, specifically Irish bourgeoisie culture, and unrelentingly individualistic, they test the limits of the individual place in her times, rather than question such a place in the light of any radical political vision. O'Brien, in *My Ireland*, when recalling her time at university in Dublin that coincided with the Easter Rising, wrote: "I am conditioned against ideologies and dogmas" (O'Brien, *My Ireland*, 113). Although not locked to any left wing critique, any revolutionary dogma, nor to any

as education, religious practice and issues of morality. See Louise Fuller. *Irish Catholicism Since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004.

¹¹ See Joan W. Scott. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

¹² The irony of the sanctity of the family is especially poignant when one considers that for many women and children, life within the home was one of oppression, subordination, abuse and violence. The clergy often persuaded estranged wives to reconcile with abusive husbands, which indicates the paramount importance of maintaining the ideological sanctity of the family and the woman's place in that family, despite empirical evidence to the contrary.

recognisable ideological practice, O'Brien's fiction is, this thesis will argue, quietly, insistently and consistently political.

Kate O'Brien Bibliography

Kate O'Brien was born in Limerick in 1897, the seventh child of Tom O'Brien, a horse dealer, and Catherine Thornhill. Her mother died less than a year after giving birth to her tenth child, when Kate was five years old. As a result, O'Brien was boarded at a local French-run convent, Laurel Hill, with her three older sisters, and she remained there for thirteen years. O'Brien's father died at the completion of her schooldays, and she then commenced a degree in University College Dublin on the proceeds of a scholarship. She graduated in 1919 and moved, the following year, to England, working briefly as a journalist and teacher. Subsequently, she accompanied her brother-in-law, Stephen O'Mara, to the United States as his assistant, on a fundraising campaign for the new Irish State. This was followed by a ten-month assignment as a governess in Spain. On her return to England, O'Brien married the Dutch journalist, Gustaaf Renier, but the marriage ended within the year. She returned briefly to journalism and wrote four plays, one of which was a success and on foot of the latter, began her career as a writer. As well as writing novels, she also had a successful career as a literary critic in both Britain and Ireland that included reviewing fiction for *The Spectator* from 1937 to 1952, although the respective works are considered significantly different in subject matter and execution. She also wrote a column for *The Irish Times* called "Long Distance" from 1967 to 1971. Interestingly, O'Brien was the first to see the potential of Samuel Beckett's novel, *Murphy*: "Murphy, at least for this humble examiner, sweeps all before him. [...] For the right readers, this is a book in a hundred thousand." (O'Brien quoted in Walshe, *Writing Life*, 70) Walshe writes that her "exuberant praise" for the novel was noteworthy, as she was usually "reserved as a critic" (70). O'Brien was awarded The Hawthornden Prize and The James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *Without My Cloak* (1931), and in 1939, she was awarded a French literary prize, the *Femina Vie Heureuse*. She lived mainly in Britain, except for a ten-year period during the 1950s when she lived in Roundstone, Co. Galway. Kate O'Brien died in Kent in 1974, aged seventy-six.¹³

¹³ Details on Kate O'Brien's life were sourced from the following works: Eibhear Walshe. *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006; Tina O'Toole. Ed. *Dictionary of Munster Women Writers 1800-2000*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2005; John Logan. "'Family and Fortune' in Kate O'Brien's Limerick" in John Logan. Ed. *With Warmest Love: Lectures for Kate O'Brien*. Limerick: Mellick Press, 1994, pp. 105-130.

O'Brien's literary career began in 1926 with the successful staging of the play, *Distinguished Villa*, and based on its success she was invited to join PEN, the writers' association, in 1927. The following year, she began to write *Without my Cloak*, a historical novel and family saga. The novel was published in 1931, to great success, gaining O'Brien two prestigious literary awards, the Hawthornden and James Tait Black memorial prizes. O'Brien's ensuing body of fictional works, which are realist in form, comprise the very successful historical novel set in Spain, *That Lady*, a contemporary novel set in Spain, *Mary Lavelle*, and a second historical novel set in Mellick, O'Brien's fictional Limerick, *The Ante-Room*. She also wrote two novels exploring Ireland's cultural ethos in the 1930s and in the period preceding World War II, *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer*, respectively. *The Land of Spices* was set in a convent, and includes the theme of the importance of education for women, as does *The Flower of May*, while O'Brien's final novel, *As Music and Splendour*, explored the lives of two Irish girls who work as opera singers in late nineteenth-century Italy. O'Brien's other works comprise the biography, *Teresa of Avila*, a memoir, *Presentation Parlour*, and two travel books, *Farewell Spain* and *My Ireland*. *Farewell Spain* is a travelogue written during the early days of the Spanish Civil War, and the book contains a series of reminiscences, impressions of, and insights into Spain, its people and its culture. O'Brien's second travel book, *My Ireland*, presents O'Brien's impressions of the various parts of Ireland she had visited during her lifetime. *Presentation Parlour* was O'Brien's last full-length work, and recounts impressions of her early years in relation to the influence of her five aunts. The chronology of O'Brien's work is as follows:

Title	Setting	Year of Publication	Place of Composition
<i>Without My Cloak</i>	1860-1877	1931	Kent/Sussex Border
<i>The Ante-Room</i>	1880	1934	Limerick
<i>Mary Lavelle</i>	1922	1936	London
<i>Farewell Spain</i>		1937	London
<i>Pray for the Wanderer</i>	1937	1938	Bridgham-Groombridge
<i>The Land of Spices</i>	1904-1914	1941	Oxford
<i>The Last of Summer</i>	1939	1943	Croyle, Cullompton
<i>That Lady</i>	1576-1592	1946	Clifden, Corofin
<i>Teresa of Avila</i>		1951	Roundstone
<i>The Flower of May</i>	1906	1953	Roundstone
<i>As Music and Splendour</i>	1886-1891	1958	Roundstone and London
<i>My Ireland</i>		1962	Limerick, Dublin, London
<i>Presentation Parlour</i>		1963	Limerick, Dublin, London

I have chosen to work with lesser-known novels, *Pray for the Wanderer*, *The Last of Summer* and *The Flower of May*, as well as the popular *Without My Cloak* and *The Ante-Room*, because the first point of negotiation for the characters in O'Brien's novels is the family, which in O'Brien's novels is a microcosm of the Irish cultural ethos. In this way, O'Brien politicises the family and the family space by utilising it as a structure that must be engaged with when individual personal desire threatens the collective familial bond. O'Brien's first novel, *Without My Cloak*, published in 1931, established the concerns that she explored throughout her work. *Without My Cloak* is a family saga that contains a subtle examination of religious codes, familial codes, cultural codes and the social codes of the bourgeois Considine family. The theme of love is explored through the framework of familial bonds, marriage, motherhood, female sexuality, as well as women's social entrapment. In *The Ante-Room* (1934), O'Brien explored religious, social and familial codes in Ireland during the era of Charles Stuart Parnell, through the representation of a transgressional love affair juxtaposed with the impact on the family of the impending death of the matriarch. Moreover, by using the framework of the historical novel genre in this novel, O'Brien questioned whether anything had changed for women pre- and post-Independence. The main protagonist in *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938) is a male writer whose function in the text is to act as a mouthpiece for O'Brien's views, as he struggles with the lure of family on his return to Ireland from London, after a broken love affair with a married actress. *Pray for the Wanderer* is O'Brien's only novel set in a contemporary timeframe, and the cultural context is markedly pronounced. The novel was written after the banning of *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and includes an attack on censorship, the Catholic Church and the ethos of Éamon de Valera's Ireland. This ethos is represented in discussions throughout the novel on the newly presented 1937 Irish Constitution. Through this frame, O'Brien explores the family, as well as woman's role in the family. The particular family model rendered in the Constitution is rejected by Matt, as despite his attempts to settle in Mellick, he finds that the Ireland to which he has returned, has no place for artists. In *The Last of Summer* (1943), the claustrophobic bond between Hannah Kernahan and her first-born son, Tom, is threatened by a visiting cousin from France. The novel centres on the experiences of Angèle Maury-Kernahan who, on a whim, looks up her father's family in Ireland and subsequently, falls in love with her cousin, Tom. The prospect of marriage to an Irishman, in light of her Aunt's hostility, is juxtaposed with debates throughout the text about Irish Neutrality, which is embodied in the portrayal of Hannah

Kernahan. The development of O'Brien's opposition to Ireland's neutrality policy and her response to the banning of *The Land of Spices* (1941) is marked by the ultimate rejection of Ireland by the main protagonist, in favour of a Europe on the brink of war. Lastly, *The Flower of May* (1953), explores the path to independence for the protagonist, Fanny Morrow, in conjunction with the death of her mother and the marriage of her sister, Lilian. *The Flower of May* opens with the marriage of Lilian Morrow and explores the ramifications of marriage on a woman who is unsuited to the selflessness demanded by Church and State.

The negotiation of family dynamics also includes a moral perspective and the teachings of the Catholic Church are employed as the moral authority that informs family edicts in O'Brien's texts. In a letter to her friend, the literary critic Vivian Mercier, O'Brien wrote: "I am a moralist, in that I see no story unless there is a moral conflict, and the old-fashioned sense of the soul and its troubling effect in human affairs." (Mercier, 98) Publicly, O'Brien declined to talk about Catholicism when invited to do so on BBC Radio in 1956. Her grounds for refusal included the fact that she was a lapsed Catholic, as well as, Walshe writes, "the fact that her family would be listening in to the programme most eagerly." (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 107) She was not so reticent in her work, however, and her friend, the critic and short story writer, John Jordan, in an overview of O'Brien's novels, "Kate O'Brien—A Note on her Themes", wrote: "Miss O'Brien has always been immensely attracted by the ritual, liturgical and cultural aspects of the Church and her imagination ... dallies fruitfully with Christian Rome, and all the devotional intricacies of her subjects." (Jordan, "Note on her Themes", 57) While an engagement with Catholicism is present in all of O'Brien's texts, its presence is utilised in different ways. This thesis will argue that Catholic Church views on gender roles can be deemed a political issue in O'Brien's texts, as the sections of the 1937 Constitution relevant to women were informed by Catholic Social Teaching principles, and the series of legislation that affected women enacted during this period and afterwards assumed woman's role as that outlined in the Constitution. In the texts, religious ritual and practice is a daily feature of the lives of the characters, and there are particular incidents of intellectual engagement with religious tenets throughout; as Jordan wrote: "Miss O'Brien's heroines, without exception, may more easily be described as *protestants*" (57). Jordan explained: "I wish to indicate by it an attitude towards life which derives its ultimate rules of conduct, stringent and

comprehensive, from the individual private heart” (58). Thus, personal ethics overrule Catholic Church teaching in situations of moral dilemma in the texts. Agnes Mulqueen in *The Ante-Room*, for instance, does not pursue an affair with her brother-in-law out of love for her sister rather than on account of religious edict.

Consequently, a current of ambiguity runs through the novels with regard to Catholicism, as in spite of O’Brien’s affirmed agnosticism; there is a sense that she envied those who had faith. For instance, in *As Music and Splendour* Clare Halvey says: “I suppose that I have in spite of myself what Grandmother calls “The Faith”. If I have, I’m glad. I imagine I’d be lonely without it.” (O’Brien, *Music*, 142) As Eamon Maher writes in “Irish Catholicism as Seen Through the Lens of Kate O’Brien and John McGahern”, both writers “appeared to believe that they owed a debt of gratitude to the religion into which they were born for introducing them to a faith and a Gospel rich in symbolism and capable of appealing to what is best in human nature” (Maher in Bevant and Goarzin, 96). In this way, religion provides a marker against which modes of behaviour are negotiated, and while O’Brien’s heroines who leave the family may embrace modes of conduct alien to Catholic strictures, incidences of sustained rebellion are rarer in characters that remain within the family unit. For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, I concentrate on the novels, *Without My Cloak*, *The Ante-Room*, *Pray for the Wanderer*, *The Last of Summer* and *The Flower of May*, in which the female characters, mothers, wives and single women, ultimately remain within the family, having negotiated their position within societal and Catholic Church *mores*.

Review of Secondary Material on Kate O’Brien

Despite the success of Kate O’Brien’s novels during her lifetime, her work was no longer popular at the time of her death, and much of it has been out of print for some time. Due to the ensuing critical neglect, therefore, the availability of secondary material is uneven, and what does exist occurs largely in three tiers of time; the 1930s, up to O’Brien’s death in 1974; the 1980s, when there was a resurgence of interest in O’Brien as a result of the re-publication of some of her novels by Virago, as one of the outcomes of second wave feminist movements; and in the 1990s, work largely pioneered by Eibhear Walshe, Tina O’Toole, Gerardine Meaney and Emma Donoghue. Walshe’s edited collection of essays on O’Brien’s work opened up her work to new

perspectives and currently, Walshe's biography, *Kate O'Brien: a Writing Life*, published in 2006, is the most recent full-length work on O'Brien. Thus, the overview of secondary material on O'Brien's work is organised in chronological order; contemporaneous criticism, post-1974 and the 1980s; the 1990s, and lastly, current criticism. This is further categorised into material from newspapers, periodicals and scholarly articles, anthologies and histories, works on the Irish novel and the Irish writer, as well as full-length works on O'Brien's work. The conclusion considers the implications of the above survey in the context of O'Brien and Irish Writing.

Reviews and Re-issues

On the seventh anniversary of O'Brien's death, in an overview of her life by Caroline Walsh in *The Irish Times*, the Limerick Labour politician, Jim Kemmy, was quoted as saying that O'Brien's "invaluable contribution wasn't appreciated during her lifetime" (Kemmy in Walsh, 8). Kemmy blamed this on the censorship laws and cultural self-righteousness in Irish society, and his remarks can be assessed by examining the number of entries for Kate O'Brien in R. J. Hayes index, *Sources for the History of Irish Civilisation: Articles in Irish Periodicals*.¹⁴ Judging by the high rate of entries, O'Brien's work was consistently written about throughout most of her life, except for three significant periods of time, which suggest the veracity of Kemmy's view of the impact of censorship on O'Brien's work. The most significant period was the aftermath of the banning of *The Land of Spices* in 1941, when O'Brien's work was not written about in Irish periodicals for almost five years, despite the publication of *The Last of Summer* in 1943. This suggests that censorship had a significant impact on O'Brien's reputation and profile in Ireland. In *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer*, the literary critic Julia Carlson summarises the grounds for the banning of publications in the Censorship of Publications Act, 1929. The grounds are that the books are considered to be,

'in ... general tendency indecent or obscene' (part II, section 6); that they devote 'an unduly large proportion of space to the publication of matter relating to crime' (part II, section 7); and that they advocate 'the unnatural prevention of

¹⁴ See Richard J. Hayes. Ed. *Sources for the History of Irish Civilisation: Articles in Irish Periodicals*. Vol. 4, Persons. Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1970.

conception or the procurement of abortion or miscarriage' (part II, section 6) (Carlson, 3-4).

Carlson goes on to explain that the word "indecent" is understood "as including suggestive of, or inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice or likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave' (part I, section 2)" (4). It was O'Brien's subtle reference to what was deemed an "unnatural vice" in *The Land of Spices* that best exemplifies the travesty that was the Censorship Board at work.

The Land of Spices was the cause of a controversy that highlighted the sheer idiocy of the workings of the Censorship Board in Ireland. The novel, despite its convent school setting, was deemed, as Seán O'Faoláin explained in an article in *The Bell* about censorship entitled "Standards and Taste", "in its general tendency indecent" (O'Faoláin, 'Standards and Taste', 8). Moreover, the matter of its banning was discussed in the Seanád (Irish Senate), and O'Brien was personally attacked by one Seanád member, Professor William Magennis.¹⁵ About the controversial line, "She saw *Etienne* and her father, in the embrace of love" (O'Brien, *Spices*, 157), Austin Clarke, a former lecturer of O'Brien's, when reviewing the novel for *The Bell*, wrote:

There seems to me one artistic flaw in this book, the nature of the shock which drove Helen Archer ... into a Continental Order in a mood of agonised revulsion. It is an outward shock, purely pathological, and mentioned in a single euphemistic sentence. A more personal experience would have given more scope for analysis and brought us nearer the girlhood of Helen Archer. (Clarke, 95)

Reviews of the novel, by the three main newspapers of the period, do not bear out the judgement of *general* indecency. The *Irish Times* described the main protagonist, Reverend Mother Helen Archer, as a character who "may indeed complete a trilogy of saintly types in the Roman Catholic Church, depicted in modern Fiction" (*Irish Times*, 08/03/41). The *Irish Independent* stated that the novel setting "is a picture of rare fidelity and charm, with the portrait of the Reverend Mother, splendidly life-like in every line. But there is one single sentence in the book so repulsive that the book should not be left where it would fall into the hands of very young people." (*Irish*

¹⁵ See Terence Brown. *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–1985*. London: Fontana [1981], 1985. pp. 196-8.

Independent, 11/03/41) Lastly, the *Irish Press* reviewer wrote: “It is a pity that the author should with a single offensive point mar for sensitive readers an other wise magnificent character-study of a gallant soul, a truly valiant woman” (*Irish Press*, 18/03/41). Clearly, while the single line alluding to homosexuality caused some offence, reviewers discussed it in terms of a flaw in the book. Moreover, newspaper reviews of the novel were conducted, as O’Faoláin pointed out, in newspapers of which two were Catholic, and they were circulated all over Ireland. Of significance too is the fact that O’Brien does not endorse the homosexual encounter in the novel, as Helen Archer is so repulsed by her father’s behaviour that she flees to a convent. The Censorship Board of five members, therefore, disagreed with the opinions expressed in print and banned the book absolutely, and this decision demonstrated the excessive power of a Board that could hold sway over the opinions of newspapers, periodicals and the general public. As O’Faoláin wrote: “Patently, nothing could be more controversial than the question here raised” (O’Faoláin, ‘Standards and Taste’, 8). Literary Censorship, he continued, “was an effort to codify certain alleged native instincts about literature, and what has been the result? Time has proved that these alleged instincts are *not* native.” (7) Listing the roll call of banned writers that included, he wryly noted, his own name, O’Faoláin continued: “All that means is that it is the instinct of these writers against that of five censors, none of whom has ever written a piece of fiction, a play, or a poem.” (7) In the December edition of *The Bell*, O’Faoláin, quoting from the New York publication, *The Advocate*, gleefully wrote the following under the title “*THOSE AWFUL JESUITS*”: “From an Irish racial viewpoint it is pleasing to note that *America*, the organ of the Jesuits, reports that Kate O’Brien’s book ‘The Land of Spices’ is a best seller in Catholic circles.” (O’Faoláin, ‘THOSE AWFUL JESUITS’, 228)

Recalling the outcry about *The Land of Spices* some thirteen years later, Jordan commented that it had “been the subject of a great deal of confused good-natured comment, as well as a good deal of confused ill-natured comment.” (Jordan, “Note on her Themes”, 57) He described the novel as “a *tour-de-force* in the depiction of a lost childhood spent in a land possessed” (57), and concentrated on the young protagonist, Anna Murphy, arguing that Helen Archer’s nostalgic view of her childhood, brought to mind by Anna’s recitation of a favourite poem, facilitates the trajectory for the preparation of Anna for the world. Jordan, along with Vivian Mercier, was one of the few Irish critics to write seriously about O’Brien’s fiction. In “Kate O’Brien: A

Passionate Talent”, written on the occasion of her death, Jordan recalled his initial meeting with O’Brien in 1945 at the Gaiety at the staging of *The Last of Summer*.¹⁶ Jordan (1930-1988) was fifteen years old at the time, and Walshe wryly mentions that he was “a writer of some precocity who made a point of introducing himself to famous writers.” (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 120) Jordan acknowledged O’Brien’s influence on his work, and went on to become a celebrated literary critic, as well as a short-story writer, poet and broadcaster. He visited O’Brien frequently during her time in Connemara and paid a moving personal tribute to her in his poem “Without Her Cloak”.¹⁷

The furore caused by the banning of *The Land of Spices* contrasted strongly with the initial regard in which O’Brien’s work was held. After the success of *Without My Cloak*, reaction to O’Brien’s second novel, *The Ante-Room*, published in 1934, was mixed. In *Time and Tide*, Helen Fletcher described *The Ante-Room* as “unsatisfactory”, but also poetic and “beautiful in retrospect” (Fletcher, 1057). The writer, Maura Laverty, writing in *The Irish Book Lover*, wrote that the novel had “an air of unreality” (Laverty, 121). In a similar vein, Jordan appeared perplexed by *The Ante-Room* and he inexplicably found “the tragic unconsummated passion of Agnes Mulqueen” amusing (Jordan, “Note on her Themes”, 56).¹⁸ In *The Spectator*, William Plomer described *The Ante-Room* as “a celebration of orthodox Catholicism” (Plomer, 172). Similarly, Peter Quennell, in *New Statesman and Nation*, wrote that O’Brien “manages to convey an impression of the majesty and spiritual efficacy of Catholic ritual” (Quennell, 155). However, Jordan warned against taking this impression at face value when he wrote: “But too great emphasis on the trappings of atmosphere and setting can be misleading” when one considers her “excessively unorthodox” heroines (Jordan, “Note on her Themes”, 57). In addition, William Plomer, perhaps prophetically, compared the novel to a play, as did the literary critic Lorna Reynolds in her analysis of the novel in *Kate O’Brien: A Literary Portrait*.¹⁹ It was a perspective also taken up in the 1990s by the critic, Anthony Roche, who in “*The Ante-Room as Drama*”, finds similarities to Ibsen’s work in *The Ante-Room*. Roche writes that “the lessons learned as a dramatist by Kate

¹⁶ See John Jordan. “Kate O’Brien: A Passionate Talent” in *Hibernia* (30 August 1974), p. 19.

¹⁷ See John Jordan. *Collected Poems*. Dublin: Dedalus, 1991, p. 118.

¹⁸ The novel is incorrectly entitled *The Flute-Room* throughout Jordan’s article.

¹⁹ See Lorna Reynolds. *Kate O’Brien: A Literary Portrait*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987, p. 57. The book was unsuccessfully staged in 1936, which Reynolds attributes to the fact that the ending was changed.

O'Brien found their way into her writing of prose narrative" (Roche in *OPD*, 89).²⁰ The mixed reviews suggest that the novel presented a challenge to reviewers, as not only are there three genres employed in the novel, historical fiction, romance and realism, there are also multiple themes and perspectives that can be explored. For instance, there is the novel's dramatic structure as Roche remarks, and the conscious insertion of literary signposts such as the discussion about Henry James' novel *Washington Square*. In addition, the images of oppression and repression in *The Ante-Room* evoke the atmosphere similarly utilised by James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.²¹

As an established writer, O'Brien had the freedom to travel to Spain and she spent the summers of 1933, 1934 and 1935 there. Her time in Spain provided the inspiration for her third novel, *Mary Lavelle* (1936). The novel was banned by The Irish Censorship Board on the grounds of obscenity in December 1936. As the Board, the composition of which was secret at the time, was under no obligation to provide specific reasons for the banning of a novel, Walshe writes, "it is difficult to know what precisely antagonised the censors" (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 67). In "Kate O'Brien: First Lady of Irish Letters", Jordan remarked that O'Brien "would not be drawn on the interdict on this novel" (Jordan, "First Lady", 11). It seems likely, however, that the adulterous relationship between Mary Lavelle and the married son of her employer, as well as Agatha Conlon's avowal of desire for Mary in the novel was the cause of contemporary moral concern. However, the novel sold well, was published in London in 1937 and translated into German and Danish. Moreover, it was the first of O'Brien's novels to be reissued in the 1980s, as well as being filmed in 1995 under the title *Talk of Angels*. Walshe writes that as a result of the banning of *Mary Lavelle*, O'Brien suffered "a loss of readership and income", and personally, although she played down this aspect, he continues, "the ban upset her Limerick relations" (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 67).

O'Brien's ideological opposition to censorship was expressed in her subsequent novel, *Pray for the Wanderer*, published in 1938. The hostility to 1930s Ireland is manifested by the different attitudes towards the ruling class in the novel to that

²⁰ For a discussion on the dramatic structure of the novel, see Anthony Roche. "The *Ante-Room* as Drama" in Eibhear Walshe. Ed. *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1993, pp. 85-101.

²¹ See James Joyce. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1996.

expressed in O'Brien's former novels. The novel received the strongest negative critiques of all of O'Brien's novels, with Vivian Mercier considering it to be her poorest novel. Mercier wrote that the haste in which *Pray for the Wanderer* was written was "evident throughout" (Mercier, 94). Her criticism of and protest against censorship, he continued, "was too explicit to be effective" (95). Jordan did not deal with *Pray for the Wanderer* in his review of the themes in O'Brien's work, as it fell outside the scope of his topic. He judged that it and the novel that followed *The Land of Spices*, *The Last of Summer* (1943), "would be better considered in an evaluation of Miss O'Brien as a describer of manners rather than as a purveyor of information about the heart." (Jordan, "Note on her Themes", 59) Unlike the majority of O'Brien's novels, *Pray for the Wanderer* was set in the year of composition, 1937, and written within a year. In *The Bell*, Austin Clarke remarked during his review of *The Land of Spices* that *Pray for the Wanderer* "was an attempt, and not a very successful one, to escape from Ireland past and present" (Clarke, 93). However, the reviewer in the *Irish Book Lover* noted the subtlety of *Pray for the Wanderer*, writing that Matt is a character "acutely aware almost to the point of intellectual weariness of the clash of his personal ideals with the orthodoxy of life in the Ireland of 1937" (P.C.T., 70). Despite the strong criticism of Éamon de Valera, the novel was not banned, which lends weight to the argument that in print, considerations of sexual morality outweighed political dissent, as the banning of *The Land of Spices* for one line suggests.

O'Brien's novel, subsequent to *The Land of Spices*, *The Last of Summer* (1943), also contained political themes, with its focus on the policy of neutrality in the lead up to World War Two. The novel also marked the effect of censorship on O'Brien in that her heroines, from this point onwards, looked to Europe for independence. The book was adapted for the stage in 1944 and the transition from page to stage was the aspect concentrated on by reviewers in the UK at the time.²² The novel does not appear to have been reviewed in Ireland; a consequence, it could be argued, of the banning of *The Land of Spices*. In line with the new turning towards Europe, O'Brien set her next novel in sixteenth-century Spain. *That Lady* (1946) was well received and proved successful for O'Brien's profile. The novel marked the return of O'Brien's work for consideration in Irish periodicals as it was reviewed in *The Bell*, *Dublin Magazine* and *Irish*

²² See William Whitebait. Review of *The Last of Summer* in *New Statesman and Nation* (17/06/44), p. 404; Herbert Farjeon. Review of *The Last of Summer* in *Time and Tide* (June/July 1944), p. 530.

Bookman.²³ Jordan described Ana de Mendoza as O'Brien's best example of the heroines who "make their beds and adamantly refuse to lie elsewhere than on them" (Jordan, "Note on her Themes", 58). Ana is one of what Jordan called O'Brien's "excessively unorthodox" heroines, as she "perseveres in the sins of fornication and adultery, although she is by nature a pious Catholic." (58) Jordan recounts that O'Brien, when asked about the most important quality in a person, always replied that it was "generosity", and wrote: "Always she had been concerned with people who are extravagantly, dangerously generous in human relationships. This generosity is not confined to sexual relationships. It is evident, too, in the blood-relationships of Miss O'Brien's world." (55) It is this view that permeates relationships in O'Brien's texts, as when love is an element of a relationship, whether erotic or familial, O'Brien's heroines give totally of themselves. Ana de Mendoza exemplifies this "generosity", as she cannot, as Jordan succinctly describes, "forswear the 'rotteness' of her relationship with Antonio, passionate, actual and demanding as it is, for considerations of private, solitary salvation." (58). Perhaps not surprisingly, given the individual interpretation of religious rules of conduct in the text, the morality of the protagonist, Walshe writes, was criticised in America "in journals like the *Catholic Mirror* and the *Catholic Book Club Newsletter* for the independent, self-determining morality of the protagonist" (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 106).

Between 1947 and 1952, O'Brien travelled between the UK, Spain and Ireland. During this period, she wrote *Teresa of Avila*, which was published in 1951 and reviewed by the playwright Teresa Deevy in *Irish Writing*.²⁴ It was an important book, as will be discussed, as in O'Brien's interpretation of Saint Teresa, she realised the representation of the powerful ascetic "holy woman" utilised in characters such as Agatha Conlon in *Mary Lavelle*, Helen Archer in *The Land of Spices*, Ana de Mendoza in *That Lady*, Eleanor Delahunt in *The Flower of May* and Clare Halvey in *As Music and Splendour*. Two years later, in 1953, *The Flower of May* was published, and on the occasion of the publication, Jordan appraised the novel as "perhaps the amplest illustration of Miss O'Brien's complexity as an artist" (Jordan, "Note on her Themes", 53). He thought the publication of her eighth novel a timely point at which to

²³ See Hubert Butler. Review of *That Lady* in *The Bell* 12.5 (August 1946), pp. 444-5; Lorna Reynolds. Review of *That Lady* in *Dublin Magazine* 21.3 (July-September 1946), pp. 55-6; Anon. Review of *That Lady* in *Irish Bookman* (January 1947), pp. 56-7.

²⁴ See Teresa Deevy. Review of *Teresa of Avila* in *Irish Writing* (March 1952), pp. 54-5.

summarise the recurrent themes in O'Brien's novels, as he wrote that "critics have been puzzled as to the real theme of the book" (53). He believed *The Flower of May* useful as a means of "arriv[ing] at some integration of her work as a whole" (53). The novel embraces many themes, including an exploration of marriage and the Catholic wedding ceremony, the negotiation of family bonds, autonomy for women and the importance of education. Additionally, the characterisation of the matriarch of the Morrow family, Julia Morrow, suggests the trope of Julia as representative of the Irish Catholic mother in the family within the Irish cultural ethos, as is also explored in *Pray for the Wanderer* and in *The Last of Summer*. Moreover, it can be argued that the mother-daughter relationship in this novel represents the conclusion to O'Brien's explorations throughout the novels, in this her penultimate novel, that the family in the Irish cultural context is restrictive, and that to forge one's way in life, the mother, the family and Ireland must be left behind. This is portrayed in the novel by the death of Julia, which leaves her daughter, Fanny, free to live her life on her own terms in Europe, outside the constraints of family bonds. In addition, Fanny is the first and only heroine to declare her lack of certainty with regard to belief in the tenets of Catholicism. The novel therefore, can be productively read as O'Brien's final negotiation with family bonds and homeland, in a cultural and religious context, as in her last novel, *As Music and Splendour*, the events take place in France and Italy, and the heroines live alone, and therefore, outside the family and outside of Ireland. Unlike other heroines throughout O'Brien's *oeuvre*, Fanny Morrow does not undergo an emotionally challenging experience. Rather, her story, as Jordan wrote, "has been a gentle stripping-away of illusions and twists which might clutter or obscure the greater, more searing pilgrimage in emotion." (54) Jordan concludes that it is the "theme of the perishability of youth, the evanescence of perfection in human relationship, (*sic*) that gives *The Flower of May* its undertone of high seriousness." (56).

Jordan had begun his 1954 review of O'Brien's themes with the following remark: "Kate O'Brien has nothing in common, ultimately, with what might be called the 'Irish' school, with, say Stephens or O'Flaherty or O'Connor or O'Faoláin. Her closest link might be with Elizabeth Bowen" (53). He concluded by writing that "[m]ost of us ... may find it difficult to make the adjustment of sympathy necessary before accepting Miss O'Brien's cultured middle-class world, so smooth, so secure, so very slightly smug." (59) Jordan raised two issues here. The "Irish School" he

mentioned are all male writers and concerned with Ireland and its affairs in their writing, whereas O'Brien varied both the settings for her novels and the nationality of her characters. In addition, Jordan draws direct attention to O'Brien's class, which brings to mind Gwynn's remark about it being a factor in the lack of uniform consideration of O'Brien's work in various anthologies, histories and works on Irish fiction from the category of novels set in and about Ireland, a judgement that colludes with the notion that only peasantry and poverty represent Ireland, and that the middle classes are somehow not properly or really Irish, and therefore, not a fit object of study, literature or inquiry. This was to prove prophetic, as O'Brien's inclusion in the Irish literary canon was not a foregone conclusion, given her productivity and her nationality. Although on the one hand, Jordan went on to say that Vivian Mercier's description of O'Brien as "perhaps the ablest practitioner of Romance in the English language" (Mercier, 87), over-simplified O'Brien's work, on the other hand, he himself wrote: "she has little interest in following the human heart in other than the time-worn, but, I feel, time-honoured traditional modes." (53) Jordan's use of the terms "time-worn" and "traditional" in his otherwise astute review of O'Brien's work, implicitly denigrates the theme of the "following [of] the human heart". While he does consider the importance of religious influences with regard to the playing out or not of love affairs, premising the analyses of the novels in the frame of romantic fiction can lead to an under-reading of the political aspects of O'Brien's work. Of the theme of love Jordan wrote, the novels reveal:

the painfulness inherent in all human love, with especial emphasis on that love which involves the sexual and romantic, the individual, protesting conscience, moving in a world whose conduct is primarily dictated by Catholic theory and practice, but refusing ultimately, to work out its problems other than in terms of its own personal ethic; the twinship of the capacity for suffering and the capacity for generosity in emotion. (59)

While matters of the heart predominate in the stories of O'Brien's protagonists, it is other expressions of love experienced by some of the lesser-known characters that are of interest in this thesis, as for instance, in the depiction of maternal love, when some of the characters reject the role of wife and mother outright, and others who find the mantle of motherhood far from ideal. Similarly, marital love is explored in the novels with aspirations for lifelong happiness juxtaposed with the solemnity of the ceremony and the experiences of marital life that follow the ritual.

From 1954, there is a considerable gap of seven years in Hayes' *Articles in Irish Periodicals*, during which *As Music and Splendour* (1958) was published. Reynolds suggested that the isolation of Roundstone was detrimental to O'Brien's output, and that her financial problems "grew threatening" during this period (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 93). In addition, *The Flower of May* did not sell very well and the demise of the popularity of O'Brien's work in Ireland was reflected by the paucity of reviews of her final novel. A review in the *Irish Times* simply stated that *As Music and Splendour* was about two girls who became famous opera singers (Campbell, 6). O'Brien's next publication, the idiosyncratic travel book, *My Ireland* (1962), proved popular and was favourably reviewed in the *University Review* by John Jordan, and in the *Kilkenny Magazine*.²⁵ After 1962, there is no listing for O'Brien, who died four years after Hayes' survey ends. The silence concurs with her own wry judgement of being "out of fashion", as expressed in a University College Cork Campus Radio broadcast. O'Brien said: "Of course, one goes out of fashion and my kind of book isn't as much liked as it used to be, but that is inevitable." (O'Brien quoted in Walshe, *Writing Life*, 133) Perhaps in her remark, O'Brien was recalling Jordan's review of her work in 1954, when he wrote: "Unlike so many of her fellow Irish writers she works in the great tradition of the nineteenth century European novel, and accordingly her field is the universal and immutable rather than the local and transient." (Jordan, "Note on her Themes", 59) Young readers, he continued, would have difficulty with her "stiff and over-formal" style of writing (59). O'Brien's perceptive remark was reflected by the rather lacklustre Obituary in the *Irish Times* of 14 August 1974, in which the writer recalled that the novel, *That Lady*, was regarded "as rather daring at the time", and that while *As Music and Splendour* "meant a great deal to her personally ... it was not as successful with the public as her early work" (*Irish Times*, 14/08/74, 9). The obituary reflects Walshe's judgement that in Ireland a "lack of official recognition and honour was consistent throughout her final years" (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 145). Her friend, John Jordan, agreed. In 1973 he wrote: "Neither of our universities has chosen to honour Kate O'Brien. [...] It would be fitting to recognise her when *Constancy* is published, not alone for her personal achievement, but for her intransigent commitment to European culture" (Jordan, "First Lady", 11). In contrast to the *Irish Times*, Walshe

²⁵ See John Jordan. Review of *My Ireland* in *University Review* 3.2 (1962), pp. 72-4; T.H. Review of *My Ireland* in *Kilkenny Magazine* 8 (Autumn-Winter 1962), pp. 63-5.

writes, O'Brien received a "lengthy and respectful" obituary in *The Times*. The majority of her novels were summarised, and the writer remarked, rather ironically, given the parameters of inclusion and exclusion in anthologies on the Irish novel, that O'Brien "was Irish and her own people and their land inspired her most remarkable work" (*The Times*, 14/08/74, 14). The next section looks at the importance of not considering O'Brien's "cultured middle-class world" as a crucial site for the figuring of Irish identity in the new State, and to confine O'Brien to "a purveyor of information about the heart" (59) alone, as Jordan puts it, is to miss a rich and evocative archaeology of Irish cultural and social identity.

The achievements of second wave feminist movements resulted in a renewal of interest in O'Brien's work, on account of the re-issuing of most of her novels in the 1980s. Second wave feminism, the term for the women's movements that emerged internationally in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has provided a platform on which many women's rights were won, and also, on which a body of writing about and for women has followed. As the sociologist Linda Connolly and the literary critic Tina O'Toole denote in *Documenting Irish Feminisms*, from 1968 to the 1990s, women's movements played a central role in the transformation of women's lives in Ireland. Connolly and O'Toole write: "Social movement analysis is a field of study that can address the cultural as well as the political impact of feminist thought and ideas on society" (Connolly and O'Toole, 3). The wealth of archival and oral material they recover attests to the active and consistent work by women for their fellow-women in a resistant and hostile context, in the wake of the narrow parameters imposed on women by the idealistic Constitutional ethos and resultant legislation that sought to enforce limitations on women's autonomy. One crucial strand of the "cultural" impact was the establishment of feminist publishing projects, which played an important part in raising consciousness about feminist issues through the dissemination of material such as posters, cards and cartoons, as well as publications. Moreover, many feminist newspapers and magazines were established, as well as the successful *Women's Diary and Guidebook*, which later became *The Attic Guidebook and Diary*, and provided health information for women not previously available in the public domain. In addition, women journalists such as Nell McCafferty, Nuala Fennell and Mary Kenny, wrote informative and provoking articles in mainstream newspapers, as well as in

feminist journals.²⁶ In 1980, Arlen House included the reprinting of O'Brien's novels in its publication programme. Arlen House was originally founded in Galway in 1975 by Catherine Rose and subsequently, set up in Dublin when Rose moved there in 1978. The historian Margaret MacCurtain, the poet Eavan Boland, the businesswoman, Terry Prone and the poet and publisher Louise Callaghan came on board and the latter developed the project of publishing out of print novels by women. This raised O'Brien's profile and prefaces were included that opened new avenues for the reassessment of O'Brien's work. At the same time, some traditional readings of the novels were maintained. In the 1984 Arlen House edition of *The Ante-Room*, for instance, Eavan Boland reads O'Brien's interest in the bourgeoisie as representing an acquiescence to the religious and cultural codes of her class and concludes that, as such, it is a conservative work (Boland in *The Ante-Room*, x).

The Women's Community Press was established in 1983, and Attic Press succeeded Arlen House as the Irish women's press in 1984.²⁷ This development, Connolly and O'Toole write, was "a landmark in activism and publishing for several generations of Irish feminists" (Connolly and O'Toole, 138). Moreover, in "Origins: Feminist Publishing in Ireland, 1984", the historian Alan Hayes writes that the Women's Community Press originated "during a training course in publishing for women, run by Róisín Conroy of Irish Feminist Information" (Hayes, 106). Hayes writes that the Press "followed a co-operative model, using a non-hierarchical structure and sharing work equally. The original aim of the press was to open up the print medium to people and groups usually denied access to it" (106). In the UK, Virago, a British publisher, from 1984 onwards, re-printed seven of O'Brien's novels, and Walshe writes that with the exception of *Pray for the Wanderer*, all are still in print, with "some of them selling more than 10,000 copies overall" (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 148). This had a significant impact on O'Brien's profile as it opened up her work to a new readership, as the re-issued novels were reviewed in the press. Although reviews tended to categorise O'Brien as a conservative writer, working in the genre of romantic fiction,

²⁶ For a detailed account of feminist cultural projects, see Linda Connolly and Tina O'Toole. *Documenting Irish Feminisms: The Second Wave*. Dublin: Woodfield Press, 2005, Chapter 4.

²⁷ In September 1997, Cork University Press took over Attic Press. For an overview on the women's press, see June Levine. Ed. "The Women's Movement in the Republic of Ireland, 1968-80" in *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Women's Writing and Traditions*. Vols. IV & V. Cork: Cork University Press, 2002, pp. 177-187.

the re-issued novels were again available in the public forum, which paved the way for renewed critical interest in O'Brien.

Seminar, Symposia, and Sisterhood

A further significant event in relation to O'Brien's profile in the 1980s was the organisation, by Louise Callaghan of Arlen House, of a seminar in Limerick to coincide with the tenth anniversary of O'Brien's death. On foot of its success, a committee was formed and the seminar is now an annual event. The Kate O'Brien Weekend, held in Limerick each February, continues to be well attended, with an attendance of over 150 every year. As a result, O'Brien's literary reputation began to grow in a sustained academic forum. A third significant event in the 1980s was the establishment of women's studies programmes in third level establishments, which raised academic awareness of Irish women writers, poets and artists. Connolly and O'Toole write that women's studies programmes and the Women's Studies Forum, "were integral to the establishment and wider acceptance of women's studies in the Irish third-level education system" (Connolly and O'Toole, 225). The Women's Studies Programme was established at Trinity College Dublin in 1983, while the Women's Studies Forum was established at University College Dublin in 1987. (225) Many of the women involved were instrumental in protesting the paucity of women writers in the first three volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*.

Thus, Irish feminist movements of the 1980s played a commendable and important role in the resurgence of information about women writers, as well as providing accessibility to their work. The development of Irish women's history is also significant during this period, as the process of rewriting women into the Irish historical landscape was undertaken by historians. As well as the work of the pioneering feminist historian Margaret MacCurtain, three important books were published in the 1980s: Margaret Ward's *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism* (1983), which documented the contribution of women to feminist and nationalist struggles; Rosemary Cullen Owens' *Smashing Times: The History of the Irish Suffrage Movement 1890-1922* (1983) and Mary Jones' *Those Obstreperous Lassies: The Irish Women's Workers Union* (1988). These initiatives reflected changing tastes, the work of second wave feminist criticism and a growing belief that women writers, historians

and artists had something of significance to say to modern readers. As the cultural critic, Claire Connolly, writes in *Theorizing Ireland*:

Sexual politics have played a key role in determining the shapes critical and cultural theory has taken on the island. With its own separate theoretical trajectory driven by questions at the heart of Western European culture since the Enlightenment, Irish feminism concerns itself with adjudicating between the competing demands of sexual difference and equal rights in an international idiom (Connolly, 3).

Connolly's "international idiom" can be read as occurring within O'Brien's discussions on Irish culture throughout her fiction, as these are conducted in terms of comparison with European *mores*, literature and art. Central to O'Brien's perspective, moreover, are the restrictions, both physical and ideological, placed on Irish women by Church and State. The banning of the novel, *Mary Lavelle*, for instance, with its representation of O'Brien's first attempt to imagine sexual freedom for a single middle-class girl, is evidence of the machinations of Church and State co-operation in this regard.

Anthologies and Histories

In 1936, the literary critic Stephen Gwynn, in *Irish Literature and Drama in the English Language: A Short History*, wrote the following about O'Brien's first novel:

Miss Kate O'Brien, in *Without My Cloak*, has written a novel which has a richness of life, and in certain passages a beauty, that I do not find equalled among the younger Academicians. It has also, what they do not give, a study of normal Irish conditions, drawn from the existence of the richer Catholic merchants and their families. Perhaps, in manning the Academy, too much importance has been given to novels and plays of revolutionary times; and Miss O'Brien is just as Irish in every sense as Peadar O'Donnell. (Gwynn, 222-3)²⁸

Gwynn's remark about O'Brien's "Irishness" is important here, as her exploration of cultural issues in the novels that followed *Without My Cloak* were often overlooked by critics, and the political agenda of novels such as *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer* under-read. As Gwynn pointed out, the importance of the representation of "normal Irish conditions" pertaining to the Catholic merchant class was downplayed, as

²⁸ Gwynn was speaking about the Irish Academy of Letters, founded in 1932, with the object of promoting creative literature in Ireland. O'Brien was eventually elected as a member of the Irish Academy of Letters in 1947.

to be Irish was understood as working-class and concerned with revolution, whereas “richer Catholic merchants and their families” had the hallmarks of the Ascendancy, and as a result were deemed to have more in common with the English rather than the Irish. The Irish Literary Revival, as the literary critic John Wilson Foster argues in *Irish Novels 1890-1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction*, put the Irish peasant centre stage, and pushed the novel form to the sidelines, with those resisting the Revival movement deemed to be engaged in the less nationalistically informed genre of realist writing. Moreover, as Wilson Foster argues, the upper classes “were seen as inimical to the nationalist project which swelled to claim all attention and loyalty” (Wilson Foster, 13). As a result, novels set outside Ireland tended to be ignored. In this framework, O’Brien did not fit the narrow definition of what constituted an Irish writer. Furthermore, the application of rigid categories to writers of what constituted “Irishness” played a part in O’Brien’s under-representation in the Irish literary canon. An example of the application of this framework can be seen in *The Irish Novel in our Time*, edited by Patrick Rafroidi and Maurice Harmon, published a year after O’Brien’s death. Although she is mentioned throughout the sections entitled “Traditions and Conventions”, and “Forces and Themes in Modern Irish Fiction”, O’Brien’s work is not included among the twelve authors of the period 1950-1975 analysed in detail (Edna O’Brien being the only female writer considered at length). O’Brien, Rafroidi and Harmon argue, was one of the writers who “gave up the realistic novel for something else [she] set *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *That Lady* (1946) in Spain” (Rafroidi and Harmon, 54). To this end, her work is not given lengthy consideration, and while Rafroidi and Harmon mention *The Land of Spices*, for instance, in favourable terms, they neglect to analyse it in any detail. In this work, therefore, the categorisation of Revival/counter-Revival that excludes novels with a foreign setting is applied to all of O’Brien’s work, rather than to the three novels relevant to this category.

O’Brien’s place in the literary canon, such as it is, was until recently arbitrary, and this can be seen in anthologies and histories of the 1980s. O’Brien’s appearance in Maurice Harmon and Roger McHugh’s *Short History of Anglo-Irish Literature: From its Origins to the Present Day* (1982) is rendered in brief terms of comparison to other male writers. This was an agenda-setting history and highly influential, as Roger McHugh was the well-known and respected Chair of the English Department at UCD,

which was considered the spiritual home of Irish Literature at the time.²⁹ McHugh's work set the agenda for the move from Anglo-Irish writing to Irish writing, which was paralleled in time by the name change of the Irish Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature to the Irish Association for the Study of Irish Literatures (IASIL). In Harmon and McHugh's literary history, the fiction overview in the section entitled, "After the Revival", contains a quotation from *Pray for the Wanderer*: "There is no escape for a man from his own time ... save in his own nature – in his use of memory and imagination" (Harmon and McHugh, 247).³⁰ Agreeing with this sentiment, the authors argue that the fiction of the period 1922–1950 "is directly concerned with the kind of society that emerges, with the role of the individual in that society" (247). To that end, Harmon and McHugh concentrate on writers such as Sean O'Faoláin, Frank O'Connor, Liam O'Flaherty and Francis Stuart. While the authors mention most of O'Brien's novels, they link her with the work of Francis Stuart and Austin Clarke in the sharing of a spiritual vision, arguing that all three writers are "less concerned with social realities than with individual psychology" (255). This view, popular with a number of O'Brien readers, does her little justice indeed. Moreover, the quotation used by Harmon and McHugh from *Pray for the Wanderer*, is from a text that contains sustained discussions about "social realities". In addition, Harmon and McHugh cite *The Ante-Room* as an example of O'Brien's interest in psychology and they focus on the dying Teresa Mulqueen in this regard. Curiously, the authors make no mention of Teresa's daughter, Agnes, and the emotional trauma she undergoes by falling in love with her brother-in-law. The omission here of a principal character and the mixed reviews the novel received on its publication, as quoted earlier, suggests the difficulty in positioning O'Brien in a specific category, and the fact that O'Brien falls into no ready category appears to have been a factor in the ten years of critical neglect following her death. Harmon and McHugh correctly note the clashes of ideas about Ireland, art, religion and modes of living in *Pray for the Wanderer*, and judge the novel to be "somewhat spoiled by Kate O'Brien's tendency to dissect and analyse human nature and to react to Irish politics of the thirties" (260). The latter part of this sentence suggests that O'Brien should stay away from politics and such things that do not really concern a romance, or indeed, perhaps, a woman. O'Brien was indeed a political writer, but as it was the

²⁹ For a discussion of Roger McHugh's career and influence in Irish Letters, see Declan Kiberd. *Irish Classics*. London: Granta Books, 2000.

³⁰ Kate O'Brien. *Pray for the Wanderer*. 2nd ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951, p. 30.

family and the family space that O'Brien politicised, this history cannot accommodate, nor account for, the complexity of her work within its own frames. As Harmon and McHugh continue, "what the novel clearly reveals is O'Brien's subtle and sophisticated sensibility" (260), thereby aligning O'Brien with writers such as Jane Austen, whose chronicles of manners and *mores* were much admired, but not much respected as relevant, beyond offering a vista upon a small section of society.

James M. Cahalan, an American Professor of English at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and a prolific contributor to Irish Studies, included O'Brien in his 1988 historical approach to the study of fiction entitled *The Irish Novel: A Critical History*. This was the first comprehensive one-volume history of the Irish novel, and here Cahalan defines an Irish novel as one set in Ireland. He notes O'Brien's representation of the Catholic middle classes, and judges O'Brien to be the "best woman novelist of the 1930s and 1940s" (Cahalan, 208). Moreover, he writes, her best novels showed "the balance and maturity of a Jane Austen" (210), which brings to mind Harmon and McHugh's use of "sensibility" in relation to O'Brien's work. In addition, O'Brien is contained in the category, "Women Novelists", with Elizabeth Bowen, Molly Keane, Maura Laverty and Mary Lavin in a sub-section entitled "Exposé of Ireland: Realists, 1920-55". These novelists, Cahalan writes, "focused on Ascendancy and middle-class Irish life, continuing a devotion to realism that was earlier evident in novelists such as Maria Edgeworth, Emily Lawless, and Somerville and Ross" (204). It seems rather generalising to group these five writers into the category of Ascendancy and middle-class life, as the male authors dealt with by Cahalan are given specific category titles in the section on realist writers in which O'Brien is included. Moreover, Cahalan conducts his remarks on male and female writers in a class-based context. Male and female writers at the time, Cahalan writes, explored the "repressive nature of Irish society and the reverberations of Irish Politics" (204). Yet, female writers, he argues, "stand apart somewhat", as while male writers from different strata in society attempted to write, "Irish women attempted novels only when they could financially afford to" (205). Besides access to education as well as gendered cultural considerations, the implications of gender across class divides are not taken into consideration here. Moreover, Cahalan's view comes close to associating the working classes with revolutionary matters and the prerogative of males, thereby excluding the middle classes. Cahalan repeats this categorising frame in the section on the contemporary novel, where he

discusses Edna O'Brien, Janet McNeill, Irish Murdoch, Eilís Dillon, Julia O'Faoláin, and Jennifer Johnston, as if women writers all write about the same thing and have few distinguishing features to commend them, unlike their male counterparts.³¹ Clearly, O'Brien had a middle-class perspective, but despite a popular tendency to depoliticise the bourgeois, O'Brien's work was political insofar as it considered the repercussions of public discourse on the private lives of women. It is likely that the intervening re-issuing of O'Brien's novels between the publication of Cahalan's books, 1983 and 1988 respectively, aided in the consideration of O'Brien's work in the latter publication.

In anthologies and histories of the 1990s, the approach to, and the assessment of O'Brien's work reflected their predecessors. For instance, O'Brien was not included in Norman Vance's influential *Irish Literature: A Social History: Tradition, Identity and Difference* (1990), despite the raising of her profile in the 1980s. Moreover, O'Brien's work embraces all three strands of Vance's sub-title. In addition, in his Introduction, Vance calls for new approaches to the study of Irish Literature, and writes: "It is time literary historians took a fresh look at the myths and realities of identity and difference in Ireland" (Vance, *Social History*, viii). He continues: "Only by determined intrusion into the apparently invulnerable continuities of Irish tradition ... can adequate Irish literary history be written" (1). "Tradition" in the canonical sense, has tended to exclude the female writer, and in the contents table, there are no female writers listed in the ten writers to be discussed. In this work, Vance understands notions of inclusion in terms of geography, specifically Ulster, rather than gender. Gender bias is implied in the conclusion of the study where Vance assumes that "the Irishman" speaks for both male and female when he writes: "To find his own voice, to discover who he is, the Irish writer and the Irishman must understand and come to terms with past and present, predecessors and peers" (260).

In his 1992 work, *Irish Fiction 1900-1940*, the literary critic John Cronin, who has published widely on Irish fiction, argues that the turbulence of the period under discussion is reflected in the creative uncertainty of the fiction. Cronin writes: "On the whole ... the novels of the newly independent Irish Free State ... partook of the

³¹ For a detailed and critical account of similar practices in analyses of poetry, see Moynagh Sullivan. "Irish Poetry after Feminism: In Search of 'Male Poets'" in Justin Quinn. Ed. *Irish Poetry after Feminism: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2008, pp. 14-34.

tentative and embryonic nature of the emergent society itself” (Cronin, 18). This remark places the novel in a political domain, which frames Cronin’s discussions in a Revival/counter-Revival frame. Cronin concentrates primarily on an analysis of *The Ante-Room*, arguing that the novel is about “the conflict between duty and passion” (143). In this way, *The Ante-Room* is discussed in terms of the genre of romantic fiction, and while Cronin is impressed by O’Brien’s scrutiny of the demands of romantic love tested against the Catholic ethos, his view is that this leads to the dialogue being at times, “weak and unconvincing” (146). Cronin contends that the novel is powerful despite the fact that it comes close to “melodramatic mawkishness”, as O’Brien “compels her characters to an agonising conformity” (147). However, “conformity” does not come in the form of a happy marriage, which is the required ending in works of romantic fiction, as Janice Radway’s study of romantic fiction, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, documents. This does not occur in *The Ante-Room*, and will be discussed in relation to Agnes Mulqueen, and moreover, conventional “happy endings” are not a feature of O’Brien’s texts. At the same time, Cronin appreciates the cultural context in which O’Brien worked and writes: “In the censorious Ireland of fifty years ago she was a remarkable pioneer and the high quality of her best fiction still offers a challenge today.” (147)

The 1990s were also marked by a controversy about the notion of the exclusion of women writers from the Irish literary canon, which was brought to a head in 1991 by the publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vols. I-III*, edited by Seamus Deane and an all-male editorial board. The dearth of material from women writers was striking. Moreover, there was little consideration of women’s contribution to the changing of society through feminist movements, both political and academic. Reviewing the controversy in “Testimony to a Flowering”, the archivist and critic Caitriona Crowe wryly noted:

Seamus Deane devoted a substantial part of his General Introduction to warning that there are serious ‘cultural-political investments’ involved in the construction of canons and urging investigation of the grounds on which these discriminations are based. His argument is identical to the feminist one presented and acted on by such publishing houses as Virago and Attic, which have devoted themselves to the recovery and repositioning, through reprinting, of women writers. (Crowe, 2)

Accordingly, what happened to O'Brien's work in terms of the literary canon can be explained in the words used by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin in her review of the *FDA I-III*: "It is a trap of all anthologies: by 'defining', that is excluding, they create a false inclusiveness in which the invisible exiles somehow do not count." (Ní Chuilleanáin, 52) In this regard, it was largely female writers and the contribution to society of feminist movements, who did "not count". In addition, the critics Patricia Boyle Haberstroh and Christine St Peter remark in the Introduction to *Opening the Field, Irish Women: Texts and Contexts*, that while many anthologies devoted to writing by Irish women had appeared by the 1990s and afterwards (they cite a sample of fifteen such works), "a survey of the most publicized, frequently reviewed and popular anthologies of Irish literature published during this period still continued to under-represent significantly the achievements of women just as *The Field Day Anthology* did" (Boyle Haberstroh and St Peter, 2). There is an extract from *The Ante-Room* in Volume II of the *FDA*, as well as a biography on O'Brien. In Volume III, John Wilson Foster mentions O'Brien on four occasions in his section on "Irish fiction: 1965-1990", and writes that O'Brien "wrote fine novels between the 1920s and 1940s" (Wilson Foster in *FDA III*, 939). He also adds, the by now familiar comment, that O'Brien "chose to write novels that dealt with love" (940).

The position of women in the Irish literary canon was addressed by the publication, in 2006, of the *Field Day Anthology: Women's Writing and Traditions, Vols. IV & V* (Bourke et al, eds), which presented a vast range of work authored by Irish women writers, as well as recording the major undertaking of the securing of autonomy for Irish women, and their subsequent achievements in numerous areas of influence. Moreover, the volumes were a testament to the work done by female activists and academics in this area during the 1980s and 1990s. As Crowe writes:

The new volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* are a result of the flowering of women's history as an academic discipline in Ireland in the last two decades, and testimony to the unearthing of primary-source material of all kinds by its practitioners. This expertise is hard-won; battles had to be fought, and still have to be fought, to secure for women's history, and women's studies in general, the resources and the status they deserve in the academy. (Crowe, 6)³²

³² For an outline of some of the significant aspects as well as the potential influence of the *Field Day Anthology*, see Margaret Kelleher. "The *Field Day Anthology* and Irish Women's Literary Studies" in *The Irish Review* 30 (Spring/Summer 2003), pp. 82-94.

Extracts from O'Brien's work include samples from the novels, as well as journal pieces and discussions that include *Mary Lavelle*, *The Land of Spices*, *As Music and Splendour*, as well as *Farewell Spain* and *Presentation Parlour*. O'Brien's work is included in five different sections of the anthology, which reflects the varied *oeuvre* of her work. These are entitled; "Recollections of Catholicism, 1906-1960"; "Contesting Ireland: The Erosion of Heterosexual Consensus, 1940-2001"; "Lesbian Encounters, 1745-1997"; "Education in Twentieth-Century Ireland" and "Aesthetics and Politics, 1890-1960". Crucially, the volumes opened up discussions about the Irish literary canon, and an important factor of *The Field Day Anthology* debate is that it engendered ideas about new critical approaches to canonical and non-canonical writers, which broaden the parameters of inclusion. Moreover, the ensuing controversy reflected the fact that women writers and critics, as Boyle Haberstroh and St Peter write, "had developed a number of different approaches in a complex feminist debate" (Boyle Haberstroh and St Peter, 6). In addition, the production of *FDA IV & V* established a foundation for a co-operative approach between disciplines, as reflected by the multidisciplinary and collaborative panel of editors and contributing editors to *FDA IV & V*. Gerardine Meaney, in a fascinating account of the enterprise, writes in "Engendering the Postmodern Canon? *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volumes IV & V: Women's Writing and Traditions*":

Three literary critics, three historians and two Irish language editors formed a multidisciplinary and collaborative panel which identified areas for inclusion and commissioned a total of forty-seven other contributing editors, from a wide variety of academic disciplines, journalism, the arts and political groups, to research, identify and edit material for inclusion. (Meaney in Boyle Haberstroh and St Peter, 15)

The repetition of the word "inclusion" is noteworthy here. Moreover, the "multidisciplinary and collaborative panel" necessarily widens theoretical approaches to texts. In his contribution to *The Current Debate about the Irish Literary Canon* (2006), the critic Neil Murphy argues in "Political Fantasies: Irish Writing and the Problem of Reading Strategies", that when a "theoretical-political apparatus" is brought to bear on a text, readings "suffer from interpretative flaws based on the conflation of history and aesthetic texts, often to the detriment of the primary literary texts and of Irish literary studies in general" (Murphy in Thompson, 64). Accordingly, a single critical

perspective cannot be brought to bear on O'Brien's work, as there are multiple themes, approaches, subject matters and settings throughout the novels, as reflected by the inclusion of O'Brien's work in multiple sections of *FDA IV & V*. Furthermore, in Murphy's view:

The imposition of a political model without affording the text the dignity of possible diversity, the construction of a theoria of reading that refuses contemplation in favour of recognition of the power credo is really not a theory of reading at all, at least in the truest sense. (85)

A similar view is expressed by O'Brien's mouthpiece, dramatised as the playwright, Matt Costello, in *Pray for the Wanderer*, who says: "Any books, mine or Armanda Ros's, or Virgil's, exist solely to demonstrate the artist's desire and ability to write them. They are a fruit of the creative function, as irresponsible, if you like, as other fruits of creation." (O'Brien, *Pray*, 119)

In anthologies and histories, discussions of the work of women writers were initially in this decade, still patchy. For instance, Norman Vance's 2002 work, *Irish Literature since 1800*, is part of a series that has as its aim an approach to the study of literature based on the relationship between literary forms and their historical context. The anthology lacks material from women writers, with Maria Edgeworth being the only female writer with a specific segment devoted to her work. O'Brien is briefly assessed in terms of individual women's lives, family and community relationships. While Vance acknowledges that O'Brien's "themes are often transnational" (Vance, *Irish Literature since 1800*, 195), such as the theme of female self-realisation within the heritage of Catholic Europe, he overlooks *Pray for the Wanderer*, for instance, which specifically compares Irish, English and European culture. Neither does he consider the engagement with the aims of the Irish literary revival, as well as the topic of nationalism explored in *The Land of Spices*, nor indeed, the exploration of Irish neutrality in *The Last of Summer*. Vance discusses the novels in terms of Baudelaire's sense of the parochial, and does not explore O'Brien's themes in a wider context, thereby giving a sense that the private sphere and parochial settings are always distinct from the doings of men in the public sphere.

However, O'Brien's status was radically reoriented by her treatment in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (2006), a major and agenda-setting publication edited by Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary. The history is a significant work that provides a useful and productively polemic overview of the Irish literary tradition in both Irish and English, within a politically significant framework of inclusiveness. The editors' working definition of the Irish Writer sets out to model scholarly discussion on an awareness of all of the diversities that make up cultural, social and political identity understood as Irish. They write: "Our primary criterion for inclusion has been that authors were born on the island of Ireland or lived a significant and formative period of their lives there." (Kelleher and O'Leary, *Vol. I*, 4) In situations of ambiguity, the editors continue, "we would prefer to err on the side of generous inclusion rather than to impose any kind of ethnic or ideological litmus test" (4). O'Brien is discussed in the *History* by John Wilson Foster in a section entitled, "The Irish Renaissance, 1890-1940: Prose in English". In a sub-section title taken from the 1932 title of Pamela Hinkson's novel (daughter of Katharine Tynan), "The 'Ladies' Road'", Wilson Foster writes that the fiction of the women writers discussed, "is not of the Free State but of another Ireland, part Anglo-Irish, part upper-middle class (or even upper class) expatriate" (Wilson Foster in Kelleher and O'Leary, *Vol. II*, 160). This thesis argues that O'Brien's novels, especially *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer* are "of the Free State", and moreover, while O'Brien's class is a distinctive feature of her work, she was not disassociated from the world outside comfortable middle-class surroundings. At the same time, Wilson Foster acknowledges that women writers "wrote the kind of novel that Modernism and Irish nationalism had induced critics to neglect" (160-1). Here, Wilson Foster is talking about forms that emulated the nineteenth-century English novel, class bias, and novels deemed non-political in that they are engaged with events occurring in the private sphere. This acknowledgement of non-inclusive categorisation in relation to women writers is later spoiled somewhat by his under-theorised surmise that "the highest common thematic factor of the tradition remained love" (163). While male writers also write of love, there is still an unfortunate association between women writers writing about love that is dismissed under the term "romantic love", and love in this thesis, is understood as an emotional negotiation and space against which political decisions are made and unmade. For instance, in *The Ante-Room* there is a well placed reference to Henry James' novel, *Washington Square*, which connects O'Brien to a writer whose work in many respects could have been termed "romantic fiction" had it

been written by a woman, but whose relation to the romance genre has been read as ironic, subversive and strategic.³³ Although O'Brien's work at one level partakes of the romance genre, to read it as merely, or only romantic fiction, is to miss the many subtleties and interventions her work makes outside the formulaic tale of the obstructed journey to everlasting love, and to under-read the serious questions about responsibility, investment and political stability that underlie the love plots. I argue that this term is more complicated and full of possibility than it may at first promise.

Scholarly Articles and Books

The main focus on interest in critical appraisals in Anthologies and Histories on O'Brien's work during the 1980s was on her middle-class credentials, as well as the placing of her as a writer of romantic fiction. During this period, scholarly articles on O'Brien's work in books and journals, while discussing the issue of autonomy for woman and female sexuality, concurred with the label of O'Brien as a conservative writer, while at the same time drawing attention to O'Brien's representations of the middle classes. Joan Ryan, who contributed two critical essays on O'Brien in *Studies in Anglo-Irish Literature* (1982), edited by Heinz Kosok, and *The Irish Writer and the City* (1984), edited by Maurice Harmon, focused on the limited choices for the female characters in the Mellick novels, and the importance of O'Brien's depiction of the Catholic middle classes. In "Class and Creed in Kate O'Brien", Ryan wrote: "We are indebted to Kate O'Brien for the accurate and loving way she has charted the lives of a certain class and creed in literature." (Ryan in Harmon, 134) In a similar vein, in "A not so simple saga, Kate O'Brien's *Without My Cloak*", Adele Dalsimer noted that the novel "is not only a vivid fictional portrait of a previously unrepresented segment of Irish life, it is also a *sotto voce* critique of that segment's distinctive qualities." (Dalsimer, "A not so simple saga", 56) The renewed publication and resurgence of interest in O'Brien's work was reflected by the first full-length book devoted to her work by her friend, the literary critic, Lorna Reynolds. *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (1987) is mainly biographical, but shows a reluctance to confront O'Brien's sexuality, leading to a glossing over or even a denial of lesbian characters in O'Brien's work. For instance, Reynolds did not discuss Agatha Conlon's sexuality in the novel,

³³ See Henry James. *Washington Square* in *The Bodley Head Henry James*. Vol. 1. London: Bodley Head, 1967, pp 195–392.

Mary Lavelle, in any detail and moreover, considered the novel “not as well-made as its predecessor” (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 59). However, Reynolds was astute in highlighting the fact that an understanding of Irish Catholicism is an illuminating point of departure for any reading of O’Brien’s fiction, a perspective that is utilised throughout this thesis. There are critical analyses of the books Reynolds deems important, interspersed with biographical detail, including some detail on Reynolds’ own family. However, the novels that have deliberate political perspectives, *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer*, are considered by Reynolds under a heading entitled “Asides”, as Reynolds did not admire either book and considered them inferior to O’Brien’s other works. It is such “asides” that this thesis is concerned with. I read these novels, which fall uncomfortably outside of Reynolds’ frame for understanding O’Brien in terms of her politicization of the family and the family space, as well as the implications for female characters in the family. Equally, the critics that followed directly in Reynolds’ wake were alert to such asides, dealing with the issues with which she was uncomfortable with, such as sexuality.

In the 1990s, the fruits of feminist movements, the Kate O’Brien Weekend and the establishment of Women’s Studies Programmes, were heralded by the publication of two important books on O’Brien’s work, which reassessed her contribution to literature and uncovered a more radical exploration of women’s roles in Irish society in her work than earlier imagined. In 1990, Adele M. Dalsimer published *Kate O’Brien: A Critical Study*. Dalsimer was the co-founder and co-director of Boston College’s groundbreaking internationally renowned Irish Studies program, and a major proponent of Irish Studies in the United States. In her important study, Dalsimer reads O’Brien thematically and treats each novel to a critical analysis, which was the first significant work of analysis that considered all of O’Brien’s novels. Dalsimer’s excellent critique of O’Brien’s work, while acknowledging the purpose of the promotion of autonomy for women in the novels, ultimately reads O’Brien as a writer who “relies on inherently regressive ideas to formulate her arguments” (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, xv). In 1993, Eibhear Walshe’s edited collection, *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O’Brien*, was published, which discussed O’Brien’s work within a diverse range of themes, with essays on O’Brien’s travelogues, journalism and knowledge of music included. The book challenged both Lorna Reynolds and Adele Dalsimer’s assumptions of O’Brien as a conservative writer by including new perspectives on the novels. In this way,

O'Brien's significance to the modern Irish literary canon could be re-assessed, as in the Introduction, Walshe writes that the remit of the collection is to present, "the idea that Kate O'Brien refused to participate in simple, reductive exercises in subversion" (Walshe, *OPD*, 8). In 1994, a selection of lectures from the Kate O'Brien Weekend seminars, on the tenth anniversary of their inauguration, was published. *With Warmest Love: Lectures for Kate O'Brien 1984-93* was edited by John Logan, who welcomed the renewed interest in O'Brien's work by acknowledging the contribution of Arlen House, Virago and the yearly seminar held in Limerick.³⁴

Scholarly articles of the 1990s also heralded new approaches to O'Brien's work, paralleled by an important publication of this period, the LIP Pamphlet Series, which pioneered new assessments of women and women writers in Irish society. Important examples include *A Kind of Scar* (1991), in which Eavan Boland discusses the position of women writing in the Irish literary tradition. In the same year, Gerardine Meaney produced *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics*, in which she argues that the intertwining of "sexual identity and national identity in relation to Irish women serves to obliterate the reality of women's lives" (Meaney, *Sex and Nation*, 3). In addition, in 1993, the *Irish Times* journalist, Carol Coulter, produced *The Hidden Tradition: Women, Feminism and Nationalism in Ireland*. In this pamphlet, Coulter documents the achievements of active female nationalists in a colonial framework and the gradual exclusion of women in politics after Independence had been achieved. As a result of this renewed interest, perspectives such as queer studies, feminist studies, considerations of class, religion and exile, as well as personal memoirs on O'Brien's work, as reflected in Walshe's edited collection, became possible. Important examples of scholarly articles of the 1990s on Kate O'Brien include the literary critic, Anne Fogarty's essay, "Other Spaces: Postcolonialism and the Politics of Truth in Kate O'Brien's *That Lady*", in which she utilises *That Lady* as an example of a text that problematises post-colonial theory in its rendering of female attempts for autonomy outside the nationalist frame. In "The Ear of the Other: Dissident Voices in Kate O'Brien's *As Music and Splendour* and Mary Dorsey's *A Noise from the Woodshed*",

³⁴ The title is taken from an anecdote in O'Brien's travel book, *My Ireland*, in which the author recalls that her father always signed off his postcards with the words "warmest love". O'Brien used the same term when dedicating *My Ireland* to Limerick.

Fogarty confronts the representation of lesbian sexuality in O'Brien's final novel.³⁵ In addition, the Spanish setting for *Mary Lavelle* provided much scope for analysis and commentary by European scholars. In *Eire/Ireland*, Rose Quiello, in a feminist psychoanalytical reading of *Mary Lavelle*, examines the portrayal of Mary Lavelle in the context of the hysteric, as a character who "is deeply unconventional in a society where convention touches upon everything" (Quiello, 46). Other examples of European interest include a discussion of *Mary Lavelle* in the French journal, *Cycnos*, as well as an analysis of O'Brien's impressions of Spain, as recorded in *Farewell Spain*, by Mary S. Vásquez in *Monographic Review*.³⁶

Despite the erratic appearance of O'Brien in Histories and Anthologies in the 1980s, the 1990s were also a crucially important decade in the raising of O'Brien's literary profile. As a result of critical work in full-length texts and scholarly articles, the label "conservative writer" is no longer an automatic application to O'Brien, and her work can be explored in a wider context. Thus, Eibhear Walshe, in "Art, Unconcerned and Lawless: Transgression in the Fictions of Kate O'Brien", could argue that the nature of O'Brien's subversion "was a utilisation of art and of the aesthetic as a subversion of the normative codes of the bourgeois" (Walshe in Logan, 45). Consequently, the fruits of analytical possibility in O'Brien's work were opened up to literary criticism, textual analysis, gender difference and class divides, Catholicism, the cultural, social and political environment, and feminist issues, to name but a few.

John Wilson Foster's recent work, *Irish Novels 1890-1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction* (2008), has as its aim the recovery of forgotten novels and novelists, and the first section deals with fiction from 1890 to 1922, the period of the Irish Literary Revival. There is a postscript survey of "Women Novelists" from 1922 to 1940 attached to the end of the section in which O'Brien is included. *The Ante-Room*, *The Land of Spices* and *The Last of Summer* are briefly summarised, with a longer

³⁵ See Anne Fogarty. "Other Spaces: Postcolonialism and the Politics of Truth in Kate O'Brien's *That Lady*" in *European Journal of English Studies* 3.3 (December 1999), pp 342-53; Anne Fogarty. "The Ear of the Other: Dissident Voices in Kate O'Brien's *As Music and Splendour* and Mary Dorcey's *A Noise from the Woodshed*" in Eibhear Walshe. Ed. *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*. New York: St. Martin's, 1997, pp. 170-201.

³⁶ See Jacques Emprin. "Mary Lavelle de Kate O'Brien ou L'exil et le desert de L'amour" in *Cycnos* 15.2 (1998), pp. 139-49; Mary S. Vásquez. *Monographic Review/Revista Monográfica* 12 (1996), pp. 107-22.

analysis of *Mary Lavelle*.³⁷ Wilson Foster contends that there were many women writers working in the period under consideration, whose contributions have been overshadowed by the concentration on work set in Ireland about political and revolutionary matters. He restates his view, expressed in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, that Irish women novelists “wrote the kinds of novel that modernism and Irish nationalism induced critics to neglect” (Wilson Foster, 460). Wilson Foster goes on to argue that it is time to move away from the Revival/counter-Revival concept in order to account for the other types of fiction that were being written in the 1930s and 1940s, and asks: “Should the Revival and counter-Revival not be our sole concern, then we can see, with help from library catalogues and second-hand bookshops, what has been omitted from this reading of Irish fiction between 1890 ... and 1922” (5). In this way, the reformulating of the canonical model can be undertaken, as, he continues, the “omissions become glaring as soon as we expand our notion of fiction to incorporate varieties of popular and ‘genre’ fiction” (5). Additionally, as a result, the earlier traditions and antecedents among various types of fiction that later writers have built on will encompass the diversity of genres and experimental labels attached to Irish fiction written in English. Wilson Foster suggests that if there is a discernible tradition of the Irish novel, it is largely a female tradition. Women writers of the 1920s and 1930s, Wilson Foster argues, “maintain continuity of style and theme with their predecessors and do not illustrate any fracturing or rupturing that is amenable to easy political and cultural explanation” (460). Moreover, he continues, they demonstrated a wider cultural perspective in that most of them had been educated abroad or had travelled quite extensively. As a result, he argues that women writers were more inclined to display social objectivity, as they inherited, he writes, “a traditional subtlety for the intricacies of social relationship ... and if this reflects the marginal role in constitutional politics women have historically played in Ireland, it also permits a social objectivity missing in so much male Irish fiction” (460). Here Wilson Foster appears to concur with James M. Cahalan’s argument in his 1988 work, *The Irish Novel: A Critical History*, discussed earlier, that women write similarly and about similar topics. Moreover, Wilson Foster writes:

³⁷ Agatha Conlon, a prominent character in *Mary Lavelle*, is named erroneously as Agatha Keogh (475). A footnote (n. 10, p. 487) mentions that O’Brien was educated abroad, but in actuality O’Brien was educated by a French Order of nuns based in Limerick, followed by three years at University College Dublin. In the summary of *The Land of Spices*, it is not clarified that much of the action in the “Belgian Convent” takes place in an Irish branch of the Order.

The cultural malaise of the Free State appeared to affect the male Catholic writers more than the female, perhaps because for one reason or another male Catholic writers took internal Irish politics and culture more to heart than their female colleagues, having for much longer hand, as voters and workers outside the home, a direct and personal stake in political structures. (459-460)

Apart from underrating the sterling work of feminist historians, such as Margaret MacCurtain and Margaret Ward in documenting the active part women played in political affairs, and taking into account the Free State political and ideological climate that excluded women from taking part in the political arena, it is a rather sweeping statement to suggest that all women writers did not take “Irish politics and culture” to heart. This thesis argues that on the contrary, women were very much affected by the cultural malaise of the Free State, as dramatised in *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer*, but here again the social and political arena being associated with males and the public sphere alone, evident in the majority of the anthologies and histories already discussed, comes into play.

Current criticism has produced crucial and important works on the areas of feminism and sexuality that interrogate O’Brien’s novels through the lens of queer studies and feminist critiques, and reflect the work spearheaded by Eibhear Walshe’s edited collection, *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O’Brien*. Moreover, O’Brien’s role as critic, journalist and travel writer also provides scope for analysis.³⁸ Critics such as Eibhear Walshe, Emma Donoghue, Katherine O’Donnell and Aintzane Legarreta-Mextxaka have discussed lesbian sexuality in O’Brien’s fiction in detail, and as a result, have provided brilliant re-openings of her work’s potential for a subversive critique.³⁹ In addition, analyses of feminist issues by critics such as Patricia Coughlan,

³⁸ See the following for a range of publications, in reverse chronological order, on Kate O’Brien, her work, and works that include essays on her writing: Mary Coll. Ed. *Faithful Companions: Collected Essays Celebrating the 25th Anniversary of The Kate O’Brien Weekend*. Limerick: Mellick Press, 2009; Deirdre Quinn and Sharon Tighe-Mooney. Eds. *Essays in Irish Literary Criticism: Themes of Gender, Sexuality, and Corporeality*. Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2008, pp. 109-124, pp. 125-139; Patricia A. Lynch et al. Eds. *Back to the Present: Forward to the Past: Irish Writing and History since 1798*. Volume 2. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi B.V., 2006, pp. 3-16, pp. 17-26, pp. 27-39, pp. 41-49; “Bibliography of Selected Articles/Essays on Kate O’Brien” in Walshe, *Kate O’Brien: A Writing Life*, pp. 187-190; O’Toole, *Dictionary of Munster Women Writers*, pp. 233-236; John Logan. Ed. *With Warmest Love: Lectures for Kate O’Brien*. Limerick: Mellick Press, 1994; Eibhear Walshe. Ed. *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O’Brien*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1993.

³⁹ See Eibhear Walshe. “Invisible Irelands: Kate O’Brien’s Lesbian and Gay Social Formations in London and Ireland in the Twentieth Century” in *SQS: Journal of Queer Studies* (January 2006), pp. 39-48;

Ailbhe Smyth, Mary Breen and Elizabeth Butler Cullingford have also opened up O'Brien's work to wider discussion.⁴⁰ Eibhear Walshe's biographical work, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (2006), is a much-welcomed volume for those interested in O'Brien's life and work. Walshe traces the central themes in O'Brien's novels, and builds on the aims of his 1993 edited work, and contends that O'Brien's themes subverted the cultural and literary codes of the times. He writes:

In her fiction, Kate O'Brien was a subversive. She created novels that were deceptively traditional in form but radical in content – each novel a Trojan horse smuggling in forbidden topics, such as adultery, lesbianism and venereal disease through the medium of her civilised, graceful narratives. (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 2)

Moreover, in Walshe's work, the banning of two of O'Brien's books is considered in terms of the impact it had on O'Brien's relationship with Ireland, thereby opening this trajectory up as another crucial means of understanding her work. Although this is an ongoing theme in her novels, it has neither been much considered nor fully explored to date, and my subsequent analysis of religion and family in O'Brien's work will further press the possibilities of this means of reading her novels. This thesis argues that O'Brien's novels, instead of being "mere romance", represent, through her minute and forensic detailing and plotting of family life in Ireland, a critique, not only of the Irish Constitution of 1937, but also an exploration of Ireland's place as a State in the wider world of Europe and beyond.

Emma Donoghue. Ed. "Lesbian Encounters: 1745-1997" in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Women's Writing and Traditions*. Vols. IV & V. Cork: Cork University Press, 2002, pp. 1090-1140; Katherine O'Donnell. "'But Greek ... usually knows Greek': Recognizing Queer Sexuality in Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle*" in Patricia Boyle Haberstroh and Christine St Peter. Eds. *Opening the Field. Irish Women: Texts and Contexts*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2007, pp. 74-91; Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka. "Orpheo, Eurydice, and Co." in *SQS: Journal of Queer Studies* (February 2006), pp. 116-122.

⁴⁰ See Mary Breen. "Something Understood? Kate O'Brien and *The Land of Spices*" in Walshe, *Ordinary People Dancing*, pp. 167-190; Elizabeth Butler Cullingford. "'Our Nuns Are Not a Nation': Politicizing the Convent in Irish Literature and Film" in *Eire-Ireland* 41.1 and 2 (Spring/Summer 2006), pp. 9-39 (Reprinted in Wanda Balzano et al. Eds. *Irish Postmodernisms and Popular Culture*. London: Palgrave, 2007, pp. 55-73); Patricia Coughlan. "Kate O'Brien: Feminine Beauty, Feminist Writing and Sexual Role" in Walshe, *Ordinary People Dancing*, pp. 59-84; Ailbhe Smyth. "Counterpoints: A Note (or Two) on Feminism and Kate O'Brien" in Walshe, *Ordinary People Dancing*, pp. 24-35.

Conclusion: Kate O'Brien and Irish Writing

Feminist literary practice has done much to interrogate and expand fixed notions of literary evaluation, and as such has had an enormous impact on the literary canon. As the critic Rebecca Pelan writes in “Literally Loose Cannon or Loosening the Literary Canon”, “it would be difficult to imagine the position of women’s writing and publishing today without a framework of feminism, whatever internal disputes it may contain” (Pelan in Thompson, 90). Pelan welcomes the “now widely-accepted distinction between ‘literature’ and ‘writing’” (89), as she argues that this distinction probes at the heretofore accepted terms for the making of “great” writers. This in turn raises questions about the definition of literary aesthetics, as quality remains a debatable topic in the recovery of women’s writing. In “The *Field Day Anthology* and Irish Women’s Literary Studies”, the critic Margaret Kelleher cautions against premising the “rhetoric of loss” as it “risks significant overstatement and elision of the extent to which women’s writings existed to be remembered” (Kelleher, 88). At the very least, it is to be welcomed and appreciated that the material from women writers is now available for discussion and critical assessment. In addition, Pelan, quoting from Imelda Whelehan in *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to ‘Post-Feminism’*, argues that “the main strength of modern feminist thought is its interdisciplinarity, its resistance to easy categorization” (Pelan in Thompson, 99).⁴¹ At the same time, Pelan writes, “much remains to be done in terms of the ways in which women’s creative production is assessed by hegemonic literary practices that conceal their own historically-developed biases” (89). She cites examples of the privileging of experimental texts over realist texts, for instance, the latter predominantly produced by Irish women writers, but optimistically concludes that “in both reviewing and critical practices, the very fact that these debates are taking place ... suggests that much has been achieved in interrogating and altering the allocation (or withholding) of literary value based on aesthetic standards of achievement alone” (109).

Although O’Brien was not quite forgotten in general works on Irish fiction, the predominance of the frame of Revival/counter-Revival approaches to literary fiction had

⁴¹ See Imelda Whelehan. *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to ‘Post-Feminism’*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995.

an impact on whether O'Brien's work was deemed relevant or not to the work in question. This raises questions about the parameters of the literary canon, as well as the notion of inclusion and exclusion. From the Literature Review Overview, it can be argued that a fresh look at the standard canon, as pioneered by *FDA IV & V*, for instance, in the light of Stephen Gwynn's remarks that Kate O'Brien was just as Irish as any other author, and that the Catholic merchant class were a strand of Irish society whose representation in literature was as important as that of any other class or strata of Irish society, is still necessary. Walshe writes that in the 1930s, "the Irish middle class lacked a literary voice from within" (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 76). As a result, Walshe observes: "In writing novels about the modern Irish bourgeoisie, Kate was creating a literature from scratch", and Walshe credits her with "bringing an entire genre into being, the Irish bourgeois novel" (76). While Walshe's remark is an overstatement, certainly, O'Brien is the twentieth-century writer most synonymous with this genre, and whilst James M. Cahalan advances the argument in *The Irish Novel: A Critical History*, that O'Brien's focus on the middle-class is "pioneering and unique" in many ways, (Cahalan, 209), the Limerick-born, Gerald Griffin can be identified as a predecessor.⁴² However, it is O'Brien who most significantly developed the genre as a means of popular entertainment and as a vehicle for social commentary and critique.

As few examples of Irish Catholic merchant class writers from this time are widely available, O'Brien's work offers a valuable perspective to any study of Irish fiction. Moreover, the experiences of Catholic bourgeoisie women in the literary tradition are infrequent. Additionally, the experiences of single women, differences in circumstances between women of different classes, and the significance of cross cultural and political societies such as the Irish Countrywomen's Association, the Irish Housewives Association, and the Mother's Union, have often been overlooked. While serious strides have been made in this area in the social sciences and in cultural and historical studies with the publication of books such as Caitriona Clear's *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961*, Maria Luddy's *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940*, Yvonne McKenna's *Made Holy: Irish Women Religious*

⁴² Gerald Griffin (1803-1840) was a Catholic novelist, playwright and poet. His family left Ireland for Pennsylvania in 1820, leaving Gerard in the care of his older brother. He never saw his parents again. His most successful novel was *The Collegians* (1829). However, concern about the morality of his fiction caused him to give up writing and he entered the Christian Brothers in 1838. See www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11588, accessed 8 April 2009. See also, Walshe. *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life*, p. 76.

at Home and Abroad, James M. Smith's *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*, as well as Diarmaid Ferriter's recently published work, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, the assessment of women writers from the early twentieth century in the field of Irish Literary Studies has been under-promoted.⁴³ The field of Irish Studies is still largely dominated by the overpowering figures of Joyce, Beckett and Yeats and outside of academic circles O'Brien is still largely unknown. Crucially then, O'Brien's work questions the generalisation of women as a homogenous group in society, also challenging the view that women's sexuality can be linked only to their production and governed as one and the same outside the context of individual agency, choice and desire.

The contrast between the work done on O'Brien in scholarly articles and full-length works compared to that documented in the anthologies and histories discussed reflect Ní Chuilleanáin's remarks about the *FDA I-III* in that exclusion is understood as unworthy for inclusion. To a large degree, general works on the novel and anthologies reflect each other and neglect in one area is frequently mirrored in the other.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, gender bias still appears to be a factor in the story of the exclusion of women writers. Moreover, in "Territory and Transgression: History, Nationality and Sexuality in Kate O'Brien's Fiction", Gerardine Meaney remarks that women's writing is "only available to specialists, in academic libraries, and to those with the time and skills to seek it out" (Meaney, "Territory and Transgression", 77). Similarly, Boyle Haberstroh and St Peter note the ease with which women's work can be ignored, as besides "a dedicated group of readers and scholars: the text has to get into print (or back into print), has to be reviewed, has to be taught in literature classes and has to be written about" (Boyle Haberstroh and St Peter, 2-3). In addition, they argue that the current popularity of post-colonialism studies in Ireland has tended towards excluding women writers, as it has, they write, "tended to be centered more on narrow political than on cultural or social forces" (5). However, the term "political" needs to be redefined in

⁴³ See Caitriona Clear. *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000; Maria Luddy. *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Yvonne McKenna. *Made Holy: Irish Women Religious at Home and Abroad*. Dublin and Portland: Irish Academic Press, 2006; James M. Smith. *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007; Diarmaid Ferriter. *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*. London: Profile Books, 2009.

⁴⁴ For a comprehensive history of anthologies of Irish Literature, see Margaret Kelleher. "The Cabinet of Irish Literature: A Historical Perspective on Irish Anthologies" in *Éire-Ireland* 38.4 (Fall/Winter 2003), pp. 68-89.

order to move away from its connotation with events in the public sphere alone, as the politicization of the family and women's roles in the family in O'Brien's texts indicate.

However, feminism itself widens the terms of the political so that it can be redefined in order to move away from its connotation with events in the public sphere alone, to take in other aspects of ontology and history as politically inflected as the politicization of the family and women's roles in the family. It is now a commonplace of the academy that feminist history, theory and literary practice has politicised internal spaces, the private, and deconstructed the binary between public and private. Despite this firm redefining of public and private in cultural studies, queer and gender theory, and dis/ability studies in academia across the USA and Europe, such dismantling and politicising of the private remains problematic in Irish studies. A number of feminist critics working in Irish Studies have noted how woman's writing is often the casualty of a post-colonial project that is still overly invested in a national question that is not interested in spaces outside the "public" forum investing heavily, for instance, in the notion of a public intellectual.⁴⁵ Additionally, critics such as Edna Longley and Roy Foster, who have been identified as "revisionist", have noted how a canon involved in nation building has little room for writing that appears to undermine or challenge the integrity of that nation.⁴⁶ Equally, queer theorists and writers have noted how "queer writing" is also occluded by the national, which emphasises Wilde's and Casement's republicanism over their homosexuality, and indeed over thorny and difficult terrain such as paedophilia and pederasty.⁴⁷ So although it is commonplace within feminist theory and gender studies to think of the private as political, such a commonplace was not contemporaneous with O'Brien, and thinking about her work today remains critically marginal. Thus my reading of her work through the frame of public/private makes a bi-ocular contribution to Irish studies and writing. It provides a way of reading O'Brien that makes explicit the political potential of her explorations of inner and outer

⁴⁵ Critics who have written on this topic include Kim McMullan, Margaret Kelleher, Tina O'Toole, Moynagh Sullivan, Linda Connolly, Anne Fogarty, Jody Allen Randolph, Guinn Batten, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, Gerardine Meaney, and Pat Coughlan.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, Roy Foster's *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change 1970-2000*. London: Penguin, 2008; *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History*. London: Penguin, 1993; *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*. London: Penguin, 1988 and Edna Longley's *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*. UK: Bloodaxe Books, 1994.

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Anne Mulhall, with Moynagh Sullivan and Wanda Balzano. Eds. *Irish Postmodernisms and Popular Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave 2007; and the critical writings of Colm Tóibín.

life and it contributes to widening the term of a canon and process of canonicity that is still slow to adjust and redefine according to feminist practice and principles.

Critical Methodology

O'Brien has been labelled in a variety of ways in literary criticism, from that of popular writer of romantic fiction to that of a radical, subversive voice, as pioneered by the essays in Eibhear Walshe's edited collection, *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien*. The question this thesis asks is to what extent O'Brien's work, seemingly about romance, is subversively political, when considering her depiction of Catholic women framed by Church edicts and practice and the 1937 Irish Constitution. Two sets of relevant co-texts are utilised to explore possible answers, papal encyclicals, especially *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) and *Casti Connubii* (1930), as well as Articles 40-44 on "Fundamental Rights" in the 1937 Irish Constitution, in particular Article 41 on "The Family", which states:

Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937. Article 41, The Family

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | 1 | In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. |
| | 2 | The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. |

In the image rendered in the Irish Constitution, Catholic Church Social Teaching values and the State ethos merged to construct a woman who selflessly gives her life to the home and to those within. Thus, to be the ideal Irish woman as described in the Constitution, one must be a mother and at that, a particular kind of mother, a theme that is specifically explored in *Pray for the Wanderer*, and as such provokes questions about the rendering of maternal characters throughout O'Brien's texts. Additionally, in that novel, as well as in *The Last of Summer*, maternal figures function to explore and question Irish cultural *mores*. O'Brien directly confronts the roles and duties imposed on women by Church edicts and practice and the 1937 Irish Constitution in *Pray for the Wanderer*, which I use as a template for reading the female characters in O'Brien's other novels. Consequently, the implication of O'Brien's representation of this

ideology for her characters that are mothers, wives and single women is the focus of this thesis.

In addition, on account of the close relationship between Church and State in the first half of the twentieth century in Ireland, I am reading O'Brien's work in light of the 1937 Irish Constitution and papal encyclicals relevant to gender roles and ideology as perpetuated in the Constitution, especially in relation to woman's role in the home. The particular research trajectory reads O'Brien in the light of the parameters of Catholicism and the family, by locating close textual analysis in a socio-political historical framework, focusing especially on the role of the Church in structuring gender role expectations and practices in a section of society seldom written about, that of Irish middle-class women of the first half of the twentieth century. Whilst Catholic ideology has been dealt with culturally, socially, historically and politically in a number of contexts, the relation of the Catholic Church to gender in twentieth-century Irish literature has generally been under-investigated.⁴⁸ This has led to an under-reading of women's acceptance of their roles that denies claims for individualistic negotiations with gender roles. This exploration of desire and restraint is reflected in O'Brien's texts by the rendering of characters that display outward stability while battling inner turmoil. Thus, the dynamics of the family is the literary prism through which the struggle for self-determination in the religious and cultural context is negotiated by O'Brien's characters.

In this thesis, a close reading of the texts drives the methodology, with a broad contextualisation of these readings in contemporaneous social and political discourses. My approach comes closest to the work of American feminist literary critics, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and the Anglo-American branch of feminist criticism (a considerably debatable term, as much English feminist criticism is quite distinct from the American approach) that informed much of the commendable second wave feminist work of the later twentieth century. I also use Simone de Beauvoir's crucial text, *The Second Sex*, as a theoretical template for reading O'Brien,

⁴⁸ Revelations of physical and sexual abuse in State and Church institutions during the period in question in the print media and in documentaries such as the TV documentaries *Dear Daughter* (1996), *States of Fear* (1999) and the film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002), points to a considerable divide between ideology and reality. *Dear Daughter* exposed child abuse in the Goldenbridge industrial school run by the Mercy Sisters. *States of Fear* told the story of the Magdalene laundries, which was later dramatised in the 2002 (Miramax) film, *The Magdalene Sisters*, directed by Peter Mullan.

as it is contemporaneous with O'Brien's work and useful in that regard, particularly in relation to the discussion of motherhood in Chapter Two. It remains very important and integral to my scholarship to maintain a primary interest in traditional critical concepts like theme, motif, and characterisation, with literature functioning amongst other things as an arguable index of representations of the social world in which it was written. To this end, I explore primarily female characters in O'Brien's work. This is not to suggest that they operate as historical documents, but as possible sites of exploration of the issues surrounding women's lives and experience at the time O'Brien wrote.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979), is a historically important work, as it paved the way for much subsequent feminist criticism. Gilbert and Gubar's method of textual analysis is to concentrate on literary protest inside the text, as they explain that "the striking coherence we noticed in literature by women could be explained by a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society" (Gilbert and Gubar, xi-xii). Although there has been much development in feminist literary criticism since Gilbert and Gubar's pivotal text, for me close reading of O'Brien's texts has driven the choice of working within the framework that they set, seeking the instances of impulse to "struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society". Prevailing views on women's role in society, heavily influenced by the ideologically dominant Church, are often reflected in the struggles that O'Brien's characters undergo, thereby the texts negotiate and explore the dynamics of oppression, power and the ideology of patriarchy in early Independent Ireland.⁴⁹ Thus, O'Brien's work facilitates an exploration of the Church's influence, its role and contribution with regard to the lives of women. Through her work, considerations of how the female characters explore and negotiate these roles can be sought. These questions are considered by O'Brien throughout the novels by the inclusion of topics such as the role of the Church in daily society, indicated by the

⁴⁹ Patriarchy, as used in this thesis, is understood as the way in which males have dominance over females. Adrienne Rich explains the term as follows in *Of Woman Born*: "Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male." (Rich, 57)

numerous Church personnel portrayed in the texts and the preponderance of private and public religious ritual.

O'Brien's biography, *Teresa of Avila*, published in 1951, provides an important bridge between the historical context and her fiction, as in her study of the saint she used a secular focus rather than a religious one. She wrote: "I write of Teresa of Avila by choice which is passionate, arbitrary, personal. [...] But I am not writing of the canonized saint. I propose to examine Teresa, not by the rules of canonization, but for what she was – saint or not – a woman of genius." (O'Brien, *Teresa*, 9-10) Coupled with Teresa's passion for God, O'Brien admired her single-minded purpose of re-establishing the ascetic life "throughout Spain, and the world" (73) in the face of adversity. For instance, the Papal Nuncio, O'Brien wrote admiringly in *Farewell Spain*, had called her, "'restless, disobedient, contumacious, an inventress of new doctrines, a breaker of the cloister-rule, a despiser of apostolic precept which forbiddeth a woman to teach'" (O'Brien, *Spain*, 109). Thus, in order to establish her Order, and succeed as a religious reformer, Teresa became a rebel. For O'Brien, Teresa was on the one hand passionately religious, and on the other hand, a rebel, and it is this contradistinction that resonates in the depictions of personal struggle in O'Brien's female characters. Moreover, in O'Brien's depiction of Teresa lies the context for her rendering of "excessively unorthodox" heroines in a dominant Catholic environment, a milieu that will be described in the next chapter. As Eibhear Walshe astutely observes about the link between Saint Teresa and O'Brien's rendering of aesthetic women in "Lock up your Daughters: From Ante-Room to Interior Castle":

O'Brien appropriates this figure of the 'holy woman' and transcodes her as female radical, political dissident. By interpreting the spiritual as the political, O'Brien finds a core of resistance, a denial of the centre that allows her fiction to move beyond the merely reactionary and towards the actively subversive. (Walshe in *OPD*, 152)

The journey "towards the actively subversive" in O'Brien's fiction is frequently mapped on the path of desire, with its potential for disruption, whether paternal or extra-marital, as in *Without My Cloak*, maternal, as in *The Ante-Room* and *The Last of Summer* or romantic, as in *Without My Cloak*, *The Ante-Room*, *Mary Lavelle*, *Pray for the Wanderer*, *The Last of Summer*, *That Lady* and homoerotic as in *As Music and*

Splendour. O'Brien's *Teresa of Avila* is again of interest here, as crucial to her imaginative engagement with love was the influence of Teresa's writings about her struggles with emotional attachments. Teresa was by all accounts a sociable person and found, O'Brien wrote, "that conventual life with women suited her well, was indeed far more to her taste than the normal kind of social life she had attacked so zestfully in her father's house" (O'Brien, *Teresa*, 42). O'Brien recounts that Teresa was also no stranger to love and appears to have been romantically interested in love, which revealed to her the vagaries of human nature. Of these attachments, O'Brien surmises that Teresa "suggests of herself that she was moody and restless in attachments. Yet she formed many of them, and *chiefly with women*, whose devotion ... she could always and effortlessly command" (44, emphasis mine). This is a pointed remark to make about an important saint in the 1950s, and it is unlikely that it was written lightly. Indeed, Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka, in "Orpheo, Eurydice, and Co.," argues that O'Brien's book on Teresa is "an important example of lesbian historiography" (Legarreta Mentxaka, 117). On one occasion, Teresa wrote:

I was once in the company of a certain person, right at the beginning of my acquaintance with her, when the Lord was pleased to make me realize that these friendships were not good for me... [...] I was greatly astonished and upset about it, and I never wanted to see that person again... However, I entered into relations with that person once again... In subsequent occasions I got to know other people in the same way... But no one caused me as much distraction as did the person of whom I am speaking, for I was very fond of her. (O'Brien, *Teresa*, 40-1)

Additionally, Teresa recounted that during her first year as a nun, while seeking a cure for illness at the mountains in the home of her uncle, an attraction developed between her and her parish priest. O'Brien wrote: "The two fought through a dangerous situation ... yet sudden friendship, which finally she used to bring her confessor back to his vows and his priestly obligations, had danger in it at which she did not blink" (37). Thus, Teresa, O'Brien continued, overcame and renounced attachments in order to achieve a higher spiritual level. This idea of the battle between the demands of loving God and the desires that arise in human love featured in many of O'Brien's novels, as in the rendering of love affairs in the novels, O'Brien's female heroines put the ideal of the greater good over individual desire in matters of the heart. What O'Brien admired about Teresa, she wrote in *Farewell Spain*, was that she was "able to suffer, and record,

a long-drawn and awful adventure of the spirit without sacrificing a jot of her human reality and understanding” (O’Brien, *Spain*, 103).

It is the interpretation of love taken from Teresa’s writings that O’Brien used as a model for the rendering of love in her novels. The importance of experience for the emotional development of her characters is a crucial factor, as O’Brien wrote that in order for Teresa to become a saint, she had to forgo “attachments”, and “it was perhaps necessary for her to have known them, and through them all that of herself and of human nature which they revealed to her” (O’Brien, *Teresa*, 45). Although there are elements of both Romance and romantic fiction in O’Brien’s fiction, when she employs the experience of love in her texts, it is not along the lines of unhappy mutual love caused by the conflict between love and duty as in Romance literature such as the story of Tristan and Iseult or *Romeo and Juliet*, as argued by Mercier in relation to *The Anteroom* and *Mary Lavelle* (Mercier 86-93). Neither does it fit the rules of the genre of romantic fiction. Rather, experiences of love are modelled on the writings of Teresa of Avila who wrote of attachments with both sexes, and of whom O’Brien wrote: “But assuredly it was love, human love and her idea of it, which was the chief enemy between her and her love of God” (O’Brien, *Teresa*, 44).

As mentioned at the opening of this thesis, O’Brien was perceived of as a writer of romantic fiction and the genre of romance is, therefore, an important consideration with regard to her work. Although it is not the primary lens of interpretation used in the thesis, it is useful for my analysis of Agnes Mulqueen in Chapter Four as a demonstration of how the rules of the genre do not work when applied to O’Brien’s fiction. The perfect man is married to Agnes’ sister, and Agnes is not interested in the man who loves her and who is available. Moreover, love for her sister is, in fact, the determining factor in Agnes’ story. The genre of romance requires a happy ending, with all obstacles to the marriage between the heroine and the hero neatly removed. Important studies of the genre include Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (1984) and Tania Modleski’s *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982). Radway employs reader response as well as an anthropological and feminist psychological methodology to readers’ views on why they read and enjoy romance. She then explores what is unconsciously revealed about cultural assumptions by what readers say about their

reading of romantic fiction. While Radway concludes that the argument for whether the genre is conservative or oppositional cannot be answered, she argues that the reading of romantic fiction can be recognised as a legitimate protest. The informing principle of Tania Modleski's study of Harlequin Romances, Gothic Novels and soap operas, is the idea of contradiction, as she argues that mass art functions as such. She argues that engagement with the above genres provides outlets for dissatisfaction but that the *mores* that lead to dissatisfaction are not questioned. Both studies provide a useful understanding of the attraction of reading romantic fiction, as well as the cultural conditions that facilitates that interest. The literary critic Nancy Armstrong's 2005 work, *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719-1900*, is also useful for the exploration of desire and restraint in O'Brien's novels. As Armstrong writes of the protagonist in the Victorian novel: "[I]ndividuality depends on how ... she chooses to displace what is a fundamentally asocial desire onto a socially appropriate object" (Armstrong, *How Novels Think*, 8). In a similar vein, this is a theme that is central to the struggles in which O'Brien's female characters find themselves, and especially relevant to the discussion about the choice of role undertaken by Jo Kernahan, Nell Mahoney and Agnes Mulqueen in Chapter Four, as well as Lilian Morrow's contradistinctive expressions of desire in Chapter Three.

Considering that the rules of the genre of romantic fiction, as I will argue, cannot work when applied to O'Brien's novels, it is curious how the label persisted. In *Pray for the Wanderer*, O'Brien directly confronts the difficulty of being a writer in 1930s Ireland, a confrontation that is not considered in depth in Gilbert and Gubar's study. As Nancy Armstrong writes in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*: "Gilbert and Gubar virtually ignore the historical conditions that women have confronted as writers ... [and] ... presuppose a social world divided according to the principle of gender" (Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 8). Armstrong's pioneering book restored agency and authority to women as she positions gender as the primary distinguishing social characteristic. Not only does O'Brien reveal a repressive social order that she largely attributes to Church hegemony, she also suggests that although there are gender divisions, both genders suffer from forms of repression. Moreover, O'Brien manipulates gender norms throughout her texts, and her interpretation of gendered roles is significant, as according to Armstrong, "political events cannot be understood apart from women's history, from the history of women's

literature, or from changing representations of the household” (10). O’Brien confronted the public/private binary by politicising the family, as well as women’s roles within the family. Furthermore, she explored notions of essentialism, as, for instance, in *Without My Cloak*, to take one example, by rendering an obsessive love for a child in the father figure in the novel.

The rendering of women’s position in society pre- and post-Irish Independence is also considered in the texts, as is women’s role as defined in the 1937 Irish Constitution. Moreover the relationship between the Church and the State in Irish cultural issues such as censorship with regard to contraception and education, as well as class issues which include the role of religious personnel and the education system in perpetuating class roles is also represented in the texts. Thus, O’Brien’s fascination with the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie provides interesting explorations of the class which was to become politically, culturally and ideologically dominant in the Free State. Thus, my primary method is the close reading of the literary texts, looking at papal encyclicals and the 1937 Constitution as instances of discourses that defined practices from which women may seek “to struggle free”. In this way, this thesis also seeks for cultural, historical, religious and social contexts beyond the text. As Margaret MacCurtain argues in “The Historical Image”:

It is rare for historical research to accomplish the task of getting a society to contemplate its own identity without the help of literature... The clues to the position of women in Irish history are invariably present in the literature of a particular phase of Irish history. (MacCurtain, “The Historical Image”, 117)

In this context, O’Brien’s texts are a valuable resource for considering “the position of women in Irish history”, especially in relation to the model of woman as outlined in the 1937 Irish Constitution, a model taken from aspirations for women in Catholic writings and papal encyclicals. Equally, the discourses that structured the Constitution, with regard to women, are critical for thinking about how women defined themselves in accordance with and in resistance to the culture, and the struggles experienced by O’Brien’s characters exemplify the cultural discourses circulating contemporaneously. In “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” (1981), Elaine Showalter writes: “The ways in which women conceptualize their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are intricately linked to their cultural environments.” (Showalter, 345) Exploring this argument, the analysis of the characters is further considered in the social and historical

context with the particular focus on the Irish Catholic Church. Because Catholicism was such a key aspect of Irish culture, my focus is on religion as depicted in daily experiences and public ritual in the texts, as well as internal dynamics. To this end, I occasionally use *A Catechism of Catholic Doctrine*,⁵⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Catholic Dictionary*, not as authoritative sources for my own ends but as examples of a specific direction that language was taken in by the force of Catholic teaching, and as indicators of the ways in which ordinary words and phrases were specifically inflected by the Catholic Church in Irish life, and as shadow sources of value and meaning for the pivotal document of the newly Independent Ireland, the 1937 Irish Constitution with its promulgation and support of the family. The overall structure of this female character-focused thesis, therefore, is to examine the influence of the Catholic Church on constructions of gender, the modes of femininity advocated by Church teaching and the polarity between the representations of the lives rendered in O'Brien's fiction against lives that they as Catholic women are supposed to aspire to, as promulgated in Church writings and the 1937 Constitution in the socio-political historical framework. The intention is to examine gender constructions as part of the mainstream of Irish cultural and literary history and position gender as central to social, political and cultural life, rather than as an adjunct and as a category occupied only by women and their special interests groups. Textual analysis is, therefore, positioned in conjunction with religio-socio-political and women's history, as well as cultural and literary criticism. The interdisciplinary approach is used to consider how O'Brien explores the contribution of the Irish Catholic Church to the construction of modes of femininity and gender roles in the context of women in the family structure, and young, single women on the cusp of choosing a future role in life.

Building on but departing slightly from Gilbert and Gubar's resistance reading, Barbara Lewalski, by reading with the text, argues that any work of literature is a product of its time and must, therefore, contain cultural norms. In her analysis of the significance of Milton for the writer, "Milton on Women – Yet Again", Lewalski writes: "Milton's poems ... are at once products of a specific historical moment and also imaginative constructs ... they are shaped by, but also shape, the culture" (Lewalski in

⁵⁰ It should be noted that *A Catechism of Catholic Doctrine* framed the questions that one was allowed to ask, which was an authoritarian stance that operated in the Catholic Church until the Second Vatican Council, and reflected the emphasis on the following of rules, underwritten by Thomist teaching that knowledge is fixed and static.

Minogue, 49). Similarly, O'Brien's texts, which reflect cultural norms such as patriarchy and the construction of gender in terms of the Constitution and Catholic Social Teaching ideologies, can be productively read as "imaginative constructs" in that the texts both explore and question the cultural context of early twentieth-century Ireland, through the representations of O'Brien's female characters. Another school of feminist criticism, psychoanalysis, has also proved useful in limited ways for this thesis, as psychoanalytic discourses, as the literary critic Ruth Robbins argues in *Literary Feminisms*, "provide us with ways of describing the distinctively gendered nature of those effects in which women are differently effected than men" (Robbins, 107). In *The Last of Summer*, O'Brien refers to Freud as well as to the Oedipus complex. Freud described the sexual and gendered ordering of society, and his work is useful for examining how we become psychologically gendered people. His methodology was to put together behaviour and unconscious desire and conflict, and this is particularly useful for the analyses of Caroline Lanigan in *Without My Cloak* and Jo Kernahan in *The Last of Summer*. In *Sexual Politics* (1969), Kate Millett condemned Freud as a prime source of patriarchal attitudes against which feminists must fight, and psychoanalysis as a mode of collusion in capitalism, which she saw as the main oppressor of women. She argued that to effect any social change, the ideology of patriarchy had to be attacked and reformed. Thus, the social and political repercussions of these modes of structuring personality and psyches are implicit in the texts, as O'Brien depicts the interior life and its politicisation in patriarchal societies. Millett astutely pointed out that it is the "ideology" of patriarchy that is the stumbling block to change, an argument that is represented in O'Brien's *Pray for the Wanderer* with its portrayal of the "ideal" Irish Catholic mother. In *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), Juliet Mitchell defended Freud by using the distinction between sex (a matter of biology) and gender (a construct that is learned or acquired) to argue that Freud does not present the feminine as a "given", thereby allowing for gender roles that are malleable and changeable. Mitchell argued strongly for a feminism sympathetic to psychoanalysis, as individual changes can effect, she contended, larger and wider change.⁵¹ As struggle is often internal, subtle or expressed in somatic protest, psychoanalytical insights are useful in identifying instances of the impulse to "struggle

⁵¹ See Juliet Mitchell. *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.

free from social and literary confinement” (Gilbert and Gubar, xi-xii) in O’Brien’s work.

O’Brien’s work takes religious practice and theological issues as thematically central, and so the role played by the Catholic Church and the Irish State in fusing and then perpetuating notions of women’s “nature” and consequently, their fixed “role” in the family is interrogated in her work. Millett expressed the view that religion plays a crucial role in “patriarchal convictions about women” (Millett, 46). She argued: “Patriarchy has God on its side. One of its most effective agents of control is the powerfully expeditious character of its doctrines as to the nature and origin of the female and the attribution to her alone of the dangers and evils it imputes to sexuality.” (51) Thus, Millett placed a heavy emphasis on patriarchal religion’s role in promulgating the idea that where culture shapes behaviour, “it is said to do no more than cooperate with nature” (27). In this way, the role of religion in patriarchal societies, as reflected in the worldview adapted from Catholic Social Teaching Principles by the Irish State with its particular representation of woman as mother in Articles 41.2.1 and 41.2.2, as well as the allocation of work deemed suitable for woman as implied in Article 45.2, can be critiqued, thereby demonstrating Millett’s main argument that “sex is a status category with political implications” (24). In addition, O’Brien was a contemporary of Simone de Beauvoir and her work suggests some similarities with de Beauvoir’s theories, as de Beauvoir was also very interested in the power of religious practice and symbolism in women’s lives. *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, bridged the gap between the Suffragettes and the second wave feminism of the late sixties and seventies, and de Beauvoir used a socio-historical context that included the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, biology, psychoanalysis, art and literature in her study of women. De Beauvoir focused on the concept of woman as “the Other”, giving an historical account of the development of the social construction of “woman”. While de Beauvoir observed that cultural influences were a major factor in the subjection of females, the perspective of women’s corporeal experiences in the text can seem negative. This is expressed particularly in the representations of mothers and motherhood. Reading O’Brien alongside de Beauvoir is fruitful, for despite O’Brien’s political differences (de Beauvoir was a socialist, O’Brien unapologetically bourgeois and capitalist), as well as her sympathetic portrayal of mothers, there are many parallels in their work, which show their respective difficulties with bourgeoisie marriage and the

maternal aspect of womanhood. However, de Beauvoir's witty and perceptive analysis of the contradictions of marriage and motherhood in *The Second Sex*, are undermined by her own contempt for women who choose reproduction over intellectual independence, even though she argues that the behaviours attributed to women "are shaped as in a mould by her situation" (de Beauvoir, 608). De Beauvoir wrote that from the beginning, woman's greatest problem "was her enslavement to the generative function" (148). O'Brien explored woman's "enslavement to the generative function" in the rendering of Molly Considine in *Without My Cloak*, in the context of the private life monitored by Church and State authorities. In addition, de Beauvoir expressed her views on the capacity of marriage to provide for long-term physical fulfilment: "[I]t is pure absurdity to maintain that two married persons ... will provide each other with sex satisfaction as long as they live" (464). O'Brien expresses a similar view in that long-lasting fulfilled partnerships, despite the perception of her as a writer of romantic fiction, are not portrayed in her novels. De Beauvoir situates the bourgeois family at the centre of her critique of western patriarchy and identifies it as a place of oppression for women. Likewise, O'Brien takes the family as a primary structuring framework, and through it she explores religious, social and political issues. The family is a key component of patriarchal societies, Millet writes, in that "[s]erving as an agent of the larger society, the family not only encourages its own members to adjust and conform, but acts as a unit in the government of the patriarchal state which rules its citizens through its family heads" (Millett, 33). Accordingly, the framework for this thesis is the negotiation of family dynamics in O'Brien's texts, which ties in with Millett's charge that "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family" (33).

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), Friedrich Engels wrote: "The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed slavery of the wife... Within the family he is the bourgeois and his wife represents the proletariat." (Engels, 79)⁵² Moreover, Engels argued that the family's "essential points are the assimilation of the unfree element and the paternal authority" (70). Taking Engels' description of the bourgeois family, which is useful for thinking about the

⁵² Engels' theories on the family were radical in that he attacked the anthropological assumption that the patriarchal family was a "natural" social system. Instead, he argued that it was a unit in which marriage, for a woman, was based on economic dependency which in turn facilitated the overall system of property ownership. For an analysis of Engels' theories see Kate Millett. *Sexual Politics*. London: Virago Press, 1977, pp. 108-127.

family as represented in O'Brien's novels, this thesis considers how, in O'Brien's fiction, selected female characters negotiate the parameters and demands of the modern individual family. In the Catholic marriage ceremony, for instance, the identity of the woman is symbolically subsumed into that of her husband's. As a result, her desires and dreams must be repressed in order to fulfil her role as facilitator for the common good of the family. O'Brien explores the subsequent lack of autonomy and its consequences in both mothers and wives, as her characters confront the enormity of the duties expected of them in light of personal dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Moreover, the subject of "paternal authority" is an implicit element of the path to autonomy in O'Brien's rendering of her single female characters, as self-fulfilment, either in pursuit of education or a career, is achieved only outside the family unit. In addition, Nancy Armstrong's ground breaking rethinking of the political potential of novels that do not appear overtly political provides a useful frame for rethinking O'Brien's work as "thinking" and "testing" the socio-political changes that Ireland was processing at the time at which O'Brien wrote. As Armstrong writes in an article, "How Novels Think":

I want to think about the novel as something that thinks. More specifically, I want to think about the novel as a collective process that thinks through conflicts among a culture's major categories to solutions that simply can't be achieved in real life, at least not at the time they are imagined. (Armstrong, "How Novels Think", n.p.).

In this way O'Brien's work can be read as propelled by what Armstrong calls, "the problem-solving logic that seeks and finds a purely symbolic resolution beyond the categories organizing modern realism". Equally, although it focuses on moments of "struggle", such moments can be seen to confirm the prevailing order, or the order which is being explored by such clashes. Indeed, as Armstrong argues:

Fiction displays its problem solving magic so as to suggest that what the human sciences have identified as elemental wishes, fantasies, and even drives may not in fact have a natural source deep within each and every member of the human species. On the contrary, given that fiction remains the privileged medium of modern cultures, its open display of magical thinking suggests that such thinking may very well have an external cultural source. If this is true, then, contrary to prevailing opinion, magical thinking does not threaten the internal coherence of modern cultures so much as provide the semiotic glue holding them together. (*Ibid*)

This thesis then entertains the possibility in its enquiry that the thinking of fiction itself is a conservative force and that “does not threaten the internal coherence of modern cultures so much as provide the semiotic glue holding them together”. So although O’Brien was much concerned in her fiction with women who did *not* “fit” the “prescribed social roles” and the difficulties involved in negotiating the path to self-definition as a result, such preoccupation with the woman in and of the family, despite its challenging of such conscription, risks “locking” her there.

The historian Kathryn A. Conrad argues in *Locked in the Family Cell: Gender, Sexuality and Political Agency in Irish National Discourse*, that “the family cell is a social structure that was firmly established and self-regulating; manipulation of that discourse was an effective means of control and reproduction, both literally and figuratively, of the social order” (Conrad, 10). Moreover, she argues, “women who did not fit the prescribed social roles bore the brunt of regulatory practices and punishments” (5). As O’Brien deals primarily with the Irish bourgeois of the early twentieth century, themes of “open or concealed slavery” are relevant to O’Brien’s concern with autonomy for women, a topic that is explored throughout O’Brien’s fiction. Each of the female characters in O’Brien’s fiction is coloured in some way or another with the experience of negotiating a position of self-determination within patriarchy’s chief institution, the family, and resistance to official discourse and seeking alternative stories of self, form part of the psychologically forensic plots. Throughout the texts, O’Brien’s female characters position their desires in relation to the family as they struggle to deal with situations that imperil the unity of the family. While psychoanalytical perspectives open up a number of interesting interpretative possibilities, the political content of the texts and the historical conditions remain a central strand of my thesis, and a key focus of my interpretative practice. Based on the critical perspectives described above, my methodology is primarily that of close textual analysis, concentrating on the representations of the characters depicted in O’Brien’s novels that inform the interior states of the characters that are often at odds with their exterior presentation, thereby reflecting the public/private dichotomy both within and outside the home that O’Brien’s female characters negotiate. Accordingly, the thesis considers how the public discourse regulating gender roles, particularly those in Catholic teaching, structures the psyches of O’Brien’s female characters to be discussed, and how they resist, struggle and ultimately adapt to these roles.

The unique position accorded to the Church in Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century points to the institution as having an especially strong influence in Irish life. Moreover, the Church was heavily involved in the policing of the body, both in terms of control, in the sense of being civilized, and in the parameters it placed on women's bodies particularly, by the beliefs promulgated on the "nature" of women. Thus, the body is the site of conflicting ideologies and in O'Brien's work, the most significant conflicts are those created by religious expectations and beliefs. O'Brien's fascination with the religious context of Irish culture is present throughout her work and is a backdrop throughout to the actions and decisions taken by her heroines. The role of the Catholic Church in everyday life in a world dictated by Catholic theory and practice is a central theme in O'Brien's novels, and in this thesis, O'Brien's perceived concern with Catholicism cannot presuppose the assumption of a straightforward conservatism on her part, as in the novels, O'Brien explored religious belief primarily as an intellectual pursuit rather than through the medium of an acceptance of dogmatic teaching.

Although utilising methods and insights pioneered by other O'Brien readers, this thesis differs from previous O'Brien studies, and adds to and expands O'Brien scholarship in a number of ways. First, it examines previously under-read texts, *Pray for the Wanderer*, *The Last of Summer*, and *The Flower of May*. Secondly, it focuses on the religious content of O'Brien's work in the context of Irish political and legislative life, and this is the first time that these contexts have been paired in this way. By arguing that the matriarchal figures in the above novels are modelled on the image of woman as conveyed in Articles 41.2.1 and 41.2.2 of the 1937 Irish Constitution, I join the ranks of other more recent readers of O'Brien in asserting the case for reconsideration of O'Brien as an intentionally and consistently political writer. Such novels and such a focus are worthwhile because they add not only to the body of O'Brien scholarship, but also because they reframe aspects of the history of the Irish novel, adding to the exemplary Irish feminist scholarship that has asked Irish cultural practices to rethink questions of aesthetic value, political engagement and margin and centre, by virtue of setting gender as a significant interpretative lens. Further, the Catholic Church's role in public discourse has been extensively studied, and with the continuing revelations about Church abuse in a variety of situations, the internalisation

of Church doctrine as a self-blaming and self-abnegating force in the psychological make-up of its victims is being increasingly explored. This thesis looks at such internalisation in characters who would not usually be considered victims, but who would be considered amongst society's privileged and elite, and looks at the subtle effects of how such discourses are practiced and loved by the middle classes, the class understood as the ideologically policing and socially regulating class.

Thesis Layout

Key questions and thematic strands are dealt with within the framework of the thesis that examines fictional characters inside the nuclear and extended family, with the contribution of the Church to gender roles infiltrating the subject matter of each chapter. The Church gave women an identity and a role in society that gave them moral power, which may have served to compensate for the lack of proper agency within the social and political fabric. On the other hand, living these roles often demanded much from women, as the much-fabled often-stereotypical strength of character assigned to women of this generation suggests. As the journalist Mary Kenny attests in *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*: "Irish autobiography is particularly insistent on the power and presence of the mother, often characterised as a strong personality in the home." (Kenny, 35) Of particular interest in this thesis is how O'Brien's female characters engage with Church ritual, as well as assessing their expressed negotiations between bodily and Church demands and expectations. Aspects of the cultural context in which O'Brien was writing are here considered important to the reading of O'Brien's work, as Irish women's history is still under-researched, and according to the historian Maria Luddy in "Women in Irish Society, 1200-2000", "stems from the predominance given to political history within the Irish historical establishment" (Luddy, *FDA V*, 461). The inclusion of Catholic Social Teaching principles in relation to woman's role in the 1937 Irish Constitution, especially in Article 41 on The Family, suggests the Constitution as a crucial document of investigation in this thesis. *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) contained the founding principles for Catholic Social Teaching, and as these encyclicals directly informed sections of the 1937 Irish Constitution, the significance of Church teaching with regard to women and their roles, as expressed in papal writings, is included. The question of female sexuality is also implicit in the texts, in view of O'Brien's exploration of roles for single women in a

society whose Constitution chose to focus on women only as wives and mothers, as in the Catholic context, sexuality can be expressed only between married couples, in a monogamous relationship, and conducted in acquiescence to procreation. Recurrent themes in O'Brien's work, such as the bond of the family, personal freedom for women, religious considerations and female sexuality are explored throughout the chapters, as these areas were central, both culturally and legislatively, to ideologies of gender negotiations during the period in question. As a result, the cultural ethos is an implicit part of O'Brien's remit, as Church and State ideologies on women's roles could not have been implemented without the sympathetic conditions needed to sustain such tenets.

Chapter One, "Setting the Historical Frame", is an introductory chapter that briefly sets out the historical context of the influential role of the Catholic Church in Irish society, as well as on the Irish State, with regard to women's roles in O'Brien's fiction. Chapter Two, "Mother", focuses on the politico-cultural representations of the Irish Mother in the context of the 1937 Irish Constitution through the portrayal of Una Costello in *Pray for the Wanderer*, while the writing of State boundaries and policies on women's bodies and psyches is explored through Hannah Kernahan as representation of Ireland's neutrality policy in *The Last of Summer*. Chapter Three, "Wife", explores women's negotiation of the limits of heterosexual marriage in the representations of Caroline Lanigan and Molly Considine in *Without My Cloak*, as well as the newly married Lilian Morrow in *The Flower of May*. Chapter Four, "To Struggle Free": "Nun, Married, Old Maid", examines how the constitutional family cannot accommodate single women in a way that is dignified and honorific, framed by the question of the development of women's position in the Irish cultural ethos between pre- and post-Independence. Agnes Mulqueen in *The Ante-Room* represents the 1880s, while Nell Mahoney in *Pray for the Wanderer* and Jo Kernahan in *The Last of Summer* symbolise the 1930s single woman. The "Conclusion" documents, assesses and underlines the trajectory of my argument, which is that O'Brien conducts a sustained critique throughout her work of the influence of the Catholic Church and State on the lives of Irish women, and positions the contribution this thesis can make to Kate O'Brien studies.

CHAPTER ONE
SETTING THE HISTORICAL FRAME

Introduction

Literary critics are increasingly alert to the significance and extent to which Kate O'Brien's work is embedded in the social and political context of its day. In "Kate O'Brien as a 'Herstorical' Writer: The Personal Story of Women", Maria de la Cinta Ramblado Minero writes: "In her novels, O'Brien sets in motion a process of reconstruction of history from a woman's point of view, analysing the way in which the historical background of her country conditions and affects women's development." (de la Cinta Ramblado Minero in Lynch et al, 5) The "historical background" in which this thesis is most interested, is one in which the Catholic Church plays a most specific role in determining the roles and conditions pertaining to the lives of the middle-class women that populate O'Brien's texts. While a preoccupation with Catholicism is not surprising given the manner in which religion was so closely bound up with nationalism, politics and culture in twentieth-century Ireland, it is O'Brien's depiction of characters who conduct an intellectual engagement with the religion to which they maintain fidelity that is of interest here. This model of intellectual engagement is evident in O'Brien's portrayal of Teresa of Avila in her biography of the saint. Teresa (1515-1582), whose life coincided with the period of the Reformation, the Renaissance and the Council of Trent (1545-1564), was one of the most famous nuns in Church history, and in *Teresa of Avila*, O'Brien, as Eibhear Walshe observes in *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life*, "celebrated Teresa's achievements as a secular figure, the woman who gained power and respect in a man's world" (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 73). As an example of a professional, independent woman, Teresa made a strong impression on O'Brien's imagination, and "Holy women" who are, as Eibhear Walshe writes, "secular figures of austere spirituality and authority" (19), feature throughout O'Brien's work with Agatha Conlon in *Mary Lavelle* being the first of a linked series of independent-minded ascetic women described as "nunnish" in the texts. For instance, the depiction of Jo Kernahan in *The Last of Summer*, who aspires to become a nun, encompasses striking similarities to O'Brien's portrayal of Saint Teresa. Additionally, another similarly described character is Nell Mahoney in *Pray for the Wanderer*. Nell, however, chooses another "vocation", that of marriage and although daunted by the institution of marriage, can contemplate it when she falls in love. However, her choice of husband is framed in the larger context of Ireland and repression versus Europe and freedom, as well as

considered alongside the demands and duties of Catholic marriage. As all of the characters to be discussed negotiate personal desire in a world dictated by Catholic theory and practice, an historical overview of this world seems useful for contextualising the analyses of O'Brien's depictions of women in her novels. In order to do so, I will briefly describe the Catholic Church's rise to its position of power in twentieth-century Ireland, its particular relationship with women, Church writings on the role of women in the family and in society, and the significance of the Mother of God as role model for women, as well as the Irish State's incorporation of these views in the 1937 Constitution.

Changes in the role and position of the Catholic Church from the nineteenth-century "devotional revolution" to the drawing up of the Irish Constitution in 1937 led to its strong influences and the exerting of considerable power in Ireland's social and political life, with specific aspects of Catholic doctrine being incorporated into the new Constitution. There are specific instances in O'Brien's fiction where she highlights family dynamics that powerfully suggest that she takes the model family encoded in the 1937 Irish Constitution as a framework and dramatises the implications of its dictates, especially for women.¹ In much of her fiction, the engagement is implicit, shaping life choices and relationships, but there are also several occasions where the intertwining of Church and State is explicitly pondered upon, discussed and debated, by various characters. For instance, *Pray for the Wanderer* is expressly in dialogue with the draft Constitution, which is dedicated to "the Most Holy Trinity",² and Matt Costello, deliberating the implications of this document, expresses the view "that Ireland, newly patrolled by the Church, would be unlikely to vote solid against the Holy Trinity" (O'Brien, *Pray*, 30). Further, the extent of religious ritual such as prayer, mass, confession, devotions, weddings and funerals in daily life, and the interaction between lay people and Church personnel, are an intrinsic part of O'Brien's texts. In order to contextualise the extent of Church influence on women's roles, and on the constitutional issues with which O'Brien engages, this chapter provides a brief overview of the history

¹ By the family in this context is meant a heterosexual, monogamous, procreative and indissoluble union.

² The *Catholic Dictionary* defines the Trinity as follows: "The Holy Trinity is the central doctrine of the Christian Faith, which states that the one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Three Persons sharing one nature. The Three Persons are co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial, and are to receive the same worship". See *Catholic Dictionary*. Revised Edition. Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2002.

of the Irish Catholic Church and the Irish State in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Rise of the Irish Catholic Church

Nineteenth century Church developments are pertinent to an understanding of the widespread practice and influence of twentieth-century Catholicism in Ireland, as after the Famine, the Church underwent a radical reform that mobilised the laity to greater devotion during a period coined by the historian Emmet Larkin as the “devotional revolution”. In “The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75”, Emmet Larkin places the “devotional revolution” as the period between the first National Synod of Thurles in 1850, which sought to regularise and centrally administer Church practices, and the second National Synod of Maynooth in 1875.³ In *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*, the sociologist Tom Inglis, following on from Larkin, and drawing on Max Weber’s and Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of religion, describes the “devotional revolution” as a process whereby Catholics were socialised into a strong religious belief, practice and moral order (Inglis, 1-13).⁴ In addition, the sociologist Tony Fahey, in “Catholicism and Industrial Society in Ireland”, writes that the revival and expansion of Catholicism and the Catholic Church founded on the restructuring and revitalisation of clerical organisation, “was a major feature of nineteenth century Irish history, affecting politics, culture and social structure” (Fahey in Goldthorpe and Whelan, 248). The Irish Church had gone into decline before the Famine both with regard to the clergy and the laity, largely as a result of the seventeenth-century Penal laws, which had severely limited the number of priests

³ Larkin’s thesis has been challenged by Thomas McGrath who argues that the “devotional revolution” was the culmination of an evolutionary process that had been going on for 300 years. McGrath argues that the changes which occurred in Catholic religious practice in the nineteenth century ought to be seen as the working out of the decrees of the Council of Trent between the adjournment of that body in 1563 and the convening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962. The Council of Trent, which began its discussions in 1546, sought to fix standard practices and patterns throughout the universal Church. Because the relaxation of the Penal Laws did not occur in Ireland until circa 1775, the Tridentine canons did not infiltrate the Irish Church until the eighteenth century. The Tridentine renewal that followed, McGrath argues, was accelerated by the Famine, with the period of Larkin’s “devotional revolution” being in fact the latter end of a long-term evolutionary process. See T. G. McGrath. “The Tridentine Evolution of Modern Irish Catholicism, 1563-1962; A re-examination of the ‘devotional revolution’ thesis” in Réamonn Ó Muirí. Ed. *Irish Church History Today: Cumann Seanchais Ard Mhacha Seminar 10 March 1990*. Armagh, n.d, pp. 84-99. Larkin answered McGrath’s interpretation of events in his essay “Before the Devotional Revolution”, where he argues that pre-famine Church personnel and Church plant simply could not have supported the social and economic resources needed for Tridentine achievement. He supports his claim with a series of tables and maps showing a nationwide lack of resources. See Emmet Larkin. “Before the Devotional Revolution” in James Murphy. Ed. *Evangelicals and Catholics in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*. Dublin: Four Courts, 2005, pp. 15-37.

⁴ Weber understood the practice of religion as a universal human interest, while Bourdieu was interested in how religious agents imposed and inculcated a way of thinking and behaving on lay people that tied in with their specific ethos.

and bishops in Ireland. There was a small ratio of priests to people and discipline among the clergy was administered by the local bishop rather than by a central authority. Moreover, discipline among the clergy was lax, with the main abuses being, Larkin writes, “drunkenness, women, and avarice” (Larkin, 632). In 1843, T. Chisholme Anstey, an English Catholic, concluding a summary of the situation in Ireland for the *Propaganda Fide* in Rome wrote: “[T]he only hope for religion in Ireland was for the pope to send a legate with power to correct the many abuses” (Anstey quoted in Larkin, 635). The matter was addressed by the appointment of Paul Cullen as Archbishop of Armagh in 1849. Cullen was given the mission of improving the Irish Church and was subsequently made Cardinal in 1866. Although some reform had begun, it was the reforms of Cullen, who had spent many years as rector of the Irish College in Rome that played a crucial role in the formation of the Irish Church. Larkin writes that not only did Cullen reform the Irish Church but “in the process of reforming that Church he spearheaded the consolidation of a devotional revolution” (625). Cullen began with the reform of the clergy, a responsibility he placed on the bishops. He also consolidated the laity to greater devotion, by introducing European practices such as benediction, novenas and processions, all of which were visually impressive ceremonies in a period devoid of spectacle. In addition, he initiated a major church-building programme. In the wake of these reforms, Sunday mass attendance increased from thirty-three per cent before the Famine to ninety per cent after the Famine. Cullen’s reform of the Irish Church and its clergy served the twofold purpose, therefore, of creating a strong, hierarchal organisation, with enhanced communication channels, and of forging strong links with Rome.

Larkin’s “devotional revolution” thesis supports the premise that the Irish people responded readily to Church reform and became a widely religious-practicing people within a generation. Tom Inglis, and anthropologist Lawrence Taylor, support Larkin’s “revolution” argument.⁵ Inglis, in *Moral Monopoly*, and Taylor, in *Occasions of Faith*, both describe the widespread practice of stations, a practice where mass was said in a private house, attended by neighbours, and a monetary collection gathered for the presiding priest, and other quasi-religious ceremonies held outside the Church that

⁵ See Tom Inglis. *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*. 2nd ed. Dublin: University College Dublin Press [1987], 1998, Chapter 5. See also Lawrence J. Taylor. *Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics*. Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1997, *Passim*.

contradict Tridentine practice.⁶ This suggests that the Irish Church adopted the early Roman Empire practice of synchronicity when subjugating new populaces, which saw the conquerors combine local religious practice with Roman ones and imbue local rituals with Roman religious connotations. In the same way, practices at quasi-religious sites, such as holy wells, were incorporated into Church ritual. In this scenario, however, the “devotional revolution” would have taken much longer to achieve than the approximate twenty-five years that Larkin allows. In addition, recent research carried out by the historian Cara Delay in the diocese of Kerry with regard to the practice of the “churching” rite after childbirth, suggests that new Church-based rituals, rules and regulations were not as readily adapted to as the span of the “devotional revolution” suggests.⁷ According to notes kept by Father John O’Sullivan of Kenmare in the 1850s, the relationship of the women of his parish to churching was contentious. The ruling of the 1850 Synod of Thurles removed the rite from the house to the Church and O’Sullivan’s female parishioners objected strongly to this.⁸ Delay’s research suggests that convincing women to have the “churching” ceremony in the Church proved to be a battle for the priest concerned. It could be argued, therefore, that while the “devotional revolution” did have an impact on Catholic devotional practices carried out in the Churches, the complete transfer of ritual from home to Church, as Tridentine practice demands, took a longer time to consolidate than Larkin allows. This would also have a bearing on the perception of the immediate widespread practice of unquestioning faith, as has been challenged by critics such as the journalist Brian Fallon in *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930–1960* and the historian Dermot Keogh in “Church, State and Society”.⁹ In addition, in a recent paper, the historian Eugene Hynes recounts that

⁶ The *Catholic Dictionary* explains Tridentine practice as those that relate to decrees from the Council of Trent, which was convened as a result of sixteenth-century challenges from Protestant Reformers. As a result doctrinal decrees were laid down that responded to the questions raised, as well as the establishment of uniform liturgical practice.

⁷ The Church promoted churching as a rite of thanksgiving for the survival of the mother after childbirth. *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* states that the churching of women is “a blessing given by the Church to mothers after recovery from childbirth. Only a Catholic woman, who has given birth to a child in legitimate wedlock, provided she has not allowed the child to be baptized outside the Catholic Church, is entitled to it. It is not a precept, but a pious and praiseworthy custom” (Hebermann et al, 761). See Hebermann et al. Eds. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. III. New York: Robert Appleton, 1908.

⁸ From a paper on Childbirth Rituals in nineteenth and twentieth century Ireland, delivered by Cara Delay (Department of History, College of Charleston), at “Women in Irish Culture and History” Conference, UCD, 20-22 October 2006. This has since been published. See Cara Delay. “Confidantes or Competitors? Women, Priests and Conflict in Post-Famine Ireland” in *Éire-Ireland* 40 (2005), pp. 107-25.

⁹ See Brian Fallon. *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930–1960*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999 and Dermot Keogh. “Church, State and Society” in Brian Farrell. Ed. *De Valera’s Constitution and Ours*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988, pp. 103–122.

anecdotal stories about the virgin appearing in an admonitory role to priests who were not doing their duty, were circulating in Ireland before the alleged appearance of Our Lady at Knock. Such stories support historical accounts of the need for Paul Cullen's remit of reforming the priesthood in Ireland, as well as the laity's support for reform.¹⁰ Moreover, the success of Cullen's work laid the foundation for the high profile of the Catholic Church in twentieth-century Irish society.

A central strand of the consolidation of the Catholic Church in Ireland was its role as a civilising force, which is approvingly rendered throughout O'Brien's texts. In *Pray for the Wanderer*, for instance, Tom Mahoney, on the one hand, objects particularly to the Irish Catholic Church ethos, which in Ireland "expresses itself in an inflammation of that Jansenism that Maynooth has threatened at us for so long. Now it's ripe at last – and we're sick, like the rest of the world." (O'Brien, *Pray*, 51) On the other hand, Tom tells Matt:

'I support the Eternal Church, which I detach with exactitude from all this new parish ignorance and darkness. I know its tremendous history and all the black sins on its aged face – and I admire it as I admire no other phenomenon of human organization. I never go to church or chapel, but I'm nothing if I'm not an upholder of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolical.' (50)

It is what Tom views as the puritanical strain of Irish Catholicism that is objectionable. At the same time, orthodoxy, in Tom's view, serves a useful secular function in maintaining order in society and for maintaining standards of behaviour. In this Tom reflects the opinion that the Church, while distasteful in its current practice in Ireland, also serves as a useful and necessary organisation. This raises the question as to whether O'Brien could conceive of good behaviour towards others, as well as law and order in society, being maintained outside a religious framework. Her fiction suggests

¹⁰ In addition, the authority of priests was undermined during this period on account of their opposition to the land agitation movement. From a paper entitled, "Knock versus Lourdes in the 1880s", delivered by Eugene Hynes (Kettering College) at "Catholicism and Public Cultures" Conference, IADT, 17-19 June 2009. Moreover, Marguerite Corporaal and Christopher Cusack's recent studies of the theme of reform in Irish (Diaspora) Literature of the Great Famine, suggest that the laity were supportive of the reform of the clergy, and thus, of Cullen's reforms. For instance, Corporaal and Cusack argue that the novel, *Irish Diamonds* (1864) by Emily Bowles is particularly influenced by the "devotional revolution" as all the priests depicted in the text are engaged in reform. From a paper entitled, "A Missionary and a Martyr in the New World as well as the Old: The Representation of Priests in Irish (Diaspora) Literature of the Famine Generation", delivered by Marguerite Corporaal (Radboud University of Nijmegen) and Christopher Cusack (University College London) at "Catholicism and Public Cultures" Conference, IADT, 17-19 June 2009.

that the religious upbringing promulgated in Ireland serves to perpetuate the standards of behaviour O'Brien admired. These were, of course, middle-class standards of behaviour, and Church personnel were drawn mainly from the middle classes.¹¹ O'Brien's texts indicate a belief in the necessity for order, framed in religious terms, both in individuals and in society. For example, in *The Ante-Room*, Dr. Curran reflects on the positives of religion: "[I]t seemed to him that the Catholic Church provided as good a system as might be found for keeping the human animal in order – a necessity which he emphatically accepted" (O'Brien, *A-R*, 67). In *Mary Lavelle*, Don Pablo takes up the same theme: "Even at its worst it appeared to him to be the only learned religion, the only system of faith at once impassioned and controlled. And a system of faith was essential, he thought" (O'Brien, *Lavelle*, 61). The subject is also raised in *The Flower of May* when Lucille de Mellen talks to her former *Mere Generale* about her faith: "If I find certain hypotheses working for the general good, I'm willing to let them be hypothetical – if I think them for the general good—" (O'Brien, *Flower*, 162) It is this aspiration, "the general good", that is the deciding factor in situations of individual dilemma in O'Brien's texts, although decisions are weighed in favour of secular rather than religious reasons.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, the process of religious, as well as civil indoctrination was facilitated by the interaction between Church personnel and mothers both in the home and through the Health and Welfare systems. Consequently, women were in effect monitored and supervised in the home by nuns and priests. Children had to arrive at school clean and neat, attend at certain hours, on certain days and learn how to behave in a classroom. In turn, parents had to facilitate this regime by becoming regular in their daily routine. This is where nuns from "good backgrounds" played a crucial role, as they taught lower class girls the rudiments of household crafts, which in turn facilitated the construction of the respectable farming classes. Pupils emulated the example of the refined, educated nun and strove to achieve the same civilized behaviour, as well as a clean and tidy home. Thus, the new cycle of discipline, needed for regular school attendance, facilitated and consolidated the regulation of

¹¹ The Catholic Church in Ireland played a major role in the attainment of order in society and indeed, Catholic orthodoxy had long been recognised for its policing of the individual, which was why the British Empire had tolerated the Catholic Church in Ireland. Inglis, quoting the Irish protestant historian William Lecky, writes that British politicians in the nineteenth century realized that "the higher Catholic clergy, if left in peace, were able and willing to render inestimable services to the Government in suppressing sedition and crime" (Lecky in Inglis, 113).

behaviour and habits. Mothers were held responsible for the conduct of their children at school, and consequently, children who were not suitably attired or who misbehaved were sent home. This put the onus on the mother to achieve the standards required by the school. In this way, children, through the mother, became the link between the moralising and civilising force of the Church and the home.¹² The seeds of the relationship between women and religious personnel were sown in the nineteenth century, when nuns had, at various times, outnumbered priests. Consequently, they played a crucial role in the instruction of and passing on of the faith to Irish women. It was nuns, Fallon writes, “who gave most Irish girls their moral schooling and impressed on them their responsibilities as future wives and mothers” (Fallon, 185). Moreover, Fahey writes that “the increase in female religious in the Catholic church was paralleled by a certain ‘feminisation’ of the church’s support base in the population at large” (Fahey in Goldthorpe and Whelan, 250). One of the patterns of Catholicism during this period was that it had, Fahey writes, “a particular appeal to, and association with, the world of women ... and in the widespread tendency to identify religion as women’s business, particularly within the confines of the home and in connection with the socialisation of children” (260). In Inglis’ view, the mother was “the organisational link between the Catholic Church and the individual” (Inglis, 179). Mary Kenny agrees, stating in *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland* that the women of Ireland played a key role in the consolidation of Catholicism in the early twentieth century. She writes: “[D]espite accusations of patriarchy, no one has forged, sustained, or upheld the faith of Catholic Ireland more purposefully than the women of Ireland” (Kenny, 11). In O’Brien’s fiction, women are most clearly associated with the inculcation of religious faith, especially mothers, who wielded particular power in their families. In *The Ante-Room*, for instance, Teresa Mulqueen’s periods of prayer are observed by her daughter throughout, and in one scene Agnes recalls an occasion when, as a child, she accompanied her mother to Church (O’Brien, *A-R*, 76-7). In addition, Teresa, who also features in *Without My Cloak*, insists that her son Reggie accompanies her on a pilgrimage to Rome (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 422).

In the contemporary world in which women had little actual power, Inglis argues that the relationship between women and Church personnel was often seen as a positive

¹² See Inglis, *Moral Monopoly*, Chapter 8.

one by women, a source of compensatory power, as it confirmed an interest by religious personnel who were esteemed in society, in what women were doing in the home. As motherhood was the only role outside of religious vocation endorsed by Church and State, it was through motherhood that women accessed power, and found modes of confirmation that validated them, despite the heavy personal price paid by themselves and those around them. In this way, Inglis maintains that mothers consequently seized the opportunity to sustain and uphold the rules and regulations invested in them by the Church, grooming their children for specific roles and instilling a pious devotion to the Church. Consequently, mothers played a pivotal role in Irish Society, as mothers in their capacity as carers of children, passed on the faith to their children and were held responsible for its *mores* being carried out both within and outside the home.¹³ Furthermore, it was in her role as moral and spiritual guide to her family that the Irish mother embodied ideological notions of power, as attending Church required good presentation, public participation and the semblance of family unity. In this way, Church attendance was tied in with the acquisition of symbolic, cultural and social capital,¹⁴ an arrangement maintained in families, Inglis argues, through the mother, as for instance, when Tom Kernahan in *The Last of Summer* sees his mother in this context. In a scene where he contemplates his mother's virtues, he thinks: "And living with goodness made a man value it; made him contemptuous of his own inclination to evil." (O'Brien, *Summer*, 77) The Catholic Mother was, therefore, central to the continuation of the Catholic ethos. She imitated the toil and self-denial of priests and nuns, thereby fostering vocations among her children or resigning them to the limitations of life in Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, Catholicism became the dominant religion in Ireland, and ironically, a self-abnegating discourse of motherhood had become the primary means of valuing women's self-worth, and O'Brien's novels reflect this.

There were other reasons for the success of Catholicism during the nineteenth century, as the "devotional revolution" can also be understood as a reflection of the context of its timing. Religious fervour often follows a catastrophe and so, Larkin writes, "psychologically and socially ... the Irish people were ready for a great

¹³ For an analysis and discussion of Irish mothering practices, see Inglis, *Moral Monopoly*, pp. 196-199.

¹⁴ Inglis explains symbolic, cultural and social capital as having one's wealth and position accepted as legitimate, being seen as a good person and having good social connections. See Inglis, *Moral Monopoly*, Chapter 4.

evangelical revival, while economically and organizationally the Church was now correspondingly ready after the famine to meet their religious and emotional needs” (Larkin, 639). In addition, Inglis argues that the “devotional revolution” can be seen as “a response to a loss of language and cultural identity in the nineteenth century” (Inglis, 7). By the early twentieth century, Inglis writes, “the Irish, in search of stability in a time of rapid social change, attached themselves to the Church because they feared they were being effectively Anglicised” (7-8). The strong links forged with Rome generated the gratifying situation for the populace of being involved in a religion that was different from that of their former oppressors, yet part of a worldwide power. As the political analyst Basil Chubb argued in *The Government and Politics of Ireland*, “when a national movement succeeds, people are very self-conscious about their statehood” (Chubb, 7). This sentiment is reflected in a scene in *The Land of Spices*, where the bishop and the English Suffragette, Miss Robertson, converse about a nationalist education. The bishop says: “I believe it to be wrong that a nation fervently professing one Church should be subject to the rule of a nation professing an entirely other Church – so you see, for me, that platform [of nationalism] is very closely allied to religion.” (O’Brien, *Spices*, 210) Thus, after Independence in 1922, the position of the Church as the dominant Church in Irish society was secure, and as the Irish language had been largely lost, despite the attempts made during the Celtic Renaissance, Catholicism became the unique stamp of “Irishness”. In this regard, identity with and loyalty to Church and State became largely one and the same for the populace.¹⁵

The most influential encyclicals with regard to women’s role in the family and in society, for the purposes of this thesis, are *Rerum Novarum* (“Of New Things” or “Of the Condition of the Working Classes”, 1891), *Casti Connubii* (“On Christian Marriage”, 1930) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (“On the Restoration of the Social Order”, 1931). The purpose of *Quadragesimo Anno* was to adapt and develop the doctrine outlined in the pioneering encyclical on social teaching, *Rerum Novarum*. The political context of *Quadragesimo Anno* was the Great Depression, and the threat of communism and mounting totalitarian movements. The tradition of encyclical social teaching was a response by the Popes to modernity, and the early twentieth-century onset of communism, secularism and materialism in Europe had given a new impetus to

¹⁵ See Basil Chubb. *The Government and Politics of Ireland*. 3rd ed. London: Longman [1970], 1992, Chapter 1.

discourse on Catholic Social Teaching, which had been formulated by Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903). The remit of *Rerum Novarum*, as the historian Anne Fremantle writes in *The Papal Encyclicals in their Historical Context*, was the “Church’s complete answer to *Das Kapital* of Marx, and, indeed, to Communism and Socialism in whatever forms” (Fremantle, 166). The most significant issue of concern to the Church in this regard was the new emphasis on individualism. This led to a focus on the family as, Leo XIII wrote, the “true society” (Section 13 in Carlen, Vol. 2, 244). As women were deemed responsible for the home and family, that is, the private sphere, expressions of women’s desire for self-determination were demonised as “individualistic”, selfish and socially destructive because a woman defining herself outside the patriarchal family threatened its foundations. As a result, women became the targets against which several critiques of modernity were directed, and selfish individualism became popularly associated with women’s independence and self-determination outside the heterosexual family structure. The project of modernity sought to refute irrationalities such as religion, and establish rational forms of social organisation and rational modes of thought, which obviously alarmed the Church. In addition, progress was an essential ingredient of the movement, as well as a breaking away from history and tradition.¹⁶ As a result, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, Fahey writes, the Church’s “pastoral, educational and social services were focused very much on the family” (Fahey in Goldthorpe and Whelan, 263), in contrast to the new emphasis on individualism. In Pope Pius X’s (1903-14) encyclical, *Lamentabili*, published in 1907, Pius X gathered together a number of theological propositions that he ascribed to a new heresy. The propositions that concerned areas of scriptural study undertaken by many forward thinking Catholic scholars of the period were termed modernist. The mood set by this encyclical as well as by his follow up encyclical on the condemnation of modernism, published in 1907, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (“Feeding the Flock of the Lord”), was one that rejected the use of historical critical methods in the solution of thorny problems of biblical interpretation. This encyclical set the agenda for a very conservative theology which was to be in the ascendant for almost forty years.

¹⁶ See David Harvey. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge MA and Oxford UK: Blackwell, 1990, Chapters 1, 2, 3. Post-modernism rejects modernism’s illusion of a “universal” human history, and celebrates pluralism.

Women, “Natural Law”, Catholic Social Teaching and the 1937 Constitution

The centrality of discussions about the 1937 Constitution in *Pray for the Wanderer* suggests the importance of considerations of its ideological influence especially in relation to women who are specifically defined solely as mothers. It is this construction of women underpinned by Catholic teaching on women’s “nature” and women’s roles that O’Brien’s female characters negotiate, especially when they encounter desires that are potentially disruptive to the stability of the family. Thus, a brief outline of the relationship between Church and State in this regard, that is particularly visible in relation to areas of the Constitution that include or infer to women, will serve to contextualise O’Brien’s explorations of the path to self-determination in her female characters that must first negotiate family dynamics.

As far as the Church was concerned the family was important because it provided the place of socialisation for the future members of society. The State, following Church thinking, enshrined the family, rather than the individual, in the Constitution that was deemed necessary by Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Éamon de Valera for the new State after the declaration of the State as Éire/Ireland in 1937. Article 41 on The Family states:

Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937. Article 41, The Family

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|---|---|--|
| 1 | 1 | The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law. |
| | 2 | The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State. |

Ironically, in *Pray for the Wanderer*, Matt Costello observes that the draft Constitution is “Dedicated to the Holy Trinity – why not the Holy Family?” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 30) The

“Holy Trinity” consists of one God, the *Catholic Dictionary* explains, who is “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”, a male triad, whereas the “Holy Family” includes Mary, the Mother of Jesus, as well as Jesus and Joseph. In the former triad, there is no mother figure, and therefore, woman, as well as the mother, are absent from the Constitution’s dedication. Reaction to the presenting of the draft Constitution by de Valera is dramatised in *Pray for the Wanderer*, as Matt Costello reflects on “the proffered Constitution of the Irish Free State” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 30). The relegation of women to the private sphere, as fostered by ideological assumptions on women’s role in the new Constitution, incorporated both Church and State ethos in order to maintain the ideology. As a result, women, despite being in the private sphere of the home, were monitored and policed by patriarchal institutions, the Church and the State, which imposed a framework, backed up by legalisation in the public sphere, that placed restrictions on female autonomy, especially in the area of sexuality. For the female characters in O’Brien’s fiction, the path to self-awareness and self-determination involves the negotiation of the patriarchal family ethos when potentially disruptive desires threaten the stability of the family. In *The Last of Summer*, for instance, Hannah Kernahan’s command of her favourite son’s full attention is threatened when a visiting French cousin falls in love with him. Marriage between the cousins would relegate Hannah’s role in her son’s life redundant. With no other defined role available to her other than mother, Hannah cannot contemplate being diminished in this way, and works to destroy the relationship.

The definition of woman as mother in the 1937 Constitution was an image heavily influenced by Church writings, such as the views expressed in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). When placed side by side with the text of the Constitution, the similarities between the texts are clear. In *Quadragesimo Anno* Pope Pius XI (1922-39) wrote:

Mothers, concentrating on household duties, should work primarily in the home or in its immediate vicinity. It is an intolerable abuse, and to be abolished at all cost, for mothers on account of father’s low wage to be forced to engage in gainful occupations outside the home to the neglect of their proper cares and duties, especially the training of children (Section 71a in Carlen, Vol. 3, 426).

Similarly, Article 41 of the Irish Constitution reads:

Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937. Article 41, The Family

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|---|---|---|
| 2 | 1 | In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. |
| | 2 | The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. |

The import of the words “by her life within the home” is particularly striking.¹⁷ It demands a selfless dedication on the part of women to the service of others in a private domestic space, the home. The interchangeable use of “woman” and “mother” implicitly gives one specific role to woman and at the same time, withdraws status from those who do not undertake this role. Accordingly, Church and State ethos promoted women as the lynchpin for the promulgation of stability, as stable families with good values, which were thought to be “natural” to women, would underpin a stable society. The State, to all intents and purposes, legally enforced Church teaching on women’s “nature” and their role in society. O’Brien’s work places considerable emphasis on the exploration of woman’s “natural” role, and she tests the “naturalisation” of women’s roles in the 1937 Constitution against other “natural” inclinations for autonomy, desire and non-heterosexual and hegemonic intimacy, as well as attempting to imagine other options and roles for single women throughout her fiction.

During O’Brien’s lifetime, the ideological forces that surrounded the institution of motherhood were, therefore, endemic. In *Maternity in Ireland: A Woman-Centred Perspective*, the sociologist Patricia Kennedy, citing Adrienne Rich’s argument in *Of Woman Born*, maintains that Article 41 demonstrates, “a basic contradiction throughout patriarchy; between the laws and sanctions designed to keep women essentially powerless and the attribution to mothers of almost superhuman power (of control, of

¹⁷ Declan Kiberd writes that a “feeble” attempt was made by women’s groups to challenge this phrase and include “women outside the home”, but it was “easily deflected” (Kiberd, 405). See Declan Kiberd. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. London: Vintage, 1996. Kiberd’s information is elicited from Maurice Manning’s essay, “Women in Irish National and Local Politics 1922-72” in Margaret MacCurtain and Donncha O Corrain. Eds. *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension*. Dublin: Arlen House, The Women’s Press, 1978, pp. 95-6.

influence, of life-support)” (Kennedy, 46).¹⁸ O’Brien, by framing the family as similarly portrayed in the Constitution, treated the private space as political and moreover, subjected to analysis the position of mother, wife and single woman in the family. O’Brien’s work highlights that the model family and idealised motherhood of the 1937 Constitution was really only a possibility for and available to middle-class families, for those who had the economic means to sustain the implied model.

The tendency to assume the private sphere as non-political and the public sphere alone as political is a key element of Catholic teaching that is evident in the writings of the Fathers of the Church.¹⁹ In *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII quoted extensively from “St Thomas of Aquin”, who had integrated into Christian thought Natural Law Theory, elicited from the philosophy of Aristotle.²⁰ In his *Biology*, Aristotle set out his thesis that women were not rational animals in the way that men were. Consequently, in *Politics*, this premise is Aristotle’s basic justification for excluding women from citizenship in his ideal State. As a result, in his work, women were deliberately excluded from the public realm while also being associated with the “basal” realms of the human body, which were the sexual inclinations. In contrast, men were associated with the “higher” realms or intellectual inclinations.²¹ By incorporating this ideology, Church Fathers, such as the bishop and theologian, Saint Augustine (354-430), as well as Aquinas, viewed the containment of women to the private realm as complementary to the removal of the source of sin and temptation for men engaged in public affairs. This

¹⁸ See Adrienne Rich. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York and London: W. W. Norton, [1986] 1995.

¹⁹ The *Catholic Dictionary* explains that the title of Fathers of the Church “was given to writers of the early Church, many of whom were also bishops; originally a mark of respect accorded only to heads of churches as indicative of their responsibility for discipline and doctrine within the family of the Church as the human father is in his family; later extended more broadly to those notable for the orthodoxy of their doctrine, who by their writing, preaching, and holy lives defended the Faith”.

²⁰ In his writings, Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) adopted Aristotle’s theories on women’s function in society, as in the classical Athens of Aristotle’s lifetime, the chief function of women of citizen status was the procreation of legitimate children. Legitimate children were central to the maintenance of the inheritance system and so women were prevented from encountering men other than relatives. By remaining largely indoors, wealthy Athenian women avoided charges of uncertainty with regard to the legitimacy of a child. Moreover, when indoors they were sequestered in the quarters allocated to women and did not mix with male visitors. Consequently, women were rarely seen in public, attending only funerals or festivals and were excluded from political life, which was left to men alone.

²¹ In relation to women, Aristotle’s premise was that the male is by nature superior and the female inferior (See, for instance, *Politics* 1260a11ff, 1254a10-13). For an overall discussion in this regard, see *The World of Athens: An Introduction to Classical Athenian Culture*. Joint Association of Classical Teachers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, Chapter 4. It should be noted that sources on citizen women in Athenian society, in themselves a small strata of society, are scarce and were produced and expressed by men living in a male-dominated society.

division between the private and public spheres persisted throughout the centuries, and Aquinas, taking this division for granted in his writings, systematically defined natural law with the obligations and rights that constitute it, seeing the father as the head and ruler of his household, for example, and consequently, responsible for its upkeep and inhabitants. This view of specific roles in the family is further incorporated into the ritual of marriage and the implications for women are explored by O'Brien in the novels to be discussed.

Catholic Church promulgation of Natural Law theory, on which the principles of Catholic Social Teaching are based, therefore, had significant repercussions for women as its patriarchal tenets were incorporated into the 1937 Irish Constitution. It is especially in Article 41 on The Family that the influence of Catholic Social Teaching can be seen, as the phrasing used, Declan Costello notes in "The Natural Law and the Irish Constitution", refers to the family as having rights, "which are antecedent and superior to all positive law' [and thus] clearly and strongly inspired by the Christian view of natural law" (Costello, 414).²² Papal rhetoric on women's nature and women's roles were absorbed from an early age by churchgoers via pastoral letters and religious publications, and continued unmodified until the advent to the Chair of Peter by Pope John XXIII. Moreover, Church writings implied that because women give birth to children, they were biologically the *natural* carers of those children. In his influential encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII used the expression "the law of nature" repeatedly, and wrote that "woman is by nature fitted for homework" (Section 42 in Carlen, Vol. 2, 252). Leo XIII's pronouncements on women's place in *Rerum Novarum*, as the theologian Georgia Masters Keightley writes in "Catholic Feminism's Contribution to the Church's Social Justice Tradition", revealed his assumption that a woman's activities were "defined as well as circumscribed by her nature" (Keightley in McHugh and Natale, 340). Keightley argues that papal teachings ensured that the notion that human experience could be divided into two spheres, "public" and "private" would become central to Catholic social thought. It was a short step to decide, as the philosopher Barbara E. Wall argues in "*Rerum novarum* and its Critics on Social and Sexual Hierarchies", that certain occupations "are less fitted for women who are intended by nature for work of the home – work indeed which especially protects

²² At the time this was written, 1956, Declan Costello was a Dáil Deputy. He subsequently served as Attorney General from 1973-77, and as a Judge of the High Court from 1977 to 1999.

modesty in women and accords by nature with the education of children and the well-being of the family” (Wall in McHugh and Natale, 376).²³ With this influential encyclical, and the equally influential, *Quadragesimo Anno*, women’s role within the home was cemented and later adopted into the draft Articles prepared by the clerical committees involved in the drafting process of the 1937 Constitution.

The emphasis in papal encyclicals on the destruction of the family unit as a result of women working outside the home contributed to the negative perception of working mothers, and coincided with the aspirational ideal of the mother who could focus solely on the home. This, of course, could only be of concern to the middle class as little consideration was given to the many women who were economically compelled to seek paid labour. Papal encyclicals on women working outside the home, for example, speak about a fundamental difference between the sexes, as Keightley observes, “a difference of ability in fact, that actually serves to place restrictions on what women may do in public” (Keightley in McHugh and Natale, 340). It is in such a supposition that the Classical Greek cultural premise of the separation of the political domain (*polis*), in which participants exercised the use of reason in order to advance, as opposed to the private domain (*oikos*), in which participants concentrated on production and reproduction comes into view. Keightley writes that by consigning woman “to the private as these texts do, by making this the original, ultimate ground of her responsibility and identity, the pontiffs ineluctably consign woman to a state of perpetual political and economic dependence” (343). In addition, Kennedy argues that taking control of the future of the new State included taking “control of women who were designated a very particular role as wife and mother dependent on a male breadwinner, with few rights but many demands, burdens and responsibilities” (Kennedy, 65). A social security system based on this model, therefore, she continues, “was essentially discriminatory against women as women were marginalized in the paid labour market and their labour in the home was generally unseen or undervalued” (53). Thus, the ideological parameters for women’s “lives” in a specific capacity were set within the home. The investigation of essentialist notions of gender throughout O’Brien’s work takes place within the Catholic context, where Church writings were

²³ From *Rerum Novarum*, Section 60, quoted in Barbara E. Wall. “*Rerum novarum* and its Critics on Social and Sexual Hierarchies” in Francis P. McHugh and Samuel M. Natale. Eds. *Things Old and New: Catholic Social Teaching Revisited*. Maryland: University Press of America, 1993, p. 376.

quite definite in their rendering of the Catholic woman's role. As a result, the path of self-determination for O'Brien's female characters is a path through a complex network of Catholic teaching and social *mores* which disapproves of self-determination for women.

The definition of family and motherhood in the 1937 Constitution was underwritten by a number of other political matters. The Taoiseach, Éamon de Valera had several agendas regarding the stability of the new State, as well as its ideological direction, and as is common in post-revolutionary societies, a number of the new boundaries were inscribed on the bodily and spiritual integrity of the nation's women. The 1922 Constitution, in de Valera's view, was imposed on the fledging nation, and as such was a reminder and a remnant of the Free State's colonial past. Achieving stability in the wake of the Civil War was also a major concern, and historians have speculated that it is likely that de Valera was aware of the Church's value in maintaining, in Brian Fallon's words, "some moral balance and order in a country with a long though intermittent history of violence" (Fallon, 188). Moreover, as de Valera had been excommunicated during the Civil War, an accommodation with the Church had become an essential aspect of his governance if he was to keep the support of the majority of the population. Fallon points out that de Valera and "his party needed the façade of religious respectability, while the Church for its part must recognize and accept him as the country's legally elected and legitimate leader" (187). From the beginning of his sixteen years in power, as Louise Fuller writes in *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture*, de Valera "pursued a policy of economic and cultural nationalism" (Fuller, 5). His first major public engagement was the 1932 Eucharistic Congress, which he handled superbly.²⁴ De Valera's triumph at this event served to quell the bishops' misgivings about him in the wake of his Civil War stance, and at the same time, Irish politicians were not slow in discerning that Church disapproval of their actions could cost them the support of their Catholic constituents. In addition, as the majority of politicians had been educated in Catholic schools, they would have held

²⁴ For a description of the occasion see Terence Brown. *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985*. London: Fontana [1981], 1985, pp. 38-9. Of the Congress Brown concludes: "For a moment Dublin must have seemed the centre of Christendom and Ireland truly a part of a world-wide community" (Brown, 39).

similar views to the clergy on most matters deemed important to the Church.²⁵ A relationship with the Church was not a difficult matter for de Valera to pursue, despite his former excommunication, as he was, by all accounts, a devout Catholic and had many friends among the clergy. Yet he was not a puppet in the hands of the Hierarchy and was capable of resisting or ignoring their advice when it suited his political purposes.²⁶ In *Pray for the Wanderer*, O'Brien dramatises, through Matt, the relationship between de Valera and the Church, as well as impressions of de Valera, as

a more subtle dictator than most... He did not bring materialism out for public adoration, but materialistic justice controlled by a dangerous moral philosophy, the new Calvinism of the Roman Catholic. [...] He used it subtly, but the Church, having less reason than he to walk with care, did not so trouble. (O'Brien, *Pray*, 30)

This portrait of de Valera as a “subtle dictator” suggests itself in the recounting of events in relation to the articles affecting women in the Constitution, as documented by Margaret Ward in *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*. Ward writes:

Now as president, he took the opportunity to ensure that women, whether they liked it or not, would give priority to their duties as wives and mothers. He had never wanted women in the public sphere and he was going to enshrine these prejudices within the constitution. His attitudes were so well known that no one was taken in by his protestations of concern for women's well-being. (Ward, 238)

De Valera's “prejudices” reflected Catholic Church teaching on women's “nature” and as a result, women's “roles”, and the means used to try to secure stability ensured that women's needs and possibilities would be subsumed to the larger project of nation building.

De Valera is understood to have been a keen scholar of the writings of Irish exponents of Catholic Social Teaching, but it is the work of two clerics, in particular, the Jesuit, Edward Cahill and the Holy Ghost priest, John Charles McQuaid (who later

²⁵ See Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig. “The Power of the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland” in Patrick Clancy et al. Eds. *Irish Society: Sociological Perspectives*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1995, pp. 593-619.

²⁶ See J. H. Whyte. *Church and State in Modern Ireland: 1923–1979*. 2nd ed. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980. The second edition of Whyte's book, *Church and State in Modern Ireland: 1923-1979*, is the edition referred to throughout unless stated otherwise.

became the somewhat notorious Archbishop of Dublin), that stands out among the many contributors to the 1937 Constitution, and they are credited with helping de Valera compose the sections of the Constitution relevant to women and the family.²⁷ Dermot Keogh gives an account of the process in “Church, State and Society”, explaining that de Valera invited Cahill to come up with draft articles, relevant to the Church’s interests. Keogh writes: “When Cahill brought the matter to the attention of his superiors, they decided to set up a committee of some of the best minds in the Jesuit province to comply with de Valera’s request.” (Keogh in Farrell, 109) Although quite altered from the original draft material provided by the Jesuits, the finished articles were heavily based on the topics debated by the committee. McQuaid, as de Valera’s friend and advisor, as well as the Holy Ghost Order itself, played a more direct role in the process. The result, which drew heavily on papal encyclicals, became Articles 41 to 45 of the Constitution.²⁸ Ward writes that the proposed Constitution was “imbued with all the reactionary values of Catholic social teaching, particularly in its insistence upon the primacy of women’s role within the family” (Ward, 237).

De Valera presented the draft Constitution on Radio Éireann on 30 April 1937. It was published the following day in the *Irish Press*, the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Times*, and presented to *Dáil Éireann* (Chamber of Deputies) on 11 May 1937.²⁹ Article 41 was especially problematic from a female perspective, as Articles 41.2.1 and 41.2.2 are objectionably paternalistic, as well as unrealistic, in modern day circumstances. Although much of the ensuing legislation enacted during this period that was gender discriminating has since been found to be unconstitutional, it is questionable whether such legislation could have been passed without a powerful ideology on women’s role

²⁷ The Articles directly influenced by Catholic Social Teaching were as follows: Articles 15 “Constitution and Powers, 18 and 19 “Seanad Éireann” (Irish Senate), 40-44 “Fundamental Rights” and 45 “Directive Principles of Social Policy”. See Chubb, *The Government and Politics of Ireland*, p. 45.

²⁸ In the Foreword to Dermot Keogh and Andrew J. McCarthy’s, *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937*, Gerard Hogan argues that the influence of Catholic thinking and social values in the Constitution has been overemphasised by historians (Hogan in Keogh and McCarthy, 13-37). Keogh and McCarthy chart the drafting process which led to the enactment of the Constitution, and the contribution made by civil servants, the clergy and legal experts. With regard to the Constitution as a whole, Hogan’s argument, based on Keogh and McCarthy’s findings, is a valid one. For the purposes of this thesis, however, it is the Articles that concern women, particularly 41.2.1 and 41.2.2 that are of interest here and there is no argument as to the paternalistic tone used, the use of “woman” and “mother” as interchangeable terms, and the close association with papal encyclicals. For details on the personnel involved in the drafting process, see Dermot Keogh and Andrew J. McCarthy. *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937*. Cork: Mercier Press, 2007, pp. 503-4.

²⁹ As the Constitution was passed on 1 July, there was little time to consider it, as it came into operation on 29 December 1937.

in the home to support it.³⁰ It thus appears that despite some protest, such views on women's role in the home reflected widely held beliefs at the time.³¹ Although the Church was invited to help draft the Constitution, women were not, and the lawyer Yvonne Scannell writes in "The Constitution and the Role of Women": "[W]omen had no part in framing *Bunreacht na hÉireann*. Not one woman took part in drafting it." (Scannell, 123) This reflects the marked change in political participation by women after Independence, as noted by various commentators. In "Church, State and Women: The Aftermath of Partition", the sociologist Liam O'Dowd writes: "There appears to be considerable agreement among modern historians and feminists that women's role in politics and public life diminished in the aftermath of Partition, especially in the Irish Free State." (O'Dowd, 3)³² An indication of this, as Maryann Valiulis argues in "Engendering Citizenship: Women's Relationship to the State in Ireland and the United States in the Post-Suffrage Period", is that in the early years of the Free State, "there was an ongoing debate between political and ecclesiastical authorities on the one hand, and middle-class feminists on the other, over women's relationship to, and role in the new state" (Valiulis in Valiulis and O'Dowd, 168). Women believed that they had earned the right to be considered full citizens of the State because of their participation in the revolutionary struggle, but this was not to be the case. In *The Hidden Tradition: Feminism, Women and Nationalism in Ireland*, Carol Coulter notes that republican women supporters "saw themselves as an integral part of the emerging nation, with no aims distinct from those of the emancipation of the people as a whole" (Coulter, 5). As a result, preoccupation with nationalist aims was predominant in the work of republican women's organisations, and feminist issues were sidelined. *Cumann na mBan* (Irishwomen's Council), for instance, remained silent during the campaign against the 1937 Constitution, as it was not, in their view, a Republican constitution. They were also preoccupied with protesting against George V's inclusion of Ireland as part of his kingship titles, and the fact that Ireland had not been declared an independent Republic in the new British Constitution. At the same time, Ward emphasises that at no stage were female activists ever, despite their often crucial and essential activities, accepted as

³⁰ See Keogh and McCarthy, *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937*, p. 30.

³¹ See Liam O'Dowd. "Church, State and Women: The Aftermath of Partition" in C. Curtin et al. Eds. *Gender in Irish Society*. Galway: Galway University Press, 1987, pp. 3-36. A similar view is expressed by Mary Kenny in *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*. Revised and Updated Edition. Dublin: New Island, 2000.

³² For a sustained analysis of the contraction of women's political role after Partition and in the early years of the Free State, see Margaret Ward. *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*. London: Pluto [1989], 1995, Chapters 6 and 7.

equal members of the nationalist struggle. In the event, for women who had been actively engaged in the fight for freedom, the imposition of an Irish replica of colonial restraint was a severe blow to their aspirations. As a result, women activists, Coulter writes, “found themselves excluded from political life in the new state, which usually established its own specific form of patriarchy, combining the institutional patriarchy of the former regime with all the most conservative elements of local religious and cultural traditions” (Coulter, 3).

Opposition to the Constitution by women’s groups with feminist aims was not based on political rights, which were considered adequate, but rather on what is termed in *Pray for the Wanderer*, as the “alarming signposts” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 30) in the draft Constitution that could lead to discrimination because of the known emphasis laid upon woman’s *social* function as mother. The Women Graduates Association, which led the campaign against the Constitution, joined forces with the Joint Committee of Women’s Societies and Social Workers, the latter Committee chaired by Mary Kettle, sister of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. Kettle, Ward writes, “was a staunch feminist who had remained distant from the nationalist movement” (Ward, 239). In *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937*, the historians Keogh and McCarthy recount that Louis Bennett, secretary of the Irish Women’s Workers Union, pointed out that the problem lay not with what was actually stated in the draft articles, but in the “ambiguity and the implications that may be given to them” (Bennett quoted in Keogh and McCarthy, 186). These organisations feared, the historian Caitriona Beaumont relates in “Women and the Politics of Equality: The Irish Women’s Movement 1930–1943”, that Articles 40, 41 and 45 could “foreshadow an extension of such legislation as Section 16 of the Conditions of Employment Act, legislation which would limit the opportunities of women in the economic field, and which could be passed under Article 40.1” (Beaumont, 184). The reaction to the draft Constitution from the three female Deputies was disappointing. Only one, Bridget Redmond (*Cumann na nGaedheal* or League of Gaels), spoke against it, but as the historian Mary Clancy points out in “Aspects of Women’s Contribution to the Oireachtas Debate in the Irish Free State, 1922 – 1937”, “only at the insistence of women’s organisations” (Clancy, 208). Redmond was also absent for much of the debate, and Margaret Mary Pearse (*Fianna Fáil* or Soldiers of Destiny), sister of Padraic Pearse, made no contribution. The third female deputy, Helena Concannon (*Fianna Fáil*), who was also a member of the National University

Women Graduates Association, spoke in favour of it. On 14 May 1937, Beaumont writes, “the Taoiseach met with representatives from the National University Women Graduates Association, the Joint Committee of Women’s Societies and Social Workers and the National Council of Women to discuss the draft Constitution” (Beaumont, 181-2). The organisations enjoyed some success, such as the securing of an amendment to Article 16, that, Beaumont recounts, “ensured that Irish nationality and citizenship could not be withdrawn on the sole ground of sex” (182). The phrase “inadequate strength of women” was removed from Article 45, but “unsuited to their sex” remained, which the Women’s Groups argued, still signified discrimination against working women. The Groups had no success with Articles 40 and 41.³³ While objections raised by women’s groups were taken into account to some degree, these particular articles were not included in any amendments made. Moreover, in de Valera’s view, the positive role of women’s participation in the home would be endorsed in key sections of the Constitution. Ward writes that de Valera “stoutly maintained that women’s duties in the home were of such importance that the state should not require any further services from them” (Ward, 240).³⁴ Keogh and McCarthy cite a similarly expressed view of women’s role in the home by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, who said: “Nothing will change the law and fact of nature that woman’s natural sphere is the home.” (Keogh and McCarthy, 114) Like de Valera, McQuaid expressed the view that Article 41 recognised the special importance of women’s role in the home. In addition, by taking into consideration the stream of sustained discussion on the evils of modernism and individualism at the time, as well as the importance of maintaining and upholding good values directed at women in ecclesiastical literature, it is understandable that some women felt that the 1937 Constitution did indeed recognise their contribution to society by the work they carried out within the home. While de Valera appears to have reflected views generally held on women’s roles at that time, it should be noted that he was the only leader during the 1916 Easter Rising who refused to allow women from

³³ For a detailed account of the protestations to the offending Articles verbalised by women’s groups, and the negotiations carried out with Éamon de Valera, see Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, pp. 237-245. See also Keogh and McCarthy, *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937*, pp. 183-188.

³⁴ De Valera argued that in Article 41.2.2 he was acknowledging both the importance of women’s contribution to society by the work they carried out in the home, as well as protecting them economically. For an extract from de Valera’s speech purporting this view, see Keogh and McCarthy. *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937*, p. 187.

the various nationalist political organisations to enter the building he was occupying, thereby preventing them from taking part in the Rising under his command.³⁵

Scannell argues that ensuing legislation justified that “[t]he women of 1937 were right to fear that the state would give article 41.2 the most restrictive interpretation of their rights” (Scannell, 126). From 1932 onwards, the Fianna Fail government had sought to curb emigration and unemployment by introducing an industrialisation programme. By 1936, fifty-nine per cent of these jobs were filled by women. However, general negative attitudes towards working women contributed to a raft of legislative moves being introduced which curbed this trend. Female legislators did not contribute significantly to areas of women’s interests, and female deputies did not speak out against the 1935 Conditions of Employment Bill. However, female senators, especially Jenny Wyse-Power, were vociferous in their opposition to legislative restrictions on women throughout the period of 1922 to 1937. In general, female senators were more active and confident in speaking out, as many had previously enjoyed public roles in other organisations. Their colleagues in the Dáil, were, in the main, related to deceased TDs (*Teachtaí Dála* or Dáil Deputies) and were approached to stand in order to continue party loyalties in constituency areas. Most had little previous experience of public roles. Margaret MacCurtain argues in “Women, the Vote and Revolution” that the extreme Republican views of women deputies, inherited from their menfolk executed in 1916, caused them to lose out on the opportunity for making new political traditions (MacCurtain in MacCurtain and O Corrain, 55). Neither Margaret Collins-O’Driscoll (*Cumann na nGaedheal*) nor Helena Concannon (*Fianna Fáil*) initiated any legislation in respect of women. Moreover, Clancy writes, both Deputies “endorsed women’s responsibilities towards maternal and domestic duties” (Clancy, 208). By 1943, there were only three female representatives in *Dáil Éireann*, Brigid Redmond, Mrs. Reynolds and Mrs. Rice, all of who were loyal party women, and who, therefore, put party considerations before women’s rights. Another significant factor is that most politically active women were from the upper classes, as evidenced in the debate about the payment of a Children’s Allowance in 1943-4, which Irish feminists did not organise themselves to address. As the historian Caitriona Clear writes in

³⁵ See Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, p. 110. The feminist and co-founder of the 1908 militant Irishwomen’s Franchise League, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, said of de Valera that to him woman was “a sheltered being, withdrawn to the domestic hearth, shrinking from public life” (Sheehy Skeffington quoted in Ward, 203).

Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961, this “shows how sadly out of touch they were with the concerns of the majority of women” (Clear, *Women*, 212). The decision to have the allowance paid to men also demonstrated the Government's failure to honour the promise to women implicit in the Constitution. The contribution of female deputies with regard to policy, therefore, was negligible.

Despite the campaign against the Constitution undertaken by women's groups, it was accepted, on 1 July 1937, by 685,105 votes to 526,945, and as Beaumont argues: “Traditional party loyalties, de Valera's reassurances and the manifestation of Catholic social principles in the Constitution are all factors to be considered.” (Beaumont, 184) As a result, as Chubb wrote, citing Emmet Larkin, the powerful position of the Catholic Church in Ireland “was further enhanced because it ‘managed to build itself into the very vitals of the nation by becoming almost at one with its identity’” (Larkin quoted in Chubb, 15).³⁶ In this way, the twin appeal to faith and fatherland made the Constitution appear fully Irish, as both God and Nation are addressed in the preamble.

The Consolidation of the “Ideal Role” of the Middle-Class Homemaker

The parameters set for women in the Constitutional model was a contributory factor to the disappearance of women from the public sphere, and played a part in the consolidation of the “ideal role” for women as one who worked solely in the home nurturing the men folk who would populate and govern the public sphere, and raising young girls who would breed for the nation. The rise of the ideology of the “ideal role” for women is described by the historian Rosemary Cullen Owens in *A Social History of Women in Ireland 1870-1970*. Cullen Owens writes:

Because prosperous middle- and upper-class women very consciously neither contributed to family income nor to household chores, the role of those who did so tended to be downgraded, and the woman of leisure, devoting her self to accomplishments or a full-time home maker, became the ideal. (Cullen Owens, 227)

³⁶ See Emmet Larkin. “Church, State, and Nation in Modern Ireland” in *American Historical Review* LXXX.5 (December 1975), pp. 1244-1276. Reprinted in Emmet Larkin. *The Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism*. New York: Arno, 1976.

The family as depicted in O'Brien's fiction, and as implicitly represented in the Constitution, was middle-class. Although, O'Brien was herself an unapologetic member of the Catholic bourgeoisie, her work nonetheless, explores the class dynamics of the ruling middle-class of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Gerardine Meaney remarks about O'Brien's work in "Territory and Transgression: History, Nationality and Sexuality in Kate O'Brien's Fiction", "it is her exploration of the limit of the feminine's integration into and exclusion from political and symbolic structures that renders O'Brien's fiction of interest to contemporary feminism" (Meaney, "Territory and Transgression", 91). The historian John Logan in his essay, "'Family and Fortune' in Kate O'Brien's Limerick", attests that the O'Brien family had three domestic servants at one point, which was exceptional for the times (Logan, 118-9). In a recent article, "Invisible Irelands: Kate O'Brien's Lesbian and Gay Social Formations in London and Ireland in the Twentieth Century", Walshe writes: "In her representations of Irish middle-class life, Kate O'Brien always made a clear distinction between the Irish bourgeoisie and their servants, and she presented these servants as loyal upholders of a civilised Irish existence." (Walshe, "Invisible Irelands" 46) Walshe's view is evident in her memoir, *Presentation Parlour*, where O'Brien writes about "our good Lizzie" (O'Brien, *P.P.*, 83). In the convent, lay sisters performed housekeeping tasks for her, and in her memoir, O'Brien also wrote about the many happy days the O'Brien children spent in Shannon View, her uncle's house, in the company of the "angels" in the kitchen regions. The array of servants in the household, dairy, kitchen garden and saddle-room, she recalled, "loved us, and let us run mad" (94).

In his biography on O'Brien, Walshe adds that because of where the O'Brien home was situated, "the O'Brien children grew up economically distant from their immediate neighbours and geographically distant from their social peers. This left Kate unsure and defensive in the social and domestic details of her Irish middle-class narratives." (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 6-7) In addition, Walshe observes that O'Brien, after her experience of living in Roundstone, "seemed to have viewed the people of Connemara as a race apart – simple, unworldly, austere, dignified – and this was from the perspective of a writer who was born less than a hundred miles away" (116). In this regard, O'Brien appears to share the idea as promoted by Yeats and the Cultural Revival movement, of the peasant in the west of Ireland as the true aristocrat. In *Without My*

Cloak, for instance, the peasant girl, Christina Roche, is given “aristocratic” attributes in order to be deemed worthy of the love of the wealthy Denis Considine. Similarly, the peasant heroines Rose Lennane and Clare Halvey in *As Music and Splendour* are given exceptional attributes, which lift them above the ordinary. For instance, Christina Roche’s beauty is not immediately apparent to the upper middle-class Denis Considine, but rather unfolds as her face is revealed to him as she approaches. He sees in her face, “an aristocratic fineness which somehow contrived not to contradict but to glorify all her manifest signs of simple stock” (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 287). In another scene, Denis sees, “not only Christina in a cotton dress, the farm girl of his native country, but another Christina too, someone older and wiser than he had guessed, in whom a habit of courage and purity had called up *aristocratic* grace to meet this hour” (307, emphasis mine). The repeated use of “aristocratic” suggest that Christina must have this attribute in order to be worthy of Denis’s interest. Moreover, in the text, Christina’s parentage is depicted in a significant manner. A few sentences describe Christina’s mother, who became pregnant while in service and later died in childbirth. Christina’s father, however, is described at length: “This young man was the descendant of a strain that was conventionally aristocratic in all its members and ordinary customs, and had a claim also to intellectual aristocracy.” (291) There then follows almost an entire page on the merits of Christina’s father’s family. The passage concludes that Christina’s father had no idea that a daughter of his, “wandered about Irish fields burdened not only by her own bastardy but by a considerable and unnourished share of his lonely, aristocratic, passionate mind.” (291) O’Brien’s middle-class values suggest themselves here, as she appears compelled to give Christina exceptional attributes in order to justify the Denis’ attraction to her. In a similar vein in *As Music and Splendour*, exceptional attributes mark Rose Lennane and Clare Halvey apart from their fellow Irish peasants, as well as their fellow peasant colleagues. This distinction is expressed by their aristocratic fellow student, Antonio, who

sometimes puzzled with Rose over the differences he found between her and the Sicilian girl, Mariana. ‘You’re both peasants, serf class really – aren’t you? [...] But you and Mariana – Chiara, too, I suppose? – well, you’re about as humbly born as possible ... Mariana is a dear girl – but she *is* out-and-out a peasant, in everything. But you–’ (O’Brien, *Music*, 265)

Rose replies to this: ““Oh, so am I, Tonio. Make no mistake!”” (265) Clare too acknowledges her humble roots in a conversation with Rene, a fellow singer, and Rose’s former lover. He asks her:

‘You – you are some kind of aristocrat, I imagine.’

‘My grandmother is *my* kind of aristocrat. But my father is a lazy clerk in the Customs and Excise. I don’t remember my mother – but Grandmother smokes a clay pipe, and is bi-lingual.’

Rene raised his eyebrows.

‘In Irish and English.’

‘Then you’re a peasant?’

‘Yes, indeed.’ (331)

In an essay describing a meeting with Kate O’Brien, Eavan Boland in “Continuing the Encounter”, describes O’Brien as “a romantic elitist” (Boland in *OPD*, 18). This view is supported by O’Brien’s pride in her maternal family’s humble beginnings, of which she writes in her memoir. Her grandfather, she wrote, fought with “guile and energy ... to hold on to the same lands which the original conqueror had given to their Plantation ancestor” (O’Brien, *P.P.*, 16). She then recounts that the Thornhills later became much reduced in circumstances after the Penal Laws, but in spite of this, O’Brien wrote, “in spirit and character they never were serfs at all” (16). Such humble roots were of course offset by subsequent improvements in the social and economic condition of her own family, and the qualities for scaling the social ladder were clearly identified here as inherent, suggesting a certain belief in essentialist notions of character, as well as a quasi-Calvinist belief in the inevitability of acquisition for those who were “good”.

The wealthy middle classes of the late nineteenth century, as portrayed in *Without My Cloak* and *The Ante-Room*, were present mainly in towns and cities, as the Irish population was predominantly rural. O’Brien writes about this affluent Catholic class that comprised of business and professional families who survived the famine and prospered through the turn of the century. The comfortable lifestyles of the wealthy are evoked with descriptions of quality clothes, and with words that convey the sensuousness of good food, fruit, wine, and the smell of good coffee. However, these luxuries do not come without a price for the women of this class. As the historian Senia Pařeta observes in *Before the Revolution: Nationalism, Social Change and Ireland’s Catholic Élite, 1879-1922*: “The conservatism of the Celtic Revival ... produced a

model of Irish womanhood incompatible with many of its women activists. The emphasis on Irish women's purity and obedience became ... a cornerstone of the traditionalists' view of the 'real Ireland'" (Pašeta, 152). As a result, the privileged position of educated middle-class women comes with expectations of behaviour that they must conform to, and it is the patterns of conformity that O'Brien objects to.³⁷ Such patterns are discernable through the patterns made visible by the contrasts between the women who could live up to the ideal role of homemaker in a genteel and supported fashion, and the less "ideal role" played by the servant women who enabled them to do so, through labour outside of their own home, in the home of another "homemaker".

The hierarchical world order implicit in the shaping of the "full-time homemaker" reflected the notions of class divisions expressed in *Rerum Novarum*, as well as the role played by the State in shaping class structure in Ireland due to its post-Independence economic and social policies. On the one hand the Church lauded the poor in terms of the rewards for suffering and sacrifice promised in the afterlife, despite Church personnel being in the main from the middle classes; on the other hand, they perpetuated class divisions especially through the education system. In *Pray for the Wanderer*, Father Malachi, who represents the Irish Catholic point of view on topics debated in the text such as censorship, the Constitution and the role of the Church in Irish society, explains his interpretation of the Church view on poverty: "The poor you have always with you, and if Christianity had its way you'd have them more and more. We'd all be what you call poor – levelled down to decent, simple poverty." (O'Brien, *Pray*, 121)³⁸ Father Malachi's view reflects the low estimation Christianity puts upon earthly life as opposed to the value of the soul that lives on for eternity. Karl Marx's 1848 philosophy had posed the possibility of material happiness on earth, which went against the long-held Catholic Church belief of happiness being possible only in the afterlife. As a result, in *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII condemned the pursuit of materialism, as well as a materialist worldview, in strong terms, in the wake of a world he perceived of as being dominated by the evils of individualism, socialism and

³⁷ This does not suggest homogeneity of experience, aspiration and access to resources. Rather it suggests the exploration of dominant ideologies surrounding women, their status, their roles and some of their material realities.

³⁸ The full quotation ascribed to Jesus is "The poor you have always with you, but you do not always have me" (*John 12:8*). In addition, there is the following pronouncement ascribed to Jesus: "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (*Matthew 19.24*). This suggests that it is impossible to be rich and achieve salvation.

communism.³⁹ Thus, despite Leo XIII's belief in the dignity and sacredness of each human being, as expressed in *Rerum Novarum*, he also accepted the differences between people as a natural phenomena, with the emergence of social classes a natural part of the fabric of a community.⁴⁰

The State also played a role in shaping class structure in Ireland due to its post-Independence economic and social policies and its susceptibility to pressure groups, particularly the Church.⁴¹ As those in power, both in government and in the Church hierarchy were educated largely in elite Catholic schools, homogenous cultural values prevailed.⁴² Both Church and government personnel came largely from the middle classes, and the sociologist, Maire Nic Ghiolla Phadraig, in "The Power of the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland", indicates how "natural" leaders were created through the education system. She writes: "The affluent and those able to avail of scholarships continued to second-level education provided by religious orders and these produced the elite of government, public service and to some degree business and finance." (Nic Ghiolla Phadraig, 596) Different teaching orders catered for different sections of society, with an over representation of those in power having been educated in the elite Catholic schools. Each section of society was pastorally catered for and a questioning or criticism of *mores* and methods of education and/or leadership was

³⁹ Again, the central role played by Thomas Aquinas's Natural Law Theory in Church ideology was key in this regard, with its perception of world order as patriarchal and hierarchical with people living in communities in which cooperation, interdependency and social hierarchy was natural as well as beneficial to the functioning of the community. Leo XIII's response to these concerns, and the rising socialist movement in Europe, which explains the emphasis on the right to private property in *Rerum Novarum*, was to posit the ideal of class harmony in order to counteract the class warfare of the socialist movement and the unrestricted competition of the individualist. For the implications of this from an Irish perspective, see Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland 1923-1979*, Chapters 3 and 4. See also Don O'Leary. *Vocationalism and Social Catholicism in Twentieth-Century Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000.

⁴⁰ See *Rerum Novarum*, Sections 26, 28, 32 in Claudia Carlen. Ed. *The Papal Encyclicals 1878-1903*, Vol. 2. Ann Arbor, Pierian Press, 1990.

⁴¹ The origin of class division in Ireland goes back centuries. The existence of seven states in Ireland around the time of Saint Patrick is mentioned in the *Leabhar na gCeart* (Book of Rights) ascribed to Saint Benignus, a follower of Saint Patrick. Each of these states had clans who paid tribute to a *Ri* or clan chief, who in turn paid tribute to the *Ard Ri* or High King. In every state there were ruling clans, few in number, who would claim relationships to the *Ri* or ruling class. The latter clans were free from all tributes and consequently, superior to "unfree tribes". This early distinction of class followed through the centuries from the great Irish Chiefs, through the Norman castle owners, the Landlords in the "Big Houses" and eventually to large farm and business owners. See Mary Hayden and George A. Moonan. *A Short History of Ireland*. New and Revised Edition. Dublin: Talbot Press, n.d.

⁴² For an account of how politically disparate university-educated Catholics' expectation of leadership in the event of Home Rule was doomed by the intervention of World War I and the 1916 Easter Rising, see Senia Pašeta. *Before the Revolution: Nationalism, Social Change and Ireland's Catholic Élite, 1879-1922*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1999.

discouraged. Thus, the Church, in fact, contributed to, Nic Ghiolla Phadraig argues, “the reproduction of inequality” (605), while consolidating its power base. The State, therefore, working in alliance with the Church, was also responsible for the maintenance of class divides. The everyday nature of the interaction between middle-class families and Church personnel is striking in O’Brien’s fiction, demonstrating the pervasive links and the mutual benefits of this alliance. The critiques that O’Brien’s fiction performs do not oppose the Church as an institution, or the State as a force, but instead examine the subtle variations of intimate relationships in middle-class lives where familial relationships and everyday practice serve to deploy Church and State agendas.

The patriarchally-defined mother, idealised in her role as homemaker, was valued above all other professions, besides that of nun. Paid work was acceptable for poorer women only.⁴³ In “Neither Feminist nor Flapper: The Ecclesiastical Construction of the Ideal Irish Woman”, the historian, Maryann Valiulis describes this idealised role for women thus:

The self-sacrificing mother whose world was bound by the confines of her home, a woman who was pure, modest, who valued traditional culture, especially that of dress and dance, a woman who inculcated these virtues in her daughters and nationalist ideology in her sons, a woman who knew and accepted her place in society (Valiulis in O’Dowd and Wichert, 178).

In this description, Catholic Church values are intertwined with “Irishness” in the mother’s role as the promoter of purity, modesty and “nationalist ideology”. Valiulis argues that returning women to the home was, as far as de Valera and the Church were concerned, “essential to the stability of the family, the state, and a catholic society” (168). Valiulis attributes the main part in this endeavour to the Church with its anti-modernisation stance. Valiulis’s view concurs with Inglis’ argument in *Moral Monopoly*, that mothers were the organisational link between the Church and the Family, and that the Church’s influence on family life was mediated, as Margaret MacCurtain writes in “Recollections of Catholicism, 1906-1960”, “through a

⁴³ In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir was scathing about women who employ other women, and wrote: “In the upper classes women are eager accomplices of their masters because they stand to profit from the benefits provided. [...] But a woman whose work is done by servants has no grip on the world... [They] give nothing, do nothing, in exchange for all they get... Their vain arrogance, their radical incapability, their obstinate ignorance, make them the most useless nonentities ever produced by the human species.” (de Beauvoir, 638) See Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage, 1997.

construction of Irish motherhood shaped by Catholic practices, under the moral guidance of priests and nuns” (MacCurtain in *FDA IV & V*, 570). On the other hand, Caitriona Clear does not believe that there was a specific plan to return women to the home, as she claims that the evidence is too inconsistent. Clear bases her hypothesis on 1936 and 1946 census figures which show an increasing number of women gainfully occupied in the home, with working farmer’s wives or assisting female relatives not included in that figure. Moreover, figures for women employed in agriculture or in domestic service were declining at the same time. Clear argues that what the figures prove is that the home was no longer a site of gainful employment:

Women were patently not being chased out of the workforce and ‘back into’ the ‘home’; female assisting relatives were, on the contrary, leaving a workplace which was also a home, and domestic servants were leaving other people’s houses to emigrate or to work in other sectors. (Clear, *Women*, 15)

Likewise, the historian Diarmaid Ferriter, in his history of the Irish Countrywomen’s Association, *Mothers, Maidens and Myths: A History of the ICA*, argues that Inglis’ thesis in *Moral Monopoly* is a simplistic one “which overlooks the diversity of the role of the woman in rural Ireland” (Ferriter, *Mothers, Maidens and Myths*, 20).

Nonetheless, O’Brien’s work is most concerned with the socially conservative and solidly middle classes, as the bourgeois families in O’Brien novels all have domestic servants, who also serve in the texts as ciphers or foils for middle-class protagonists. Conversations between employer and employee do not take place and servants are notably deferential. The issues of autonomy are not explored by these characters or seen to be within their scope. Although class divides are presented as “naturalised”, and the servants are rendered as happy, loyal and loving towards their charges, this does not necessarily mean that this dramatisation is without commentary, or does not function as a means of considering the limits of class on individual potential and choice. Logan argues that O’Brien was not dismissive of people of other classes. Rather, he writes, she “is asking the reader to note and consider the social inequalities which characterised the late nineteenth-century city” (Logan, 130). So although, as Adele Dalsimer wrote in *Kate O’Brien: A Critical Study*, “[t]he Irish Catholic bourgeoisie remained the touchstone of [O’Brien’s] imaginative vision” (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, xiii), the context in which the bourgeoisie is set is also critically

important. The physical and emotional work of mothering in such a context varies according to class, and thus, ideologies of motherhood must be read in the context of the whole cast of people who labour in the role of “mother” in the middle-class home.

Mariolatry, Maternity and Marriage

Throughout O’Brien’s fiction, reference is made to the Legion of Mary and the Child of Mary Sodality, popular in convent schools. The popularity of these organisations and devotions conducted specifically to the Mother of Jesus, as rendered in O’Brien’s literary representations of such allegiances, reflect the primacy of Marian devotion in Irish Catholicism. The references in the novels are associated with expectations of exemplary behaviour, and in *The Land of Spices*, for instance, when two latecomers for the assigning of marks are “giggling” as they fall through the swing door in their haste to be on time, “two children of Mary looked demurely shocked” (O’Brien, *Spices*, 69). In the early twentieth century, community-based movements were important sources for the dissemination of devotion to Our Lady in Ireland. In “The Peak of Marianism in Ireland 1930-60”, the historian, James S. Donnelly, quoting from an earlier article on the topic, writes:

[T]he Marian current was transmitted in the post-Famine decades ‘largely through such quintessential aspects of the “devotional revolution” as the parish-mission movement, the dramatic expansion of female religious orders, their monopoly over girls’ secondary education, and the associated growth of sodalities and confraternities, many of them with an explicitly Marian focus’. (Donnelly in Brown and Miller, 282)⁴⁴

In 1921, Frank Duff founded the association that later became the Legion of Mary, and both Hannah Kernahan in *The Last of Summer* and Nell Mahoney in *Pray for the Wanderer* are members of this conservative Catholic association whose membership is drawn largely from the middle classes. Nell’s former fiancé describes her as “one of this town’s shining lights ... and head cook and bottle-washer of the Legion of Mary” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 169).⁴⁵ In “Fullness of Life: Defining Female Spirituality in Twentieth Century Ireland”, Margaret MacCurtain, writes that the Legion’s,

⁴⁴ J.S. Donnelly, Jr. “The Marian Shrine of Knock: the first decade” in *Eire-Ireland*. xxviii.2 (Summer 1993): 96.

⁴⁵ See also Kate O’Brien. *The Last of Summer*. London: The Book Club, 1944, p. 180 and Kate O’Brien. *The Flower of May* London: The Companion Book Club, 1955, p. 262. Originally called the Association

distinguishing characteristics were its cultivation of the devotional life of the lay-Catholic through the cult of Mary as Mediatrix of All Graces, its emphasis on personal holiness, and an open-ended spiritual ministry to others to lift them out of their apathy, indifference or unawareness of God. (MacCurtain in Luddy and Murphy, 243)

The Legion, she continues, “created in Ireland a school of Marian spirituality” (244). Such devotional and evangelising activity also encoded self-denial, self-abnegation and a sense of righteousness in passing judgement on the lives of those deemed less holy and devout, and gave many women a stick with which to beat other often more transgressive women.

Additionally, discourses of motherhood in the new State were powerfully underwritten by the cult of Mary, and O’Brien’s texts explore the disjunction between nature and culture mediated in the explicit and implicit practice of Mariolatry and the repercussions of this for women. In *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics*, Gerardine Meaney argues: “In Ireland, sexual identity and national identity are mutually dependent. The images of suffering Mother Ireland and the self-sacrificing Irish mother are difficult to separate. Both serve to obliterate the reality of women’s lives.” (Meaney, *Sex and Nation*, 3) Moreover, Meaney argues that patriarchy’s strongest hold over women is its ability to promote the inner division of virgin/mother. The idealised role of woman as homemaker, with the Blessed Virgin Mary as Catholic model and de Valera’s virtuous mother in the home as the State model, made self-determination of the female highly problematic. The result of this powerful ideology, Meaney argues, is that it “inhibits women’s will for change and recruits women damaged by patriarchal ideology to the cause of patriarchy itself and sets them campaigning and voting against their own interests” (5). Such discourse of self-hatred

of Our Lady of Mercy, the name was changed to the Legion of Mary in 1925. The Legion originated from a conference of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and the order of its meetings is largely based on Saint Vincent de Paul society procedure. The Legion advocates the duty of every Catholic to try and spread the faith. Members do not take part in any public campaigns, as individual meeting individual is central to their approach. Don O’Leary writes: “The Legion aims at the sanctification of its members by prayer and active work for the sanctification of their fellowmen, so that it aims at the spiritual development of the whole community” (O’Leary, *Vocationalism and Social Catholicism*, 76). In addition, the Legion is devoted to prayer and the performance of good works and is still active around the world. Because of Church hierarchical wariness with regard to social innovations undertaken by lay people at the time of its founding, it was twelve years before Pius XI gave Frank Duff a special blessing. For an account of the early years of the Legion see Frank Duff. *Miracles on Tap*. New York: Montfort Publications, 1961.

haunts Mariology in Catholicism, a Church practice which is often conversely promoted as empowering for women, but which for feminists represents a narrative and icon of split desires and impossible ideals. Discussing Julia Kristeva's argument in "Stabat Mater", Toril Moi writes in *The Julia Kristeva Reader* that "Christianity is the most refined symbolic construct in which femininity ... is focused on Maternity" (Moi, 161). Kristeva, who recounts her own experience of maternity alongside a discourse on the cult of the Virgin Mary, argues against the prevailing Christian disjunction between culture and nature which demand too high a price from women, and proposed a model of maternity as the confrontation of nature *and* culture, and furthermore, the pregnant woman as a split subject as well as a subject-in-process.

Mariolatry, to briefly sketch the principal developments here, is inextricably linked with priestly celibacy, the denigration of the human body in general, and the pathologising of the female body in particular. The promotion of priestly celibacy in the middle ages coincided with the promotion of devotion to Mary, the Mother of God.⁴⁶ The de-sexualised Mary as a male construct was held up as an ideal for ordinary women, but as many feminist theologians and historians have argued, in this rendition, she could only be an impossible ideal. The Middle Ages saw growth and development for Mariology, although the exact time and means whereby Mary became "sinless" became a matter for debate and dispute. French Catholicism played a more direct role on the development of Marian devotion in Ireland, as a result of the penal laws that had made it necessary for Irish priests to be trained in France. The particular trajectory of influence was pioneered by the Belgian Bishop, Cornelis Jansen (1585-1638), in his chief work, "Augustinus", in which he sought to reassert Augustine's strict ethical codes with regard to sexual pleasure. Jansen's teaching, or Jansenism, emphasised the darker side of human nature, a view incorporated into Irish Catholicism through its newly trained priests.⁴⁷ Jansenism understands the human being as inherently sinful, and in

⁴⁶ For an account of the impact Mary has had on world culture from biblical up to modern times, see Miri Rubin. *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary*. London: Penguin Books, 2009. See also Marina Warner. *Alone of all Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*. London: Picador [1976], 1985 and Mary T. Malone. *Women and Christianity Vol. 3: From the Reformation to the 21st Century*. Dublin: Columba, 2003.

⁴⁷ Jansen believed in predestination, and believed man to be predisposed to sin, and as the *Catholic Dictionary* explains, he "denied the free will of man in either accepting or rejecting God's grace". Despite Jansenist doctrines being condemned by three popes, the rigorisms of Jansenism persisted particularly in France. See M. Turner. "The French Connection with Maynooth College 1795-1855" in *Studies*, LXX

order to successfully enter the kingdom of Heaven at death, in need of reform and guidance. To this end, careful monitoring of the faithful by the clergy was deemed necessary, and this monitoring was particularly utilised in the area of sexuality, especially female sexuality. This in turn, had an impact on Marian doctrine, as the birth of Jesus needed to be brought in line with purity on the part of Our Lady in light of Augustinian and Jansenist views on female sexuality.⁴⁸ It became inevitable that the physical aspect of Mary's part in the birth of Jesus would have to be manipulated to suit the attribution of sexual purity. Mariology in the nineteenth century was dominated by discussions about the ideology of the Immaculate Conception, the term used by Our Lady in reference to herself, during her final appearance to Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes. As a result, in 1854, Pope Pius IX (1846-78) declared the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which had been a traditional belief among the faithful for centuries. This ideology was assimilated in Ireland by the growing importance of Our Lady during the "devotional revolution" on account of the development of devotional practices particular to her, in the building of Marian shrines, and with the proliferation of pilgrimages conducted in her honour.⁴⁹ Her alleged appearance to fifteen people in Knock, County Mayo, in 1879, cemented the continuing devotion of the Irish people. While lauding the idealised role of motherhood on the one hand, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was a dogma that implicitly negated the physical role of childbearing, as the Virgin birth reinforced ancient Greek biological beliefs of the womb acting merely as a passive receptacle for the male seed.⁵⁰ As a result, the physical demands of repeated pregnancies on women, as literalised by O'Brien in the story of Molly Considine in *Without My Cloak*, were of little concern to the male hierarchy.⁵¹

(1981), pp. 81-2; Patrick J. Corish. *Maynooth College 1795-1995*, Dublin, 1995 and Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004, p. 282 (Note 66).

⁴⁸ See Uta Ranke-Heinemann. *Eunuchs for Heaven: The Catholic Church and Sexuality*. Trans. John Brownjohn. London: Andre Deutsche [Hamburg, 1988], 1990, p. 239.

⁴⁹ For an account of Mariology in Ireland, see Peter O'Dwyer. *Mary: A History of Devotion in Ireland*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1988.

⁵⁰ In Aeschylus' *Orestia*, for instance, Apollo pronounces that it is less serious for Orestes to have killed his mother rather than his father, as she is merely the carrier of the seed: "The mother is no parent of that which is called her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed that grows. The parent is he who mounts" (Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*, 658-660). See Aeschylus. *Oresteia: Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, The Eumenides*. Grene, David and Richmond Lattimore. Eds. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1953. The remnants of this belief lingered until the discovery of the ovum in 1827 by E. von Baer (Ranke-Heinemann, 164).

⁵¹ With woman's primary function being motherhood, the premising of this role over other concerns such as the health of both mother and child, whether there are adequate material provisions available, as well as the disregard for the wishes of women in this regard become justifiable to those who wish to make it

Mary's status as wife of Joseph was also problematic, as up to the nineteenth-century Protestant Reformation, as the theologian Karen Armstrong documents in *The Gospel According to Woman: Christianity's Creation of the Sex War in the West*, sex was deemed at best unsavoury, and at worst evil, by the Fathers of the Church. As a result, marriage was seen as inferior to celibacy and was conducted as a practical arrangement or partnership by people as "their own business, not that of the Church" (Armstrong, 260). Moreover, Armstrong writes, "Augustine and Aquinas may have said that marriage was a sacrament, but no ceremonial was devised to celebrate this sacrament." (264) However, once marriage was Christianised, the status of women needed to be elevated to suit the more formalised arrangements. This was done by stressing the role of woman as wife and mother, modelled on Mary in the context of the Holy Family, rather than as the direct daughter of Eve or Pandora. In this way, women could be seen as weak and inferior and in need of protection, rather than evil, and as a result, marriage for men deemed acceptable.⁵² In O'Brien's representation of marriage, the wife as appendage is expressed in the rendering of the thoughts of both Jim Lanigan and Anthony Considine in *Without My Cloak*, as well as to a lesser extent, Michael O'Connor in *The Flower of May*. Additionally, in the bourgeois society of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Ireland, O'Brien dramatises marriage as a practical arrangement with the idea of love singularly lacking in the marital expectations of the respective spouses. One exception to this model is the portrayal of Nell Mahoney's expectations of love as a requisite for marriage in *Pray for the Wanderer*, which reflects the changing ethos on marriage from the late nineteenth, early twentieth century onwards, towards the notion of companionate unions.

so. The Irish State upheld Church teachings on the acceptance of unlimited children by banning the use of contraceptives, as well as written material giving information on or alluding to contraception. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that "Sacred Scripture and the Church's traditional practice see in large families a sign of God's blessing" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 508). See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Dublin: Veritas, 1994.

⁵² It was not until the eleventh century that the Papacy, in the person of Pope Gregory VII, took control of the institution of marriage in order to regularise sex and to provide a haven for those who could not aspire to celibacy. Ferdinand Mount writes that it was only in the twelfth century "that the formula of the seven sacraments was drawn up and not until the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century that it was imposed" (Mount in Coll, 122). See Ferdinand Mount. "The Subversive Family Revisited" in Mary Coll. Ed. *Faithful Companions: Collected Essays Celebrating the 25th Anniversary of The Kate O'Brien Weekend*. Limerick: Mellick Press, 2009, pp. 116-133. For a documentation of the development of patriarchal marriage in Europe, see Karen Armstrong. *The Gospel According to Woman: Christianity's Creation of the Sex War in the West*. London: Elm Tree Books, 1986, Chapter 8.

The tension between the demands of a conservative Church and its satellite organisations on mothers and their personal desire as women are explored in O'Brien's fiction. For instance, O'Brien attributes various desires, as well as misplaced passions and unhappiness to mother figures such as Hannah Kernahan in *The Last of Summer* and Caroline Lanigan in *Without My Cloak*. In Ireland, on account of Catholicism's influential role, women's relationship with their bodies operates in an inherited cultural and religious paradox. On the one hand, as Catholic mothers, women are linked with the Mother of God who commands veneration, whilst on the other hand, the ability to produce new life is perceived as a function that roots women in bodily concerns at the cost of participating fully in the economic and political arena. O'Brien recounts a tale in *Presentation Parlour* that reflects the absence of an acknowledgement of women's bodily functions in a public arena and which, she relates, cost her Aunt Fan's "reticence much to tell" (O'Brien, *P.P.*, 47). Fan had noticed the O'Brien children's failure to use the Chaplin's lavatory provided for their use when visiting their aunts in the Presentation Convent. In order to address the situation, and as someone much concerned with health matters, she told them the following tale in order to frighten them into going to the lavatory. Fan's reticence, O'Brien recounted, was revealed by the fact that the tale was told to the relevant O'Brien children separately. The story concerns a Miss Agatha O'Reilly's day trip to Cork. As the trip took four hours, the excursionist left at seven in the morning and did not return until after midnight. Agatha did not have time to use the bathroom before she left her home, as the cab came early and the males of the travelling party were clamouring for her prompt appearance. No opportunity arose for Agatha to relieve herself, as O'Brien wrote,

in the 'seventies and 'eighties of the last century ladies, once outside their own hall doors, were assumed to be angels, and no provision whatever was made for a primary physical need – even in capital cities... [Agatha] could not possibly ask a brother or a father what she was to do (48-9).

Agatha spent the day in misery and eventually returned home feeling very unwell. The story concludes: "[S]he woke the next morning a lunatic, and she never regained her reason" (49). The tale demonstrates the invisibility of women's bodily functions in the public realm as well as the extraordinary lengths of suffering endured by a woman in order to ignore a primary bodily need in the name of modesty. Of course, the lack of public facilities also ensured that women remained in the private world in which such

facilities would be provided for them, and they were, therefore, more comfortable socialising in each other's homes.⁵³

While the elision of bodily functions is similarly rendered by the doctrine of the Virgin birth, at the same time, as the mother of Jesus and model of modesty, virtue and humility, devotion to Mary enhanced the institution of Motherhood and fostered a Church-led cultural respect for the endeavours of women with regard to the religious instruction of their children. Of course, Mary is ambiguous and problematic as a role model for women, as she held the dubious status of occupying a pedestal while simultaneously ideologically kneeling before her son in a subservient manner. The Church, therefore, while on the one hand, restricting women's lives through Church edicts, on the other hand, appointed women as propagators and guardians of faith and morals. In this context, woman as maternal symbol is concomitant with the denigrating of real maternal lives. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir pointed out that a woman in the act of reproducing is, ironically, at her most lauded state by society (de Beauvoir, 518). Despite this, de Beauvoir perceived women's maternal function as the root of female oppression, as with regard to pregnancy, she said that the foetus "is a parasite that feeds on [the mother's body]" (512). The pregnant woman "is plant and animal" (512) and becomes "life's passive instrument" (513). Women who enjoy motherhood, she judges, "seek eagerly to sacrifice their liberty of action to the functioning of their flesh." (513) Those who undertake pregnancy with ease are either "matrons who are wholly consecrated to their reproductive function [or] those mannish women who are not particularly fascinated by the adventures of their bodies" (517). De Beauvoir did not believe in the notion of the "maternal instinct", and similarly, in

⁵³ The tale also includes the association of lunacy with women's bodies, an issue that was central to the incarnation of mothers to mental asylums if they appeared to deviate in any way from "normal" maternal behaviour. In nineteenth century Britain, when the mad came to be regarded as objects of pity rather than fear, there was a contemporaneous shift in the symbolic gendering of insanity from male to female in tandem with new discoveries made about the female reproductive system. These theories on mental illness were readily accepted as they tied in with accepted ideology about the innate nature of women within a rigidly patriarchal system. Irish doctors, despite the fact that more men than women were inmates in Irish asylums, adapted these theories. Consequently, social and emotional factors were not considered relevant while gynaecological problems were equated with mental symptoms. Single women who had had miscarriages or a child, especially those from the middle-classes, were incarcerated in high numbers, as they were no longer a viable asset in the marriage stakes. Married women suffering from a traumatic birth or post-natal depression were also committed to mental asylums. In such circumstances, any behaviour deemed "unnatural" left its perpetrator vulnerable to committal. See Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart. Eds. *Irish Women's History*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004, Chapter 9. For a first-hand account of life in an asylum during the 1940s and 1950s, see Hanna Greally. *Bird's Nest Soup*. Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1971.

O'Brien's texts, there is no sense of identification with maternity or maternal women. De Beauvoir's view is that "[t]he mother's attitude depends on her total situation and her reaction to it" (526). Similarly, O'Brien writes in *Mary Lavelle*, as Don Pablo Arevegas contemplates the demands of motherhood: "[S]omehow he could not believe that the whole of any human personality could go into the cherishing of lover and babes" (O'Brien, *Lavelle*, 57). De Beauvoir attributes shame and embarrassment at bodily changes and functions to cultural conditioning, not to the body and how it operates in itself. At the same time, she argued that cultural conditioning is not enough to keep women in a state of inferiority, as it is a "deficiency" that de Beauvoir believed could be overcome (de Beauvoir, 57). There is a sense also that in her assumption of women as equal to men, this equality is thought of in terms of the values promoted by men, a view that evokes Mary Wollstonecraft's conclusion in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, that it is "for man to establish the reign of liberty in the midst of the world of the given" (741). However, the theorist Judith Butler in "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*" offers a more positive interpretation of de Beauvoir's work. Butler suggests that de Beauvoir's analysis is infused with "emancipatory potential" (Butler, 41). In this way, Butler argues, de Beauvoir allowed for "the transformative possibilities of personal agency" (41). Furthermore, she argues that de Beauvoir allowed for the difficulty of existing, in the social sense of the word, outside of established gender norms. Butler bases this argument on de Beauvoir's persuasive thesis that views the body as a "field of cultural possibilities" (49). This argument, developed further in Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993), of the body as multiple and fluid, offers a way of approaching the depiction of bodies in literary texts that allows the body "to speak". In this way, analyses of bodily representations of "struggle" in O'Brien's characters offer a means of identifying the unspoken conflict between desire and duty. It is the dichotomy between women's experience of corporeality and Judeo-Christianity's denial and denigration of embodiment that serves as a crucible for the literary conflicts in O'Brien's texts.⁵⁴ O'Brien internalises transgressive traits in her main protagonists as a way of exploring the cost of such denials.

⁵⁴ For an overview on the body in literary theory, see the Introduction to Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick. Eds. *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 1-14.

Church, State and Procreation

The promotion of large families was a major facet in the lives of Irish Catholic mothers. As a symbol of the selfless mother, Una Costello in *Pray for the Wanderer* is expecting her sixth child. Una's feelings on this matter echo those expressed by Father Malachi on the duty to God of raising a family, as she explains her perceived duties to her brother-in-law, Matt: "We're still Catholics here, you know, and believe that man is a spirit, and that it is our duty to go on propagating him to the glory of God." (O'Brien, *Pray*, 139) According to Catholic teaching, the purpose of Catholic marriages is for the provision of children and it is considered natural and dutiful to welcome children into the world. Code 1013 of the 1917 Code of Canon Law states: "The Primary end of marriage is the procreation and education of children: the secondary end is mutual help and a remedy for concupiscence" (Quoted in Fuller, 195). The theologian Uta Ranke-Heinemann argues in *Eunuchs for Heaven: The Catholic Church and Sexuality*, that "the secondary end" of marriage originated from Augustine's misinterpretation of Saint Paul's words. In his first letter to the Corinthians where Saint Paul was responding to questions raised by the people of Corinth, the dilemma raised was whether sexual intimacy was compatible with a life in Christ. Paul wrote: "Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. This I say by way of concession, not of command." (I *Corinthians* 7:5) While Paul clearly places a high value on celibacy, he does not condemn sexuality, as he acknowledges that people are given different "gift[s] from God" (7:7). Neither does he discuss the matter on the grounds of reproduction in this passage, but rather, he writes, "it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (7:9). Ranke-Heinemann explains that Augustine misinterpreted Paul's responses to "describ[e] non-generative marital intercourse as requiring forgiveness, in other words, sinful" (Ranke-Heinemann, 236).

In the Irish Church, Episcopal writings address the issue of contraception, thereby implicitly indicating that it was a topic of contention. In 1938, for instance, Bishop Browne of Galway had strong words for those who advocated birth control, which the historian Peter Martin draws attention to in his study of censorship, *Censorship in the Two Irelands 1922-1939*. In the *Catholic Truth Quarterly*, Bishop Browne wrote that such people "regard motherhood exactly as a prostitute does,

something to be avoided at all costs” (Browne quoted in Martin, 297).⁵⁵ In the context of the Catholic function of marriage, any interference with the process of reproduction could only be viewed as wrong. The Church condemned all family planning and the State imposed this teaching with the 1935 Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, Section 17, which prohibited the sale, advertising or importation of contraceptives. In addition, under the Censorship of Publications Act, 1929, the publication, distribution and selling of literature advocating birth control was prohibited.⁵⁶ Of course, there was the added dimension of nationalism here, as Kathryn A. Conrad argues in *Locked in the Family Cell: Gender, Sexuality and Political Agency in Irish National Discourse*:

Any threat to the secure reproduction of the ideal citizen of the nation – any attempt to breach the family cell – means that the advocates of national reproduction must work, and have worked, to contain women’s reproductive agency through regulation of the private sphere (Conrad, 18).

As a result, the welfare of children born to families unable to care for them emotionally or financially overrode ideological concerns. Such situations are acknowledged by the expression of pity and sympathy in the encyclicals, but the concern to prevent interference with the “natural process” of the conception of children is of primary importance. In the encyclical, *Casti Connubii*, Pius XI wrote:

Holy Mother Church very well understands and clearly appreciates all that is said regarding the health of the mother and the danger to her life. And who would not grieve to think of these things? Who is not filled with the greatest admiration when he sees a mother risking her life with heroic fortitude, that she may preserve the life of the offspring which she has conceived? God alone, all bountiful and all merciful as He is, can reward her for the fulfilment of the office

⁵⁵ See the *Catholic Truth Quarterly*. 1.5 (July-Sept, 1938): 6. Bishop Browne was only 41 years old when he was appointed Bishop of Galway and Kilmacduagh. He served a lengthy reign, 1937 to 1976, and was chiefly concerned with and prolific on the subjects of censorship, public intoxication at the Galway Races (a campaign that lasted seven years), immodesty in dress and mixed bathing at Salthill (the latter subject catapulted him onto the world press in Ireland, the UK and the USA in 1959), as well as the grave moral risks posed by dancehalls and the cinema. According to Sean Fahey of the *Connaught Tribune*, who wrote Browne’s obituary in February 1980, Browne’s motivation was that if one had something to say, it should be directed at the widest possible audience. In a recent paper, the historian James Donnelly made the point that the duration and intensity of the above campaigns suggests a gap between hierarchal pronouncements on morality and people’s actual behaviour when attending the Galway Races and bathing at Salthill. From a paper entitled, “Bishop Browne of Galway and the Shaping of Public Morality”, delivered by James Donnelly (University of Wisconsin) at “Catholicism and Public Cultures”, Conference, IADT, 17-19 June 2009.

⁵⁶ Details from the Censorship of Publications Act (1929) and Criminal Law (Amendment) Act (1935) are taken from Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950*, p. 195.

allotted to her by nature, and will assuredly repay her in a measure full to overflowing. (Section 58 in Carlen, Vol. 3, 400)

The conflict between Church ethos and the physical toll on women of multiple pregnancies is explored throughout O'Brien's texts, as reflected in *Without My Cloak* when Molly Considine, aged thirty-four, dies giving birth to her ninth child (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 120-3). The topic of the consequences of repeated pregnancy and childbirth, introduced in *Without my Cloak*, continued to be a preoccupation throughout O'Brien's fiction. In *Pray for the Wanderer*, for instance, Matt Costello, on hearing of his sister-in-law's sixth pregnancy, is concerned for Una's existing children: "But it isn't fair to them – to exhaust yourself, to grow ill and old—" (O'Brien, *Pray*, 138) However, the concern expressed by Matt suggests empathy with the child rather than with the mother, as Matt reiterates his concern to his brother Will, Una's husband: "But look at us. Seven of us grew up – there were ten originally, I think – to find both our parents dead at the moment we most needed them." (138)

In the matter of the policing of women's bodies, the Church and State were in harmony, as the Church had much authority in its dealings with the State's Local Government and Health Department. The most striking example is the Church's "concern" with the education of women in matters gynaecological, that might take place outside the remit of Church teaching. Although O'Brien had raised the subject of contraception in her fiction long before the Mother and Child controversy, the episode demonstrates the power of the Church and its assumption about taking charge in matters deemed important to Catholic interests. A short summary of the controversy thus serves to contextualise the radical nature of O'Brien's inclusion of the topic, the moral and physical risks in having some of her heroines partake in sexual encounters, as well as the dramatising of the discourse in the portrayal of Molly Considine in *Without My Cloak*. The 1945 Public Health Bill was presented at a time when infectious diseases were rife and child mortality high. There was acute deprivation among certain sections of the population and serious measures needed to be taken. As a result, the Bill was concerned with TB, typhus and venereal disease, the latter rising alarmingly in 1944. The infant mortality rate peaked in 1944 with 79 deaths in every 1000 children born, and up to 1950; maternal mortality remained at over 100 deaths per year, with 234 and

208 maternal deaths in 1938 and 1940 respectively.⁵⁷ There was an obvious need for State intervention, but serious delays and procrastination proved to be the hallmark of the enacting of Health Bills. A separate Department for Health was set up in 1946, necessitating a new Health Bill that would apply solely to the new Department. The proposal giving local authorities the responsibility for the education of mothers and children with regard to health would prove to be the nub of the oncoming contention from the Hierarchy. Attention was drawn to the matter by Dr. James McPolin, the County Medical Officer of Health for Limerick, and an influential member of the executive council of the Irish Medical Association. Dr. McPolin's campaign moved the arguments about the Bill from objections based on medical grounds to ones based on moral grounds. He wrote a series of articles in the Association's journal in 1946, articles which argued, as the economist Ruth Barrington writes in *Health, Medicine and Politics in Ireland 1900-1970*, "that a state medical service contravened the moral law" (Barrington, 180). In this way, the proposed Health Bill became a Church affair.

The Hierarchy's fear with regard to the education of women proposed by the new Health Act was that it would include information on contraception and abortion. Doctors in Britain had favoured such inclusions in the British health reforms of the same period. Additionally, the areas dealing with the family, health and education were felt by the Church to be their domain. Barrington draws attention to an extraordinary incident, from a contemporary point of view, which preceded the 1945 Health Bill and which illustrates the extent of the Hierarchy's fears about contraception. The Archbishop referred to in the quotation below is Dr. McQuaid, while Dr. Ward served as the parliamentary secretary to Sean MacEntee, Minister for Local Government and Public Health, who had been given responsibility for health in 1944. Barrington writes:

During the Easter meeting of the Hierarchy in 1944, the use of the new sanitary tampons, called 'Tampax', had been discussed and the bishops had strongly disapproved. The Archbishop of Dublin was instructed to contact Dr Ward to explain their misgivings that the tampons could harmfully stimulate girls at an impressionable age and lead to the use of contraceptives and whether he would

⁵⁷ See Table 5.2 in Caitriona Clear. *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000, p. 115.

take action to prohibit their sale. Dr Ward, sharing the bishops' misgivings, acceded to the request. (Barrington, 149)⁵⁸

It seems an extraordinary topic of concern, from a modern perspective, at a time when the country was riddled with infectious diseases, especially tuberculosis, when material deprivation was widespread and when infant mortality was at a peak due to poor hygiene and medical care. However, it serves to emphasise the obsessive, and one could argue perverse, concern with women's issues by the Hierarchy. With women as the perpetuators of the Catholic ethos, it was important to the Hierarchy that women emulated the self-less role assigned to them in Church writings. Moreover, this particular model of woman required a certain standard of material benefits in order for the role of full-time mother in the home to be sustained. As the majority of Church personnel were from the middle classes, middle-class concerns were predominant, and the nature of the discussions to follow, demonstrates a singular lack of identification with the poorer classes and their concerns.

The controversy concerning the education of mothers continued into the 1950s and came to a head in what became known as the Mother and Child Scheme, whereby the Church made its most decisive strike on the issue. O'Brien did not directly confront the topic in her last two novels, published in 1953 and 1958 respectively. In her penultimate novel, *The Flower of May*, set in 1906, Fanny Morrow does not have a love affair, and spends most of the novel abroad, while in O'Brien's final novel, *As Music and Splendour*, set in the late eighteen hundreds, the setting is firmly European, and the love affairs are framed in the discourse of sin. In the latter novel, for instance, Clare Halvey, when contemplating her friend Rose's first love affair, "often prayed, boldly and anxiously against Heaven's rule, for Heaven's protection of their tricky and delicate first love" (O'Brien, *Music*, 171). A short summary of the Mother and Child Scheme controversy, which has been well documented by the political analyst J. H. Whyte in *Church and State in Modern Ireland: 1923-1970*, among others, illustrates the Church's strong feelings about State interference in the life of the family, its fears about the education of women with regard to contraception, as well as the extent of the Church's belief in its right to intervene in State affairs. On 11 October 1950, Dr. Noel Browne,

⁵⁸ Details given to Ruth Barrington by John H. Whyte from an interview conducted between the latter and Dr. F. C. Ward, on 18 June 1966, during research for the first edition of Whyte's *Church and State in Modern Ireland: 1923-1970*.

Minister for Health, was summoned to the Episcopal palace to discuss the Public Health Bill with Archbishop McQuaid. He was instructed to come alone.⁵⁹ McQuaid was accompanied by Dr. James Staunton, Bishop of Ferns, and Secretary to the Hierarchy, as well as Dr. Michael Browne, Bishop of Galway, whose views on those who engaged in contraceptive practices were quoted earlier. The summons of the Minister to the palace is in itself an indication of McQuaid's perception of the balance of power. McQuaid read aloud the letter that had been prepared for the Taoiseach by the bishops to Dr. Browne. The scheme was in their view, directly opposed to the rights of the family and the individual, and Barrington writes: "[T]hey expressed particular concern about the education of women for motherhood... Gynaecological care could, they argued, include instruction on contraception and abortion" (Barrington, 210). The letter, which is reproduced in Noel Browne's autobiography, *Against the Tide*, continues:

Education in regard to motherhood includes instruction in regard to sex relations, chastity and marriage. The State has no competence to give instruction in such matters. We regard with the greatest apprehension the proposal to give to local medical officers the right to tell Catholic girls and women how they should behave in regard to this sphere of conduct at once so delicate and sacred. (Browne, 158)

This passage clearly, although implicitly, places the responsibility for "sex relations, chastity and marriage" on women alone, an edict represented in *Without My Cloak* by a remark about the nature of Father Tom Considine's sermons, made by his nephew: "He's a holy terror about the way girls should conduct themselves" (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 297). Moreover, in the same novel, the moral nature of the relationship between the peasant girl, Christina Roche and the wealthy Considine heir, Denis, is placed solely in Christina's charge:

A word from Christina now, from that chaste, Catholic Christina, whose wish it was to serve God and be holy, would have brought Denis back, quick as an arrow, from his uncalculating, passionate purpose. A word from Christina would have saved the flower that was in danger. (308)

⁵⁹ The Public Health Bill was in fact already law since 1947. Dr. Browne was introducing an Amendment Bill to the Health Act passed by Fianna Fáil in 1947.

There is no indication in the text that Denis is equally in a position to bring a stop to their mutual journey into “danger”.

Minister Browne addressed and clarified the matters objected to by the Hierarchy and left the meeting under the mistaken impression that the Archbishop was satisfied both with his explanations and his intentions with regard to the scheme. On that basis, the Minister forged ahead with the Bill. However, continuing difficulties made it clear to Browne that he needed to re-address the matter with the bishops. At a subsequent meeting with Archbishop McQuaid on 22 March 1951, Browne agreed to present a memorandum to the Hierarchy and did so addressing the problematic areas in great detail.⁶⁰ He ended the memorandum with a request for the Bishops’ judgement as to whether the scheme was in fact contrary to Catholic *moral* teaching, as a theologian had privately advised Minister Browne that it was not.⁶¹ The Hierarchy, however, ignored the word, moral, and pronounced the scheme contrary to Catholic *social* teaching. The slippage between the terms “moral” and “social” allowed the Hierarchy to evade ambiguities and contradictions in their stance. It is a slippage reflected in O’Brien’s texts, as her female characters negotiate the social implications of moral edicts within the parameters of familial roles. Browne wrote: “The conscientious Catholic sins if he transgresses against Catholic moral teaching. There is no such sanction attached to Catholic social teaching, which varies from one period in history to another.” (Browne, 164) The Bishops were not questioned by anyone other than Minister Browne on the distinction between the terms “moral” and “social”, and continued with their objection to the Mother and Child scheme.

The Hierarchy’s main objection rested on the proposal of the dropping of a Means Test, whereby all mothers and children would be entitled to health care, whatever their status. The right of the family over any State provision such as education, health, welfare is stressed in Catholic Social Teaching. As such, the parents are obligated to provide for their family. By eliminating the Means Test, the Hierarchy argued, a family would be deprived of the right to provide for themselves as the State

⁶⁰ See Appendix B in Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland: 1923-1979*, pp. 438-445.

⁶¹ An indication of the perceived power of the Bishops at this time is suggested by the fact that Noel Browne did not reveal the identity of the theologian, at the latter’s request. Moreover, this request was upheld in the updated edition of Dr. Browne’s book published in 2007. See Noel Browne. *Against the Tide*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2007.

would be undertaking that role. Of course, this stance does not consider the parents who are unable to provide for their family, another consequence of the dominance of middle-class considerations. In contrast, Minister Browne, as a product of a poor working-class family, unlike the majority of his colleagues and the Hierarchy, was concerned for those people who did not have the means to provide for their families. In addition, the Hierarchy could not approve, they informed Browne, of a scheme whereby the State could control, as Barrington quotes,

a sphere so delicate and so intimately concerned with morals as that which deals with gynaecology or obstetrics and with the relations between doctor and patient [and which] lessened the proper initiative of individuals and associations and the undermining of self reliance. (Barrington, 217)

The irony of the latter part of this comment, given women's lack of agency over their own fertility, is profound, as self reliance in this instance is concerned with the family and not the individual woman in the family. With this statement, Barrington argues, the bishops "seem to have placed less emphasis on the moral dangers and more on the social consequences of the scheme" (218). The social consequences became evident in the following decades with the large numbers of single people who did not have the financial means to establish a family. This resulted in high levels of emigration, as parents were unable to provide for their children. The controversy reveals how class distinctions in Irish society were observed, as upholding Catholic Social Teaching tenets in this regard, suppressed debate on the failure of the newly Independent State's ability to provide for many of its citizens.

As mentioned earlier, Minister Browne saw the distinction between moral and social teaching as crucial to the implementation of the scheme. However, his fellow government ministers did not, and as a result of the bishops' objections, the government decided not to proceed with the scheme. Dr. Browne resigned as Minister for Health on 11 April 1951, but he took the unprecedented step of releasing correspondence on the scheme to the press.⁶² This caused a furore with the public and initiated, Whyte wrote,

⁶² For transcripts of this correspondence, see Appendix B in Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland: 1923-1979*. In addition, the front page and page three of the city edition of *The Irish Times* of 12 April 1951 was recently reproduced in *The Irish Times*, 27 June 2009, pp. 14-5. The headline reads: "Dr. Browne Replaced by Mr. Costello: Minister's Scheme Killed by Hierarchy Ruling". See also Dr. Noel Browne's account of the affair in *Against the Tide*, Chapters 9, 10, 11.

“the most extended debate on Church-State relations that had ever taken place in independent Ireland” (Whyte, 241). The Church was taken aback at the anger directed at their interference in what was considered to be the State’s business, and the public reaction caused the Hierarchy to be more circumspect into the future. It also indicated a sea change in what could be discussed in the media, as hitherto very little of the debate had been in the public domain, leaving most women unaware of the controversy.⁶³ Whyte wrote that while loyalty to the Church was strong, an unusual feature of Irish Catholicism at the time was the fact that Irish Catholics with regard to the Church and politics were “able to compartmentalise their loyalties, and to accept the Church’s authority unquestioningly in one sphere at the very time that they challenge[d] it in another” (Whyte, 12).⁶⁴ *Pray for the Wanderer*, in particular, confronts the growing influence of the Church in Ireland. For instance, Tom Mahoney recounts a tale to the visiting playwright, Matt Costello, about a man seen going into a local brothel who is sacked from his job two days later. Mellick, he tells Matt, “is going to be run on decent lines, or we’re all going to know the reason why. Did you think you’d come to the land of the free?” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 46-7)

⁶³ See Clear, *Women of the House*, p. 213.

⁶⁴ Shortly afterwards, the multi-party government, under the leadership of J. A. Costello, fell and Éamon de Valera was returned to power as Taoiseach. The latter showed a more astute handling of the bishops. His intervention before the bishops issued a public statement outlining their objections to the scheme, despite the earlier public furore, evaded further controversy. He succeeded in persuading them to have the letter retrieved. Barrington writes that what was significant at this juncture was that de Valera “accepted only that the bishops had a right to make their views known [as opposed to having the right] to determine what was acceptable health policy” (Barrington, 242). See Ruth Barrington. *Health, Medicine and Politics in Ireland 1900-1970*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1987. This was very different to the stance taken by the former Taoiseach, J. A. Costello, who after Minister Browne’s resignation had claimed in the Dáil that the government was willing, with regard to the proposed Health Bill, “to defer to the judgement so given by the hierarchy that the particular scheme in question is opposed to Catholic social teaching” (Costello quoted in Fuller, 76). However, Fuller argues that de Valera did not ignore the Hierarchy but “in relation to the re-introduction of the health legislation, close consultation was engaged in with the bishops, in order to arrive at proposals which were satisfactory from their point of view” (78). In his account of the controversy, Dr. Browne agrees with this assessment, as the Bill did not become law until its tenets were decided in the Bishops’ favour. The Bill became law in October 1953.

Conclusion

I argue that the portrayal of mothers and mother-child relationships in O'Brien's fiction challenges Constitutional and Church dictums on women's "nature" by suggesting that women are not, in every case, completely fulfilled by caring for children or fully judicious in the dispensing of love for each child. In addition, the texts also represent situations in which the mother is not the "natural" carer in a child's life. In *Without My Cloak*, for instance, a father plays a formative role in a child's life, while in *The Land of Spices*, it is a nun who concerns herself with the emotional welfare of Anna Murphy. By suggesting throughout her fiction that any adult can be the "natural" carer of a child, O'Brien questioned Church edicts on women's "nature" by engaging with the perception of motherhood as being all encompassing as well as the notion of all mothers as fonts of unstinting and unselfish love. In this way, O'Brien explored mothers as transmissional vessels of Church-State ideology. It seems that the death of O'Brien's mother at a young age may have contributed to her life-long fascination with mothers and mothering, as her fiction places the mother centre-stage. Of interest is how O'Brien contrasts the offspring of motherless children (good) with those who have been "mothered" in ideologically sanctioned ways. O'Brien's fictional mothers are either "dreamy" like Julia Morrow in *The Flower of May*, "smother mothers" like Teresa Mulqueen in *The Ante-Room* and Hannah Kernahan in *The Last of Summer*, or preoccupied with marital worries like Caroline Lanigan in *Without My Cloak* and Maud Murphy in *The Land of Spices*. O'Brien also explores the trope of the absent mother in *Mary Lavelle* and in *As Music and Splendour*. There is only one apparently "perfect" mother figure, that of Una Costello in *Pray for the Wanderer*, and she is used as a cipher to critique the cultural ethos needed to sustain the selfless woman as portrayed in the Irish Constitution. In this context, negotiating the family structure, "as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society", is an essential element for the attempting or attaining of selfhood for O'Brien's fictional characters.

In *Without My Cloak*, *The Ante-Room*, *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer*, O'Brien's female characters ultimately remain in the extended family as mothers, wives or single women. In *Mary Lavelle*, *The Land of Spices* and *As Music and Splendour*, the focus is on the experiences of women outside the extended family.

Favourable circumstances ensure that the heroine in *The Flower of May* can live outside the family, whereas the daughter of the Kernahan household in *The Last of Summer*, makes a deliberate choice to leave the family. The mothers in O'Brien's fiction do not have a role other than that of motherhood, and furthermore, O'Brien does not depict women having other roles once the experience of motherhood had been embarked upon.⁶⁵ In the texts, O'Brien appears to share an intellectual contempt with Simone de Beauvoir as expressed in *The Second Sex*, for women who choose reproduction, despite a more sympathetic portrayal of motherhood. In *Pray for the Wanderer*, there is a scene in which Father Malachi champions the establishing of families, saying, "There is a clear faith, a definite duty to God, in the raising of a family." (O'Brien, *Pray*, 119) In reply, the hero of the novel, Matt Costello, acknowledges this: "But I allow that, for those who feel it" (119). Matt's remark allows a space for those who do *not* "feel it", and also draws attention to the idea that not all women share this religious belief. Moreover, Matt's remark challenges the notion that all women are "naturally" fulfilled by motherhood. This is dramatised in *Without My Cloak* when Caroline Lanigan, after twenty unhappy years of marriage and having reared six children, is overcome by feelings of frustration and runs away. In her brother's house in London, she meets a potential lover, Richard Froud, but is unable to act on her personal desires. She explains the irrevocability of the marriage vows she exchanged with her husband, James, telling Richard: "I took him for better, for worse! [...] Isn't it terrible how there's no getting away from that?" (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 195) A close reading of O'Brien's fiction suggests, in Boland's words that "[i]t was the individual woman who interested her rather than the community of womanhood. And in the individual woman it was the interaction between sexuality and selfhood that caught her particular attention." (Boland in *OPD*, 22) This thesis would add that it is the "interaction between sexuality and selfhood", caught at the intersection between the discourses of Church and State regulation and

⁶⁵ Sylvia Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963, demonstrates the endurance of the ideology about combining motherhood with other roles. In that novel, Plath's heroine, Esther Greenwood, struggles, and ultimately, fails, as she becomes conscious of herself as a woman, to combine the lifestyle of writer with that of wife and mother. The predominance of the concept of the conflict of combining a career with motherhood is stressed throughout the novel. Esther's boyfriend, Buddy Willard, tells Esther that she will feel differently about writing when she has children and will not want "to write poems any more" (Plath, 69). Later, a famous woman poet at Esther's college is horrified when Esther tells her that someday she might get married and have children: "But what about your *career*?" she had cried" (180). Esther explains her feelings on the matter to her psychiatrist: "A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line" (181). In other words, a career and motherhood are perceived of as two distinct life choices. See Sylvia Plath. *The Bell Jar*. New York: Buccaneer Books, 1971.

“modern” ideas of equality and freedom of expression from outside Ireland, that “caught her attention”.

Although the conflict between religious belief in relation to the acceptance of children and “unchecked fecundity” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 109) is unresolved in O’Brien’s texts, what is of importance in terms of this thesis, is the issue of female autonomy in this regard, as O’Brien portrays such dilemmas in the texts as matters for the individual conscience, thereby challenging the authority of Church and State to interfere in what, in her fiction, is a private matter. In *Mary Lavelle*, for instance, Mary makes the decision to take the married son of her employer as a lover. She does so in full knowledge of it being a sin and in the expectation of retribution, as a believer should expect: “The central sin against Catholic teaching would be her affair and Heaven’s.” (O’Brien, *Lavelle*, 257) The brief summary of the historical context to the policing of women’s bodies in the matter of contraception in Ireland, brings to the fore the difficulty for those living in Ireland during the first half of the twentieth century, given the contravention against natural law, religious edicts and the State’s upholding of such edicts, to see contraception as anything other than unnatural. In her account of the Irish Housewives Association, Hilda Tweedy mentions that as late as 1974, the IHA had no consensus amongst their members on the issue of family planning.⁶⁶ There is no doubt that continuous childbirth played a significant role in the shaping of Irish women’s lives and in their exclusion from public roles in society. The Mother and Child scheme controversy illustrates how the division between private and public spheres could be problematic. By being relegated to the private sphere, the significant public consequences of health and welfare issues were not addressed, despite the fact that population growth and social and economic development are inextricably linked. Thus, the Church is seen to rarely contribute to matters pertaining to women and children, such as violence, sexual abuse, all types of discrimination and disproportionate responsibilities in the home, but in fact, its contribution in ideological terms is immeasurable. The brief overview of the social, historical, political and religious context of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century provides the backdrop to the analysis of O’Brien’s dramatisations of women’s search for self-determination in her fiction, as Catholic tenets on the “nature” of women, as well as their role in the family,

⁶⁶ See Hilda Tweedy. *A Link in the Chain: The Story of the Irish Housewives’ Association 1942-1992*. Dublin: Attic Press, 1992, pp. 57-8.

which served the “common good” of society, were incorporated into the 1937 Irish Constitution, and were used as a frame by O’Brien for the exploration of women’s role in the family.

CHAPTER TWO

MOTHER

Introduction

In this chapter I examine treatments of motherhood in the following novels, *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer*. In *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, the literary theorist Declan Kiberd uses the trope of familial relationships as a symbol for the replacement of the old regimes with the new, in the context of the period of the Revival, arguing that the Revival period signified “a revolt by angry sons against discredited fathers” (Kiberd, 380). If we apply Kiberd’s analogy to O’Brien’s work, we can see that much of her fiction is about the daughter who revolts against the “discredited” mother, as well as Mother Ireland, when daughters revolt against mothers. Kiberd suggests that O’Brien opines in her texts that “the family in Ireland had become a trap which many spirited women would want to avoid” (408). My focus in this chapter is not on the daughters, who have received considerable critical attention to date, but on the mothers. None of the mother characters under discussion function as the protagonist, but their effect on the plot and the psychological ripples of their relationships to others are pivotal to the lives and struggles of others, and their function within the text, as background for the lives of others, echoes the expected “ideal role” of the mother of the 1937 Irish Constitution.

As Tom Inglis argues in *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*, the dominant discourse of motherhood provides a nexus for the convergence of State and religious discourses. While the main female protagonists in O’Brien’s fiction are rarely mothers, the mother characters in her novels provide a most fruitful site for reading O’Brien’s psychological critique of the matrygynist bias of the 1937 Irish Constitution. The mothers in her fiction are a crucial facet of family dynamics, and moreover, have a significant impact on their children; their selflessness is not only central to family life, but the price paid for others because of this, provides significant direction for each of the novels under discussion. As Adele Dalsimer wrote in *Kate O’Brien: A Critical Study*: “As mothers, Kate O’Brien’s characters, denied education, careers, even political opinions, frequently lost themselves in the lives of their children.” (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, xv) O’Brien’s fiction explores why this was so, and her work suggests that mothers were inculcated to such mothering practices by powerful Church and State discourses. In this way, O’Brien subjects the mother and

family dynamics to a political critique. The different mother figures under discussion show that O'Brien questioned whether women could be totally fulfilled by the selflessness expected of them in this role. While the texts suggest various outlets for the surplus energies that might be retained after childbirth and childrearing is done, the mothers in O'Brien's fiction do not relinquish the role they have taken on. In "'Oh Mother Where Art Thou?' Irish Mothers and Irish Fiction in the Twentieth Century", the journalist and novelist Áine McCarthy notes the following pattern in Irish fictional accounts of motherhood:

The most cursory examination of the representation of mothers in Irish fiction reveals three widely, almost obsessively, reproduced stereotypes: Good Mammy, an idealised mother figure (dutiful, self-sacrificing paragon, devoted to God and family, provider of selfless love and good dinners); Moaning Mammy, her negative counterpart (whining or silent martyr, drained by her feckless/alcoholic husband and enormous brood of children); and the type that Irish-American novelist J. T. Farrell (1929) dubbed the 'Smother Mother', a dominant matriarch who insists on her children's adherence to her principles. (McCarthy in Kennedy, 97)

The mothers in O'Brien's fiction that I discuss in this chapter can be seen to conform to these types. This chapter turns its critical attention to Una Costello in *Pray for the Wanderer*, as an example of McCarthy's "Good Mammy", and to use J. T. Farrell's term as referred to by McCarthy, the "Smother Mother", best represented by Hannah Kernahan in *The Last of Summer*. Both types, as set out by McCarthy, are derived from the model that reflected conservative aspirations in the 1937 Constitution, but the expectations of women that underwrote the Constitution were not wholly specific to Ireland, as Liam O'Dowd argues, but part of a broader, European conservative movement, as in "Church, State and Women: The Aftermath of Partition", he writes that the contraction of Irish women's role "should be understood against a wider international movement of reaction and retrenchment in the inter-war period" (O'Dowd in Curtin et al, 4). Despite being part of a wider tendency, such demands had a specific inflection in Ireland due to the powerful, ideological influence of the Catholic Church, and given the negative perspective adapted by the papacy towards women working outside the home, only the woman who worked in the home could enjoy, as Pius XI (1922-39) put it in *Casti Connubii*, "her truly regal throne to which she has been raised within the walls of the home by means of the Gospel" (Section 75 in Carlen, Vol. 3, 403). The implied aspirational comparison with the mother of Jesus is clear.

Additionally, in this encyclical, Pius XI made the prospect of paid labour and participation in the public sphere for women so unappealing as well as detrimental to the family, that to do so appeared to fly in the face of one's moral authority.

The possibility of mothers participating in the public sphere was not only of concern to Pius XI. In “*Rerum novarum* and its Critics on Social and Sexual Hierarchies”, Barbara E. Wall writes: “Leo XIII placed great emphasis on human dignity, especially on the importance of work as a vehicle for the fulfilment of human nature” (Wall in McHugh and Natale, 367). However, this cannot be taken at face value as “work” here refers to labour in the public sphere only and as such, work that has rights attached to it.¹ Moreover, in *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) identified men as workers and women as non-workers. The attribution of value to work carried out only outside the home supports Kate Millett's claim in *Sexual Politics* that “sex is a status category with political implications” (Millett, 24). As a result, Millett argues, domestic and personal service “has no market value” (41). In this way, women's work was downgraded and their contribution to the economic status of a family undervalued, and capitalism depends for its confirmed success on their being no economic reward for women's labour in the home. The value placed on men's labour is in stark contrast to the selfless role assigned to and expected from women in the home. Pope Pius XI's words incorporating these matters in the encyclical, *Casti Connubii*, is worth reproducing at length, as in it he espoused the view that as woman “owes” obedience to her husband, any form of “emancipation” threatens her commitment to “the burdensome duties properly belonging to a wife as companion and mother”, as woman's “attention” should be focused on the home and those who reside in it. O'Brien's fictional depiction of mothers appears to literalise Pius XI's views, especially Una Costello in *Pray for the Wanderer*. By faithfully drawing the results of such limits on women's spirit and rights, O'Brien highlights the fallacy of assuming that all women aspire to the vocation of homemaking, as well as the injustice of the self-erasing expectations the Church and State had of homemakers. Pius XI wrote:

¹ The public/private dichotomy was reflected in Irish census data, as women engaged in labour on farms were not included in the “productive” work category. See Maria Luddy. “Women and Work in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Ireland: An Overview” in Bernadette Whelan. Ed. *Women and Paid Work in Ireland, 1500–1930*. Dublin: Four Courts, 2000, pp. 44-56. See also Rosemary Cullen Owens. *A Social History of Women in Ireland 1870-1970*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2005, Chapter 9.

The same false teachers who try to dim the lustre of conjugal faith and purity do not scruple to do away with the honourable and trusting obedience which the woman owes to the man. Many of them go even further and assert that such a subjection of one party to the other is unworthy of human dignity, that the rights of husband and wife are equal: wherefore, they boldly proclaim the emancipation of women has been or ought to be effected. This emancipation in their ideas must be threefold, in the ruling of the domestic society, in the administration of family affairs and in the rearing of the children. It must be social, economic, physiological: – physiological, that is to say, the woman is to be freed at her own good pleasure from the burdensome duties properly belonging to a wife as companion and mother (We have already said that this is not an emancipation but a crime); social, inasmuch as the wife being freed from the cares of children and family, should, to the neglect of these, be able to follow her own bent and devote herself to business and even public affairs; finally economic, whereby the woman even without the knowledge and against the wish of her husband may be at liberty to conduct and administer her own affairs, giving her attention chiefly to these rather than to children, husband and family. (Section 74 in Carlen, Vol. 3, 402)

As well as reflecting natural law theory, Pius XI's concerns about "the emancipation of women" was a direct attack on women either working outside the home or validating their own needs, as Pius XI suggested that family life would be destroyed if a mother worked outside the home.² Pius XI justifies his conviction on the grounds that by caring for children, spouses and the home, women serve the "common good", the same term used in Article 41.2.1 of the 1937 Constitution.³ As well as suggesting that some measure of inequality is tolerable, and that selflessness is expected, the above extract also appears to doubt that woman is, of herself, capable of making moral decisions with regard to herself, her family or the wider community. These sentiments about the "protection" of those deemed "weaker" are reflected in the Constitution. Article 45 states:

<i>Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937. Article 45, Directive Principles of Social Policy</i>		
4	1	The State pledges itself to safeguard with especial care the economic interests of the weaker sections of

² His successor, Pius XII (1939-58), expressed a similar view on women's roles, writing that a woman's natural function and disposition was motherhood. See *Acta Apostolicae Sedis (AAS)* 37 (1945), p. 287. (The *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* is an official monthly Vatican publication that prints the authoritative version of papal encyclicals).

³ Article 41.2.1 of the 1937 Irish Constitution states: "In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved" (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.2.1). See *Bunreacht na hÉireann*. Second Amendment Edition. Dublin: Government Publication Office [1937], 1942.

the community, and, where necessary, to contribute to the support of the infirm, the widow, the orphan, and the aged.

2 The State shall endeavour to ensure that the strength and health of workers, men and women, and the tender age of children shall not be abused and that citizens shall not be forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their sex, age or strength.

The phrase “to enter avocations unsuited to their sex” used in 45.4.2 allowed for the categorisation of jobs on the basis of gender, echoing Pope Leo XIII’s words in *Rerum Novarum* when he writes about “work unsuited to sex or age” (Section 35 in Carlen, Vol. 2, 250). Additionally, the term “where necessary”, used in Article 45.4.1, allowed leeway for interpretation, which the government used to its advantage, and to the disadvantage of women.⁴ For all the Constitutional aspirations to the protection of woman’s special role within the home, the reality was that many Irish women worked outside of the home by necessity.

Under the influence of Catholic Social Teaching, reflected in the country’s laws, women’s rights were negligible. From the 1924 and 1927 Juries Acts, which were designed to shield women from the unsavoury side of life by having them apply to sit on a jury, rather than being randomly selected as men were, through the 1925 Civil Service Regulation (Amendment) Bill, which curtailed women’s right to sit for all examinations in the Civil Service, to the 1929 Marriage Bar, which introduced compulsory retirement for married women teachers by 1932 and was eventually applied to the entire Civil Service, as well as the 1936 Conditions of Employment Act, which gave the government the right to limit the employment of women in any given industry,

⁴ One instance of this is with regard to the negotiation of payments for widows. Lindsey Earner-Byrne, writes that much of the debate concerning assistance for widows focused on “defining deserving rather than on applying patriarchal responsibility” (Earner-Byrne in Faragó and Sullivan, 33). Moreover, Earner-Byrne points out that there was no acknowledgement of “the notion that widows, as the wives of dead men, had a right to the domestic ideal championed in rhetoric and legislation” (36). In addition, widowers were not considered in this debate, which indirectly reflects the notion of the loss of a wife as being of no financial consequence, while at the same time, negating the work of a wife in the home. These examples suggest close connections on views of women’s role between Church and State. See Lindsey Earner-Byrne. “Parading their Poverty...’: Widows in Twentieth-Century Ireland” in Faragó, Borbála and Moynagh Sullivan. Eds. *Facing the Other: Interdisciplinary Studies on Race, Gender and Social Justice in Ireland*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 32-46.

working opportunities for married women were scaled back until it became the norm to stop working outside the home after marriage. Legislation had in fact assumed that the normal vocation of women was in marriage, motherhood and the home, and the series of legislation ensured that Catholic ideology on women's roles, which had been incorporated into the Constitution, and as similarly reflected in O'Brien's texts, became gradually introduced into the law of the land. In "The Constitution and the Role of Women", Yvonne Scannell details the cumulative effect of the promulgation of woman's "natural" role in the home. Scannell writes that women "were not entitled to unemployment allowances, because it was assumed that some man would provide for them" (Scannell, 128). She continues: "[T]he income of a married woman was deemed to be her husband's for tax purposes" (128-9). Furthermore, despite the contribution made by women to the "common good", up to the Succession Act in the 1960s, a married woman's husband, Scannell writes, "could legally disinherit her and leave her homeless in his will" (127). Legally, therefore, women in Ireland were not in an enviable position and there was no actual reward for their praiseworthy endeavours in the home. Legislation did, therefore, support the "ideal role" for woman as homemaker. Thus, in the home, woman was expected to exercise her "natural" vocation for which nature had intended her. The word "vocation", of course, has self-sacrificing connotations, as well as fiscal repercussions, for one is not paid for a vocation, and so, without a wage for her "homemaking", the "homemaker" supported the fledgling State with her unpaid labour, as well as having her own choices and mobility limited, thereby rendering her dependent in often debilitating ways on the goodwill of her husband.

Novels

This chapter examines the portrayal of motherhood in the following novels, *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer*.

Although Una Costello in *Pray for the Wanderer* is the main focus of this analysis, it is important to identify the narratorial lens through which she is mediated for the reader. The novel is narrated by Matt Costello, a successful writer, and in this novel, we have the most demonstrable instance of identifiable authorial politics across O'Brien's substantive body of fictional work. Lorna Reynolds, in *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, wrote: "The author herself is present ... as a man, a famous author

back in Ireland on a visit to his brother and sister-in-law” (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 76). Reynolds’ view is substantiated by Vivian Mercier, who knew Kate O’Brien personally and admired her work. In “Kate O’Brien”, Mercier wrote: “Miss O’Brien has clearly made her hero an author – and a banned one at that – so that through his mouth she may register her protest against modern Ireland’s love of censorship” (Mercier, 94-5). Certainly, questions of State and censorship are central to the novel, and aspects of this will be discussed further in the chapter, but Matt also functions to provide a focus on the family as enshrined in the Constitution, and to observe the debilitating effects of the restriction of choices to “homemaking” for women enshrined there too. Matt, a worldly, sophisticated and travelled man, retreats to his ancestral home in Mellick, O’Brien’s fictional Limerick, after the ending of a passionate affair with a married actress in London. Weir House is now occupied by his brother, Will, his wife, Una, and their five children. Much to Matt’s surprise, he becomes involved in the lives of this family, finds himself temporarily soothed by their tranquil lifestyle, and is attracted to Una’s sister, Nell Mahoney, who teaches world history through the Irish language. As the primary narrator, Matt’s observations, not only about Una, but also about choice and family life direct us to share his judgements and values. Throughout the novel, Matt argues the merits of individualism, art and the freedom to live life as one chooses. He also expresses the attraction of family ties, the lure of home and the familiar, as well as the difficulty of satisfying familial expectations when personal ambition does not concur with family wishes. The portrayal of Una Costello is politicised by the framing of the 1937 Irish Constitution as a central concern of Matt’s in *Pray for the Wanderer*, who serves as O’Brien’s commentator. Matt has several key sustained discussions that take place with Tom Mahoney, a relative of the Costello family and Tom’s friend, Father Malachi, about the social and religious atmosphere of Éamon de Valera’s Ireland to which Matt has returned. The debates are contextualised by the setting of the novel, which coincided with de Valera’s presentation of the 1937 draft Constitution. These conversations, between a lawyer and a priest, representatives of discursive legislative and religious authority in Ireland, and a writer, representative of a dissenting, interrogative visionary of words not tied to frameworks with other agendas, provide a testing ground, not only for explicit discussions about the new Constitution, but a prism for reading the other characters and the plot. Matt functions in the text as the moral centre in discussions about the Constitution, the “ideal” woman and the “ideal” family, as promoted in the 1937 Constitution, in Irish culture, and by the

tenets of Catholicism with its newly apparent strengths in society, as well as art and the place of the artist in Irish society. Although temporarily seduced by the peace and tranquillity of home, as a banned artist, Matt wondered, “Could he live in de Valera’s Ireland, where the artistic conscience is ignored?” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 98) Ultimately, he rejects the legislative and religious narrowness of the new State, and returns to London.

The novel itself escaped censorship, only narrowly it seems. The historian Diarmaid Ferriter writes in *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, that in the early 1950s, C. J. O’Reilly of the Censorship Board attempted to have *Pray for the Wanderer* prohibited, but he was overruled (Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*, 309).⁵ It would appear that in the 1930s, censorship criteria were framed in terms of sexuality, for despite the subversive but sustained attacks on Éamon de Valera and Irish cultural ideology throughout, the novel got past the censors. Eibhear Walshe, in “Lock Up Your Daughters: From Ante-Room to Interior Castle”, argues convincingly for *Pray for the Wanderer* as a confrontation with a “threatened patriarchal hegemony” (Walshe in *OPD*, 151). This confrontation is further demonstrated through the portrayal of the matriarch of the family in the novel, Una Costello. Dalsimer argued that O’Brien approved of Una and through her, approved also of the traditional, domestic role of women, as described in the Constitution. In a similar vein, Joan Ryan, in “Women in the Novels of Kate O’Brien: The Mellick Novels”, wrote that Una “can be considered as the stereotype wife and mother who runs the home with infinite patience, efficiency and love, living through others with no obvious impulses of her own” (Ryan in Kosok, 323). She too maintained that O’Brien approved of Una, and thus, of the traditional, domestic role of women, as rendered in Article 41.2.1 of the 1937 Constitution. Whilst there is much to support these views, I argue here that Una is not so sympathetically drawn, and that she is deliberately modelled on the “ideal role” of the homemaker, rendered in the 1937 Constitution in order to explore the implications of ideological parameters on women’s role in the family and in Irish society.

Each of the fictional mothers under discussion in this chapter has domestic help, as women of the dominant political class employed servants to look after the household and its children, and their role as labour-supported homemakers was the exception

⁵ C.J. O’Reilly was a conservative member of the Censorship Board of Publications, who served from 1951 to 1955. He taught Irish in St. Patrick’s Teacher Training College in Drumcondra.

rather than the norm. In *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961*, Caitriona Clear writes that the census figures of 1936 show that over 54 per cent of the female working population were engaged in agriculture or domestic service (Clear, *Women*, 14). Moreover, in "Women and Work in Nineteenth- And Early Twentieth-Century Ireland: An Overview", Maria Luddy writes: "Domestic service was considered to be a respectable form of employment and it was believed to provide good training for a woman when she married and set up her own home" (Luddy in Whelan, 52). Conditions varied widely and depended on the employer, as well as the number of staff employed in the house. For the middle-class woman, servants were a status symbol, as well as a mark of prosperity and respectability. Clear explains how this came about in *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, and writes:

The prosperous urban and rural middle classes increasingly defined themselves in terms of their standard of living and the status symbols they owned. Having a servant girl was not only a luxury, but an effective way of separating oneself from the classes from which servants girls were drawn. (Clear, *Nuns*, 17)

For the servant, Luddy writes: "[S]ervanthood meant living in a dependant and subordinate position in the home of people who were not only strangers, but of a different social class" (Luddy in Whelan, 53). Thus, women who were not of the middle classes would have worked ceaselessly in someone else's home.

Una, as representative of the middle class, has servants, and thus, she has the option of being able to hand over care of her children to her maid, Bridie, whenever she chooses (O'Brien, *Pray*, 65, 183). As a result, much of the labour of parenting is done by Bridie who is always to hand. Bridie's lower social class status is indicated in the text by her physical description: "A large red woman in a white apron appeared in the door-way." (10) Moreover, Bridie's florid complexion suggests physical exertion in contrast to Una's "unflurried blue eyes" (60) and "smooth white hand" (5), which is not roughened by physical labour. Furthermore, Bridie puts the children to bed while Una sits down to a dinner that has been prepared by her cook (10). Thus, the text situates Una as privileged and she is allowed to enjoy her children and their company without the attendant labour. Consequently, she is an indulgent mother, as expressed by her aunt, who raised Una, and who objects strongly to the non-disciplining of the Costello children. She tells Matt that she "deplored Una's method of bringing up children and

said that Liam's character was ruined beyond repair" (40). Una's position in the Costello family, therefore, is a microcosm of woman's status in the Constitutional model, grounded in middle-class terms, as although the characterisation of Una reflects the selflessness of the "ideal" woman of the Constitution, the text indicates that Una can live in this way because others work for her. Una has the time and the resources to "live for others" and "was no one's martyr and had no idea that there was need for a martyr in the cause of domestic happiness" (60). Una does not see that resting when she chooses or having meals prepared for her is a luxury only available to a certain class. Here, Una is a dramatisation of the model woman of the Constitution, represented "by her life within the home" (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.2.1). Of course, the selflessness involved in such a life can be seen as a form of martyrdom. Una is not forced by economic necessity to work outside the home; neither would she want to, judging by her inability to understand why her sister, Nell, continues to teach when it is not necessary for her financial survival (O'Brien, *Pray*, 19).

The middle-class credentials of the Costello family are rendered in a dinner table scene in which political party allegiances are discussed. Una tells Matt that she and Will "always vote for Fine Gael" (20).⁶ *Fine Gael*, as the party concerned with the restoration of law and order, stability and Commonwealth Status, was more attractive to the business world, professionals and prosperous farmers. Brian Fallon, in *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930–1960*, describes the first Independent Irish government as representing "a bourgeoisie which was moderately nationalist, law-abiding and constitutional, very Catholic in a special late-Victorian way, socially and culturally rather conservative, and highly class-conscious" (Fallon, 33).⁷ As the eldest of seven children, Matt's brother, Will, has inherited the ancestral home, and is a wealthy farmer. He tells Matt: "We dairy farmers are a power in the land now, my boy." (O'Brien, *Pray*, 31) Will, therefore, has benefited from de Valera's policies of economic nationalism, and a change of Government has had little effect on Will's daily life or his status.⁸

⁶ In 1933, *Cumann na nGaedheal*, the pro-Treaty party became *Fine Gael* (Tribe of the Gaels).

⁷ It was not until the 1970s that class structures in Ireland were transformed from ones based on family property to ones based on skills and educational qualifications, which in turn changed the perception of class superiority based on property ownership to one based on financial wealth.

⁸ The Civil War meant that political parties were dominated by national issues rather than community, social or economic concerns. See Basil Chubb. *The Government and Politics of Ireland*. 3rd edition. London: Longman [1970], 1992, Chapter Six.

Explicit political debate does not structure the next novel I discuss to such an extent, but tensions between an insular State and a wider world of possibility are explored through the semi-incestuous and inward-looking family relationships in *The Last of Summer*. The political context of the novel is Ireland's neutrality policy during the Second World War, and here, O'Brien employs a French woman, a visiting cousin, Angèle Maury, as commentator on the European position, with the matriarch, Hannah Kernahan, embodying the Irish stance. One of the main protagonists, Angèle Maury-Kernahan comes from outside the State to Ireland, but is positioned precariously at the edge of her late father's Irish family when she looks them up, while travelling with some friends in Ireland, just before World War Two is declared. Angèle's experiences in Ireland are a dramatisation, as Dalsimer suggested, of O'Brien's relationship with the Ireland that had rejected *The Land of Spices* (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, 74). Angèle, like Matt, as an outsider, is positioned as commentator on Hannah and the nature of the Kernahan family relationships, which are in tandem with her thoughts on Irish culture, and she is the only character in the text to draw direct conversational attention to the whole dimension of Hannah's disposition.

To her surprise and distress, Angèle finds that the three Kernahan cousins, Tom, Martin and Jo, are unaware of her existence, due to a mandate laid down by Ned, the late husband of her aunt-in-law, Hannah Kernahan.⁹ It appears that Hannah had been engaged to Angèle's father, Tom, who jilted her. Hannah then saved face by marrying Tom's brother, Ned, who was also in love with her. Afterwards, Tom went abroad, married a French actress, they had Angèle, and ties between the families were cut. Angèle's arrival is disruptive and her presence a provocative one in the family. But, despite this, in a similar vein to Matt Costello in *Pray for the Wanderer*, Angèle is initially seduced by the comfortable, familial life promised at Waterpark House, and the lure of putting the world and its concerns aside for a time. To Hannah's horror, Angèle and Tom fall in love. Thus, Angèle's falling in love with her cousin Tom, even though she has more in common with Tom's brother, Martin, who also falls in love with her, is a repeat of the similarly entangled romance in the previous Kernahan generation. By falling in love with her cousin, Tom, who shares the same name as her father, Angèle

⁹ The plot is taken from a family legend in O'Brien's own family recounted in her memoir (O'Brien, *P.P.*, 97-8). See Kate O'Brien. *Presentation Parlour*. 2nd ed. Dublin: Poolbeg, 1994.

expresses the wish to be part of the past, as Dalsimer wrote, “only to discover that it holds no place for her” (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, 74). Angèle and Tom’s relationship is subtly but intentionally destroyed by Hannah whose prudence in her handling of Tom’s love for Angèle displays an understanding of the nature of passion, as she never directly criticises Angèle in Tom’s hearing. Although Hannah is positioned in the text as an example of the “ideal” mother of the Constitution by her devoted companion, Dotey, and her “priest admirers”, her public persona is rendered in marked contrast to her behaviour in the private sphere of her home. The son to whom she is unhealthily devoted, Tom, shares the opinions of Dotey and the clergy, but Hannah’s second son, Martin, and her daughter, Jo, are compelled to love a mother whose flaws they cannot ignore, and the shadow side to the ideal is revealed through these relationships. It is only on Tom, who significantly shares his uncle’s name, that Hannah is able to bestow a similar devotion, and she is not prepared to be abandoned twice. In addition, Tom is the means for the deployment of Hannah’s sense of power, an abusive relationship about which Reynolds wrote: “This study of frustration finding compensation in power is new to Kate O’Brien’s work.” (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 80)

Hannah Kernahan, like Una, is of the middle classes, and the material comfort of the Kernahan family is rendered in the text with descriptions of good food, eaten in a dining room full of “old-fashioned silver and china” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 46). Meals are served by a servant, Delia, who “came into the room sometimes with a teapot or a dish of scones” (46). In addition, Hannah has a companion, Dotey. Dotey is a penniless, unmarried relative of Hannah’s and therefore, not paid for her services. Dotey, however, is grateful for the security her position with Hannah brings and is, consequently, “the one permanent nourisher of the now widely flourishing belief that Mrs. Kernahan was a wonder, a sainted widow and a martyr mother” (113). Dotey expresses her admiration of Hannah in pious terms, which elicit the wording in the Constitution, and situates Hannah’s class distinction in terms of her public persona:

And now look at her – the best of Catholic mothers, unselfish and devoted, a most charitable and perfect lady, a widow who had suffered many’s the dark trial all through her married life, and had had to keep her beautiful home together and bring up her children single-handed – an example to us all. (113)

As “the best of Catholic mothers”, Hannah reflects the selfless model woman of the Constitution, while the word “Catholic” evokes the similar model woman described in papal encyclicals, an image buttressed by the presence in the text of Hannah’s “priest-admirers” (113). The current “priest-admirer”, Father Gregory, is effusive in his praise of her and tells her son, Tom, that Hannah is ““A walking saint, Tom”” (58). These glowing reports by Father Gregory and Dotey affirm Hannah’s convincing performance as paragon of the family and the community. Moreover, as her status dictates, she is involved in local charitable committees: “[S]he sat on committees in Mellick – St. Vincent de Paul and the Legion of Mary: she attended personally to certain private charities which were a tradition of Waterpark” (180). Hannah maintains a façade of distinction in the local community by never going on foot to Drumaninch village. Moreover, the narrator recounts, she “disliked small talk” (107), preferring to hear news of village life from others. Hannah upholds her notion of her superior status from others especially when outside her home: “She went to Mass at her parish church every Sunday, and scattered her charming smile on friends and neighbours at the chapel gate, before she got into the Ford again and was quickly driven home.” (107-8)¹⁰

Accordingly, Hannah is in a similar economic position to Una Costello, in that they both have domestic help, a comfortable lifestyle, the leisure to enjoy past-time pursuits, and the time to enjoy the companionship of their children without the attendant drudgery that the majority of women of the house would be constantly engaged in. Like Una, Hannah has the economic means to ensure that “by her life within the home”, she will not be unsupported in the comfortable living of this concept. However, while Una is portrayed as “innocent” and “sheltered”, Hannah is more complex. In the absence of her husband, Hannah is dependent on her son to preserve the family model, and her sense of worth, which in her terms means the preservation of her son’s full attention as a spousal-type companion and as a business partner. Moreover, Hannah is aware of world affairs, as she reads two newspapers every day, and in contrast to Una, therefore, is clever and informed. In O’Brien’s work, therefore, the “ideal” mother as reflected in the 1937 Irish Constitution is of a particular class, as aspirations for such ideal

¹⁰ The “Ford” car is also a sign of Hannah’s higher status. In 1937, two years before the setting of *The Last of Summer*, registration figures show that there were 10,000 registered cars in Ireland in that year. See Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, p. 153.

expressions of motherhood are possible only if mothers do not have to undertake the labour involved in rearing children and the domestic duties involved in running a home.

The commentators of *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer*, Angèle and Matt, have both been part of the wider world and now cannot go back to an “ante-room” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 48). Angèle too is an artist and as she considers marriage to Tom, she reflects: “She would cease to be an actress now. And she would cease to be French.” (128) In a similar vein to Matt, Angèle, in order to “fit” into the family would have to relinquish her artistic identity. Equally, the family does not want her to fit in. Retaining her son’s love is vital for Hannah’s existence, and as such, Angèle as interloper who threatens the safe insularity of the family, and as a representative of modernising European influences, must be expurgated from the Kernahan family. Hannah’s dealings with her French niece whose presence threatens to deflect the attention of her favourite son, symbolises Ireland’s cultural and political insularity in the face of a world war, as the oncoming war, Hannah tells her niece, is ““nothing whatever to do with us. [...] Eire is certain to be neutral in this war, you see, Angèle. Absolutely neutral.”” (193)¹¹ There is no place for a foreigner in the Kernahan family, as Angèle represents the European opinion on the moral obligation of participating in the war, in a country where such opinions were heavily censored. Angèle ultimately returns to France, a country preparing for war, and her attempt to infiltrate the nuclear family, especially as she is part of the extended family, allows for my reading of the novel in terms of the exploration of familial bonds, which are paralleled by the Irish stance on neutrality and the country’s relationship with the wider world. These issues are dramatised through Hannah’s expressed disinterest in the subject of war, as well as her deliberate expulsion of Angèle, in an echo of the State’s expulsion of ideas it deemed dangerous to its insular self-definition.

Thus, despite differences in plot and setting, each novel also interrogates the roles and reach of family. *Pray for the Wanderer* ends with Matt Costello’s decision to leave Ireland, a decision he has negotiated through the microcosm of the family in the Irish State. On the one hand, Matt is drawn to the security to be gained from the love

¹¹ Article 29.2 of the 1937 Irish Constitution states: “Ireland affirms its adherence to the principle of the pacific settlement of international disputes by international arbitration or judicial determination.” (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 29.2)

and acceptance displayed in the fulfilled familial relationships in Una and Will's family. On the other hand, he is aware of the personal adjustments needed to replicate a family like his brother's. O'Brien's unmarried characters struggle to negotiate their place in the family, a unit that is supported by social, cultural and religious structures, juxtaposed with situations where individual experiences leads to the questioning of tenets hitherto accepted and accommodated. As an artist, and a banned one at that, Matt's choice to leave is inevitable, and he aligns himself with Ireland's exiled artists when he tells Tom and Father Malachi: "I'm not prepared to be saved on Ireland's dictated terms." (O'Brien, *Pray*, 124) The subtle but continuous undermining of the "dictated terms" of family life performs a critique of suffocating family structures. Matt does not "fit" the life that is lived by the "ideal" family, and chooses to leave a country indifferent to his absence. The Costello family is secure, and its members have health, security and the economic means to sustain an idyllic existence. Matt, as representative of the outside world, ultimately has no impact on the "harmony within this house" (184). In addition, Una and Will's "rounded-off contentment" (184), which makes Matt feel almost "outrage[d]", brings to mind de Valera's policy of Irish economic self-sufficiency. In a passage that critiques the country's cultural insularity, Matt describes the impression of "smug" complacency, as he apostrophises:

Your guilts seem positively innocent, your ignorances are perhaps wisdom when measured against the general European plight. How odd if the distressful country, the isle of Saints and Doctors¹² from which Patrick banished snakes, should prove a last oasis, a floating Lotus Land when the floods rise. (183-4)

Despite its possible potential as an "oasis", Matt leaves the "idyllic kindergarten" (79) that is Weir House, the family within it and Ireland, in order to pursue a life on his own terms.

¹² The phrase is also used in *Without My Cloak*, in a passage about the vagaries of Grafton Street in Dublin, that is situated "[i]n a country that never is done with boasting about its saints and doctors" (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 150). See Kate O'Brien. *Without My Cloak*. 3rd ed. London: Virago, 2001. It can be suggested that O'Brien's use of "saints and doctors", rather than the usual "saints and scholars", reflects the view expressed in John McGahern's novel, *Amongst Women*, by the protagonist, Moran, who bitterly resents that priests and doctors, who had done nothing for the cause of Independence, had come to power in the Free State. As a result, he does everything in his power to dissuade his daughter from studying medicine: "Sheila could not have desired a worse profession. It was the priest and doctor and not the guerrilla fighters who had emerged as the bigwigs in the country Moran had fought for. For his own daughter to lay claim to such a position was an intolerable affront. At least the priest had to pay for his position with celibacy and prayer. The doctor took the full brunt of Moran's resentment." (McGahern, 88) See John McGahern. *Amongst Women*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990.

Similarly, Angèle Maury in *The Last of Summer*, by falling in love with her cousin, is attracted to the idea of the family. However, to become “a Kernahan of Waterpark House”, Angèle knew that “[t]here would be trouble with Aunt Hannah; if she stayed with Tom and married him, a life of trouble” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 125). At the end of the novel, Angèle, like Matt, leaves Ireland as there is no place for her there. Thus, O’Brien’s texts suggest that the family, which may appear impregnable in light of the status bestowed upon it in the Constitution, which is, in turn, bolstered by cultural devotion to the Holy Family, is not inviolable. Furthermore, the threat to the family often comes from within, as the struggle for self-determination must first negotiate the familial bond, as the “ideal” model of the family, O’Brien suggests, does not take into account the consequences of actions or emotional manipulations carried out on one family member by another. In these texts, therefore, the interrogation of the family is politicised with the mother figures explored in the framework of the cultural ethos that positioned them in distinct roles.

The 1937 Constitution, Neutrality and Irish Culture

Both *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer* were written after the banning of the preceding book, *Mary Lavelle* and *The Land of Spices* respectively, and had contemporary settings. I argue that the emphasis on political themes in *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer* suggests that Una Costello and Hannah Kernahan can be read as symbols for the Irish woman circumscribed by the Constitution and thus as having a symbolic dimension that exceeds the dynamics of the respective plots. Thus, Una and Hannah can be read as explorations of the limits placed on women’s roles, as well as the economic circumstances that are needed to facilitate the supporting of such roles. Una and Hannah are both modelled on the “ideal” woman of the Constitution but neither, as will be discussed, is quite as they appear. Their respective roles, as symbols of Ireland, are foreshadowed in *Pray for the Wanderer* by the reference to Ireland as “Lotus Land” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 38, 184). Walshe, in *Kate O’Brien: A Writing Life*, writes that O’Brien referred “to her ten years in Connemara as time spent in ‘Lotus Land’, as if it were a place of fatal enchantment where she had dreamt her time away” (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 113). The mythological reference evokes the mythical fruit which when eaten induces a state of lazy and luxurious dreaminess. Una and Hannah’s insularity is indicated by the use of this mythological reference, as

their comfortable lives in Weir House and Waterpark House respectively, constitutes their world. It can be argued that the repeated references to water, rivers and water-based imagery that appear throughout O'Brien's fiction, serve as a metaphor for life. The urge to move forward is like the flow of a river, and if the course of the flow is blocked, or its existence denied, it will take another route. In that context, "Weir House" brings to mind a dam that holds back water and controls its flow, while "Waterpark House" suggests a still body of water. Thus, the implication here is that the lives within these walls are stagnant rather than flowing.

In the Cyclops episode in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom has a bruising encounter with "the citizen", a character based on Michael Cusack, the founder of the Gaelic Athletic Association.¹³ Joyce's depiction of the "citizen" deliberately evokes the one-eyed Cyclops of Homer's *The Odyssey*, and represents Gaelic Irish Nationalism at its worst with the citizen's xenophobia; his assertion of purity that includes sexual purity; his misogyny; his uncouth language; his focus on the victimisation of Ireland and its people, and his violence.¹⁴ Joyce sets the gentle, pacific, charitable Bloom in lonely opposition to a barbaric, bigoted and aggressive nationalist. Likewise, Matt Costello and Angèle Maury, the commentators in *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer* respectively, cannot find a place for themselves in de Valera's Ireland, just as Joyce similarly placed Bloom's mildness and commonsense in lonely isolation in a world given over to excesses. The implication in both novels is that such excesses are framed in movements of nationalist zeal, further underwritten by Catholic ideology.

O'Brien employs a similar strategy to that of Joyce by positioning Una and Hannah as symbols of the cultural ethos that emerged after the nationalist zeal had achieved its aim of Independence, and had settled into the role of self-government. Confidence in the achievement of Independence was expressed by the production of a Constitution that reflected the new self-determined Eire. However, the stagnant water imagery used by O'Brien in connection with the Costello and Kernahan households as microcosms of the State, dramatises the zealous enforcement of Irish identity in

¹³ The Gaelic Athletic Association, founded in 1884 to promote Irish sports, played a strong role in nationalist ideology, and was comprised of, almost exclusively, rural Catholics. Its politics were Fenian and its leaders around the country, clerical.

¹⁴ See James Joyce. *Ulysses*. London: Penguin Books, 2000, pp. 376-449. See also "The Cyclops" (9.84-96) in Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. E. V. Rieu. London: Penguin Books, [1946], 1991.

opposition to what had gone before. The enacting of Censorship is one such example and is a particular concern in *Pray for the Wanderer*. For instance, Matt Costello, when thinking about the “many lives” he has led as a writer, surmises:

The details, memories and remorse of these lives ... were too crude and small to be considered by the ancient and snobbish sophistication of Catholic Ireland. A sophistication which has produced, but would by no means read, *Ulysses* – the most awful outcry ever raised about the powers of darkness. (O’Brien, *Pray*, 71)

The views of Nell Mahoney, who represents the independent 1930s woman, on Matt’s work reflect the contemporary opinion, and are conveyed to Matt by her cousin and former fiancé, Tom, who tells Matt that Nell has described his novels, because of their emphasis on the individual, as “anti-social, myth-creating and unnecessary” (58). In addition, Nell’s sister, Una, has admitted to Matt that she does not generally like his writing. Furthermore, Matt’s brother, Will, “did not read his brother’s novels and plays, though proud of his success, but he hated having to face, however lightly, the knowledge that a member of his family was frequently guilty of impropriety in print” (16). Nell’s aunt is even more vocal than her niece. At dinner, she tells her guest that “his literary work was a disgrace to Ireland, and that she had never read a word of it, she was happy to say” (40). Similarly, in *The Last of Summer*, Hannah Kernahan expresses a derogatory view on James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, yet the text suggests that it is unlikely that she has read it. In a scene in the text, while accounting for everyone’s whereabouts, Hannah assumes that her worldly son, Martin, is “still asleep, or lying in bed reading *Ulysses*, his mother surmised, or something equally disgusting – according to his undisciplined habit” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 108). In this way, themes of insular nationalism, censorship, and neutrality in both novels are framed in terms of a political critique. This critique is further explored in the private sphere, in the characterisation of Una and Hannah as mother, modelled on the ideology of the Constitution, underwritten by Church writings on women’s roles. Although the concerns of *The Last of Summer* are different from *Pray for the Wanderer*, Hannah Kernahan and Una Costello both function as symbols, and as dramatisations of the possible consequences of embodying the particular type of motherhood endorsed in the Irish Constitution.

Pray for the Wanderer, significantly, is set at the moment when Éamon de Valera presents his Constitution to the Irish people, which coincides with Matt’s visit to

his brother at Weir House. Its tenets are addressed in the text, and Matt's first thoughts on "Dev's tricky constitution" are:

And now the proffered Constitution of the Irish Free State was before the world. Founded, intelligibly enough and even as this house was, upon the family as social unit, and upon the controlled but inalienable rights of private ownership, but offering in its text curious anomalies and subtleties, alarming signposts. Dedicated to the Holy Trinity – why not the Holy Family? – but much more in step with the times than was apparent... Subtle, but dictatorial and obstinate. (O'Brien, *Pray*, 30)

The "house" referred to above is Weir House, home to Will and Una Costello and their five children, and its inclusion above, as a microcosm of the State, suggests its representation of the aspiration of social and cultural unity of 1930s Ireland, under the leadership of de Valera. Moreover, the water imagery evoked by the name of the house, "Weir House", proposes the Costello family as conservative, traditional and disinclined to change their comfortable material circumstances. The sense of unchanging continuity is represented by the lack of change Matt sees in the rooms and furniture of his childhood home during his sixteen-year absence. Critics have tended to read this as O'Brien's collusion in, as Dalsimer, wrote, "an idealisation of Ireland's "traditional commitment to farm, faith, and family" (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, 47). In addition, Dalsimer argued that the novel "reveres the moral and cultural ethos of the Free State while deploring its manifest social restrictions" (47). Dalsimer's observations raise questions about the purpose of the Costello family in the novel. Can they be read as the "ideal" family, as promulgated in the Constitution, and by extension, as a vehicle for the approval of the Irish moral and cultural ethos? Are there not, in fact, "alarming signposts" (O'Brien, *Pray*, 30) to be found within this idyllic family that lives in "Lotus Land"? (38) It can be argued that the Costello family in Weir House is depicted as living in unrealistic shelter and comfort, shielded from many of the harsher economic and political realities outside its walls. Una's cousin, Tom, refers to Weir House as "an idyllic kindergarten" (79). The fact that every other family portrayed in O'Brien's work is dysfunctional to some degree raises suspicions about the depiction of such seeming perfection, suggesting that their very perfection may be their dysfunction. Accordingly, in *Pray for the Wanderer*, Una, the Costello family, the Church and the State are explored in symbolic terms, which posit Una as the "ideal" mother, modelled on the idealism expressed in Church and State documents, and the Costello Family as

representatives of the promotion of the Irish State's cultural ethos of self-sufficiency.

The Constitution dedication reads:

In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity from Whom is all authority and to Whom,
as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred,
We, the people of Éire,
Humbly acknowledging all our obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ,
Who sustained our fathers through centuries of trial,
Gratefully remembering their heroic and unremitting struggle to regain the
rightful independence of our Nation... (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*)

The prominence of the Catholic deity is striking in the dedication. In the text, Matt expresses his views on the commingling of Church and State. He sees de Valera as a dictator, "but a more subtle dictator than most – though he also, given time, might have the minds of his people in chains" (O'Brien, *Pray*, 30). The Irish Church, on the other hand, was not coy about wielding its power and Matt is appalled at how the new Constitution strengthens its dictatorial powers. Tom is also explicit about the role of the Church in Irish society, saying: "Religiosity is becoming a job in this country... A threat and a menace. A power in the land" (47). Moreover, the acquisition of Independence is indicated in the dedication as a sign of divine favour. Thus, few people, Matt surmises, were likely "to vote solid against the Holy Trinity. Certainly this household wouldn't, whatever it might think of Dev." (30) There is no mention or acknowledgement of the women or mothers who took part in the struggle for Independence. At the same time, Article 41 of the Constitution, in de Valera's opinion, gave a pivotal role in the family to the woman in the home. In this way, the Irish mother was a lynchpin in the achieving of de Valera's goal of a self-sufficient, stable society. In *Pray for the Wanderer*, O'Brien brings a woman modelled on this ideal centre stage, thereby dramatising the tenets of the Constitution that positioned woman solely in the private sphere by denying her presence in the public realm. I argue that to read Una as a sympathetically drawn heroine is to under-read the political critique in the novel.

The political critique of the Irish cultural ethos is continued in *The Last of Summer*, which was published in 1943 and set in the period between August and September of 1939 when war was imminent. The novel confronts the issue of neutrality in the face of a European war, which situates the topic as a source of concern, reflected

by the many discussions on the topic among the characters throughout the text. O'Brien had spent the war years in England, having left Ireland in 1939, and it is likely that British antipathy towards Ireland's political stance influenced her perception of Irish neutrality. In addition, during her time in England, O'Brien stated that she worked for the information and intelligence services, although Walshe claims that there is no record of this in her personal letters (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 98). The British press repeatedly focused on Irish neutrality in the context of an ethical argument, and the Irish censor reacted by cutting the circulation of English newspapers in Ireland. The cultural critic Clair Wills, in *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland during the Second World War*, argues that the government actively promulgated "a neutral-mindedness" through the medium of the Press (Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 54). In a scene in *The Last of Summer*, where Hannah's companion, Dotey, complains about the probability of false content in newspapers with regard to hostilities, Hannah's son retorts: "'You know perfectly well, Dotey,' said Martin, 'that your solicitous Dev. doesn't let an immoral rag within three hundred miles of you.'" (O'Brien, *Summer*, 47-8) Frank Aiken (Minister for Co-Ordination of Defensive Measures), the *Fianna Fail* Minister with responsibility for political censorship, enforced it with zeal.¹⁵ Not even the Hierarchy was allowed to speak out against neutrality.¹⁶ Thus, the wheels of censorship were reactivated and

¹⁵ James Dillon was the only Irish politician to take a stand against neutrality. In his book, *Against the Tide*, Noel Browne recounts that Dillon was forced to resign from the *Fine Gael* party as a result (Browne, 204). See Noel Browne. *Against the Tide*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan [1986], 2007. It was mostly from the Anglo-Irish community that dissent in Ireland was expressed and the neutrality policy served to isolate this community in Ireland further. For the fate of minorities in the new Free State, see Terence Brown. *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985*. London: Fontana [1981], 1985, Chapter 4. See also Mary Kenny. *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*. Revised and Updated Edition. Dublin: New Island, 2000, Chapter 4.

¹⁶ At the time, the Church was preoccupied with the perceived threat of communism, and believed itself to be under attack from a godless movement. Irish newspapers took up the topic and because of the constant emphasis on the subject by the Church and the media, communism, which reared its head even more so after the war, became a major public concern. Coupled with the threat of communism was the danger associated with moral pollution, particularly in the form of a perceived decline in sexual morality, associated with the war. Although difficult to assess specifically in Ireland, Clair Wills writes that "rates of venereal disease increased" (Wills, 324), and that the number of "illegitimate births rose slightly during the war" (325). Wills points out that in relation to illegitimacy, "the problem often lay with the poverty and poor education of both rural and urban girls" (325). See Clair Wills. *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland during the Second World War*. London: Faber and Faber, 2007. The Church adopted a defence strategy in this regard, a mechanism that had been successful in the past. As Stewart J. Brown and David W. Miller argue, the defensive priorities of the devotional revolution, which Larkin observed in the reaction to the Famine and the waning of traditional Gaelic culture in the mid-nineteenth century, were continued in Catholic Ireland's reaction to communism and secular, cosmopolitan culture in the mid twentieth century (Brown and Miller, 15). See Stewart J. Brown and David W. Miller. Eds. *Piety and Power in Ireland 1760-1960: Essays in Honour of Emmet Larkin*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2000. In addition, as the Church was asked not to speak out on the neutrality policy, the moral dimensions were not discussed in a public forum.

solidly maintained during the Emergency. In addition, almost three hundred people were employed by the Government to read and monitor private mail in the Post Office, as in actuality thousands of Irish people were involved either in the war industry or in the war itself, and could communicate information that the government was forcibly suppressing. The devotional magazine, the *Irish Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, for instance, circumvented political censorship by printing letters of thanks in war situations, for lives spared, for brave acceptance of death or for loved ones receiving last rites before death. Not alone did these letters evoke images of what was actually happening, they also confirmed that many Irish people were involved in the war, one way or the other.¹⁷

The Last of Summer encapsulates the development of O'Brien's opposition to the Irish neutrality policy and the opposing positions are debated in the text. On the one hand, loyalty to one's homeland is treated sympathetically in the novel by the laying out of practical reasons for Irish neutrality. Ireland, Angèle's cousin Jo explains to her, had few resources to assist in a war:

'Eire will be neutral, which is only the clearest common sense, politically. But that is beside the point. Little patches of immunity like ours are going to be small consolation for what's coming. Being neutral will be precious little help to the imagination, I should think.' (O'Brien, *Summer*, 81)

On the other hand, strong condemnation of Irish neutrality is expressed throughout the novel by Angèle, who represents the European position.¹⁸ Thus, Ireland's refusal to actively assist its neighbours is treated as morally questionable on a human level.

Where the portrayals of Una and Hannah overlap is in their representations as symbols of Irish culture. While Una is positioned as the embodiment of the "ideal" woman, Hannah personifies the policy of neutrality upheld by the Irish government during World War Two in the "smug, obstinate and pertinacious little island" (O'Brien, *Pray*, 183) that Matt Costello left behind in *Pray for the Wanderer*. The dramatisation of the enacting of the policy is depicted in Hannah's deliberate ousting of her niece,

¹⁷ See Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*, p. 163ff.

¹⁸ For the discussions on the approaching war in the text, see Kate O'Brien. *The Last of Summer*. London: The Book Club, 1944, pp. 27, 34-5, 47-8, 58-9, 81-2, 95, 102, 177, 185-8, 192-4, 206-8, 212-5, 217-8, 237-8, 241.

Angèle, from her home. In this way, Hannah, as symbol of Ireland, rejects variance. She represents the attitude to difference as depicted in the incident where Angèle first arrives in the village of Drumaninch. In that scene, Angèle encounters a child who sneers at her lipstick. Angèle later reflects that the incident shows “an arrogance of austerity, contempt for personal feeling, coldness and perhaps fear of idiosyncrasy” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 5). The incident stays in Angèle’s mind, and as she relates the encounter to her cousin, Martin, she

wincing again at memory of the critical, sneering child she had encountered.
‘You’re cruel in Ireland,’ she said to Martin. ‘Indeed, you’re downright rude.’
She told him about ‘what happened your lips?’
‘I’ve thought of it often since,’ she said. ‘The detachment, the bland intention to give offence—’ (223)

Angèle’s description of the incident mirrors Hannah’s treatment of Angèle, as the “bland intention to give offence” is subtly utilised by Hannah in her dealings with Angèle. Martin’s reply contextualises the incident to Ireland’s policy of neutrality, as he replies: “‘Don’t rub it in,’ he said. ‘We’re neutrals – but honestly, we have good reason.’” (223) Thus, Ireland’s neutrality policy and the implications for Ireland’s European neighbours are personified by the characterisation of Hannah Kernahan and her contrasting relationships with those who subscribe to her views and those who do not.

Una Costello: The Ideal Homemaker and Insular Mother Ireland

Una Costello can be read as representing a critique of the 1937 Irish Constitution. She is focused solely on her husband, children and home and she “lived for others” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 60). In this way, Una reflects the selfless woman rendered in the Constitution. As a resident of “Lotus Land” (38, 184), Una also serves as a symbol for Irish culture in the Free State. Una’s physicality is barely registered in the novel. Thus, there are few references to her corporeality, and those there are provide interesting possibilities to reading her against the grain of Dalsimer’s and Ryan’s interpretations. Rather than relying on extant physical descriptions, O’Brien powerfully compares Una to a rose. This is, of course, a romance convention, used by the silver poets of the sixteenth century. *The Oxford Paperback Dictionary* defines the rose as an “ornamental, usually fragrant flower”, while the expression “rose-tinted”, conveys someone with an unrealistically cheerful worldview. The dictionary interpretation of the words “Ornamental” and “unrealistic”, therefore, invite the reader to interpret Una symbolically. Una’s brother-in-law, Matt, recalls his first impressions of her as a “wild and blowy rose” (7). He later tells her that she has a “lovely open rose of a face” (140). On his visit to Ireland, twelve years later, Matt reassesses Una: “She was still an innocently seductive woman, plump and rather charmingly untidy, with mousy hair and a fragrance of contentment.” (7) At dinner, later that evening, Una is again under his scrutiny: “Matt pondered her innocent unfoldedness of nature, the ease with which her untracked and native seduction spread its perfume. She was fading, but would live and die most recognizably a rose.” (11) Furthermore, O’Brien’s use of words in relation to Una, such as “innocently seductive” (7), “native seduction” (11), “fragrance” (7), “perfume” (11) and “unfoldedness” (11), suggest the erotic connotations of the rose motif.

By using the rose motif, O’Brien positions Una as a symbol in the text. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*: “Symbolism did not come down from heaven nor rise up from subterranean depths – it has been elaborated, like language, by ... human reality” (de Beauvoir, 78-9). The significance of the rose motif is discussed by de Beauvoir when she discusses women and virginity in the context of myth. De Beauvoir related how the word “defloration” had come to be associated with the

“destroying” of a woman’s virginity, an association that was perpetuated through myths such as, de Beauvoir argued, “the knight who pushed his way with difficulty through thorny bushes to pick a rose of hitherto unbreathed fragrance” (187). The love element in these myths relates to the courtly love tradition wherein the lover is jealous and disgruntled when he sees his dream maiden being ravished by a brute that represents the political enemy. The words “native seduction” used by Matt in relation to Una, therefore, suggest the use of the motif in the bardic tradition in Ireland, and this trope was also the basis of eighteenth-century Aisling poetry, wherein woman herself represented Ireland. The best-known poets of this period were Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin and Aodhagán Ó Rathaille and the political context was the Jacobite wars and the anticipated restoration of the Stuart monarchy.¹⁹ In the Aisling genre, the poet, while wandering in beautiful surroundings, meets a beautiful woman who reveals herself to be Ireland. She gives the poet the message that the rightful king will be installed and all will be well. In the eighteenth century, the poet Liam Dall Ó hÍfearnáin initiated the tradition of Caitlín Ní Uallacháin as symbol of Ireland, who, by embodying feminine beauty, personifies the nation of Ireland. The symbol was promulgated and made popular by poets such as James C. Mangan (“Kathaleen Ny Houlahan”) in the nineteenth century and Yeats (“Red Hanrahan’s Song about Ireland”) in the twentieth century. The use of the rose motif in relation to Una, therefore, suggests that in the text, she can be read as a symbol for Ireland itself. In this context, Una represents the nation of Ireland as maternal, the Mother Ireland emblem. As Kathryn A. Conrad argues in *Locked in the Family Cell: Gender, Sexuality and Political Agency in Irish National Discourse*: “Such a construction idealizes a passive and pure female figure, the ideal woman of the house and keeper of the social order” (Conrad, 11). In addition, as Gerardine Meaney argues in *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics*: “Women have been denied a role in the life and history of nations and been reduced to symbols of the nation” (Meaney, *Sex and Nation*, 22). It can be argued that O’Brien is deliberately pointing to the similarities between the woman/mother in the Constitution and the Mother Ireland emblem, as both employ the ideology of power while at the same time rendering the real woman powerless.

¹⁹ See Robert Welch. Ed. *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. The use of a woman’s name as metaphor for Ireland arose as a by-product of the banning of direct references to the country’s name in the seventeenth-century penal laws.

Dalsimer and Ryan's arguments about O'Brien's idealisation of Una are further undermined in the text in an exchange between Tom and Matt, in which the former draws attention to the rarity of happiness such as Una's:

'My cousin, Una – well, she's very nearly my favourite study'.

'Why?'

'Happiness, Matt. Happiness, you novelist, you! Happiness as innocent as our picnic. Have you ever seen it before, Matt? Will you ever see it again?'
(O'Brien, *Pray*, 34)

The repetition of "ever seen" and "ever see" emphasises the uniqueness of Una's situation, as Tom's question encompasses the notion of happiness both in the past and in the future. In addition, the rarity of happiness such as Una's is contextualised in terms of "innocence", which suggests that Una is childlike and consequently, an unrealistic example of an adult woman. The predominant factor put forward by O'Brien in this exchange is the idea that neither Tom nor Matt has ever encountered someone such as Una. Moreover, Matt observes that Una,

loved her husband and, deriving from him, her children, with an unheeding, unaware strength of generosity such as Matt had never before observed in an adult. He had never before met in normal worldly life someone who quite precisely lived for others. (60)

The repeated use of "never before" emphasises Una's uniqueness, thereby drawing attention to the rarity of women who are fulfilled by Una's mode of living, as well as those who have the economic means to do so. This questions the assumption made in the Constitution that all women are happy to give their lives to others in the home, and moreover, have the financial means to do so. On the one hand, O'Brien recognised that women such as Una, happy to live for others and fulfilled by motherhood, may have existed, as rendered in a discussion with Father Malachi who champions the establishing of families, with O'Brien's view, expressed through Matt as follows: "But I allow that, for those who feel it" (119). On the other hand, O'Brien drew attention to Una's economic status in occupying a minority stratum of Irish society.

Una's "innocence" and insularity are rendered in the expression of her views on happiness. In a scene where she and Matt converse about her garden, his stay in Ireland and his work, Una tells him that she cannot understand why there is so much sadness in

Matt's work. She tells Matt that she has a happy life and "cannot see why millions of others" (134) cannot have the same. O'Brien frames the discussion so that it highlights the fact that the "ideal" woman can only exist within a very particular class, which is, in Una's case, the upper middle-class. Matt draws attention to the factors that have an impact on happiness and lists the reasons why everyone cannot be as contented as Una:

'Millions of others are slaving, Una, or workless, or homeless, or fighting in some brutal army for brutal ideologies they don't even begin to understand, or wasting in prisons because they resisted such ideologies, or hacking coal out of death-trap mines, or working overtime on incendiary bombs, or ranting away in manic-depressive wards because they should never have been born—' (134)

To this, Una simply replies: "But these things needn't be. No decent person wishes it to be so—" (134) Una's naivety and innocence with regard to the lives of others is emphasised here, and moreover, evokes the reference to Ireland as "Lotus Land", as like the "citizen" in *Ulysses*, Una can only see one side to a situation. In contrast to Matt, who explores both sides of the idea of living permanently in Ireland, Una is pitted therefore, on the side of cultural insularity. Moreover, Una believes that "life is worth living on most terms" (139). To this, Matt replies, "Oh Una, I wonder! That's a conviction of the sheltered, and you've always been sheltered." (139) Here, Una reflects the tendency amongst middle-class women, as argued by the feminist philosopher, Mary Daly, in *The Church and the Second Sex*, who being, "[f]ascinated by an exalted symbol of 'Woman' ... are not disposed to understand the distress imposed upon countless real, existing women" (Daly, 12). Una's idealism about other people's happiness suggests that the naivety involved in the preservation of ideology can mask cruelty. What the text suggests, in the various exchanges conducted by Matt with Una and Will, is an inability to see their privileged position, a position the novel gently ironises. As a result, Una and Will are not in a position to either see or to facilitate changing the *status quo*, which concurs with the historian Terence Brown's assessment of Irish culture in *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–1985*, where he argues: "Despite some signs of change, there was a conservative continuum with pre-revolutionary Ireland and minorities and critics in the new order had little chance to make their will felt." (Brown, 10) In relation to Una, "Matt would have wagered a good deal that she was without a fantasy life, without a day-dream. All of her was in the here-and-now; she was complete." (O'Brien, *Pray*, 60) Matt's supposition is supported

in the text as Una's thoughts are only ever focused on her family and their concerns. To be alive is to be active, and as "complete" Una is positioned as a caricature, as she has nothing further to do. Thus, she is rendered as a passive instrument in the text that reflects the self-less symbolic dimension of the woman in the 1937 Constitution.

In the text, O'Brien explores the topic of family dynamics by addressing Una's subservience to her husband, and her sole focus on her husband and children, as rendered in Pius XI's encyclical, *Casti Connubii*, that underwrites the Constitution family model. Reynolds wrote: "Will and Una are happy ... not because they accept the ethos of their time, but because, by chance, they are compatible and their marriage is a refuge for both." (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 77) In the text, Matt surmises that Una's happiness in marriage "rose from the accident of perfect mating" (O'Brien, *Pray*, 61). Although Will is presented as a benign husband and father, the inequality of the sexes is made clear by the remark that Will "loved Una with the contentment of mastery" (21). In addition, the concern of the Church with regard to the political participation of women is dramatised, when Una ventures a political opinion on the possible demise of "our poor old Cosgrave lot", to which Will rejoins: "In God's name, Una, what do you know about it?" (20) Una acquiesces immediately, as she was, Matt observes, "completely subservient to Will without once remembering that so she had vowed to be at the altar" (60). Una's "acquiescence" ensures that harmony is the norm in Weir House, as it is essential, in Matt's view, to Will's happiness. Matt reflects that the "wrong kind of joke from her, an unseeing look in her eyes at a salient moment, the merest hint of a hint of unwillingness to open her arms to him – and my brother Will would be almost comically unhappy." (62) Thus, Una's contentment is rendered in terms of her willingness to subsume herself in Will. She does not see the need for independence or freedom for women, as it is not necessary for her happiness. Of freedom for women, she inquires of Matt:

'Do you think there's any point in it?' Una asked gaily.
'I hold with freedom for everyone. I think it's a terrific point! Personal liberty. Never was it so much in danger'.
[...]
Una's eyes widened in amusement.
'But what nonsense you talk! With the whole world doing exactly as it chooses! Or so I understand from Will' (19).

The text demonstrates the child-likeness of the protected bourgeois woman, who accepts the authority of her husband like a child accepts its parents. Thus, Una is happy because she “fits” the model woman of the Constitution, as is her husband, Will, who “fits” because he is “a family man” (6). Will, Matt surmises, “did not believe that a human life could be lived satisfactorily on any other track” (6). Will, Matt observes, “created his present out of what he knew and wanted – and was happy, and good, in a sad and evil world” (30). In Una there is no rendering of personal desires that threaten the stability of the family. As Matt reflects on life at Weir House, he wonders: “The harmony within this house, for instance – is that representative and does it promise anything?” (184) In this way, the text draws attention to the argument raised in the novel that Una and Will and their life at Weir House are not a common family model. Will’s felicitous marriage means that there is no threat from Una to Will’s happiness. Matt realises: “By God’s mercy these accidents, everyday for the rest of us, do not threaten here. Her arms are always waiting for him. She loves him – and by chance quite perfectly.” (62) The words “accidents”, “everyday for the rest of us” and “by chance” draw attention to the uniqueness of their happiness. In addition, as Will is able to provide for his family, Una does not have to work outside the home, and is thereby “protected” from influences other than her husband. While the depiction of Una concurs with the notion in *Casti Connubii* that all husbands are good men, can support their wives, and that all women are fulfilled by the undertaking of “burdensome duties”, the prevalence of such models in reality is undermined by the recurring referrals in the text to the uncommonness of Una, Will, and their comfortable situation. The text proposes the rarity of families who have the means to live as Una and Will do, thereby indicating the empirical unreality of sustaining the model family illustrated in the Constitution in the economic context of the 1930s. Will’s world comprises of his family, “blood channels”, which are “his circuit, limited but warm” (6). Will, as a symbol of the middle-class man concerned with preserving his comfortable status is signalled in the text by the description of him as “a citizen of the Irish Free State, and a family man” (6), is clearly limited, and cannot go beyond blood. His rejection of others, not of his blood channels, hints at the underlying ideology of racial purity and xenophobia that characterised the early years of the Irish State.

Hannah Kernahan: “Smother Mother” and Neutral Mother Ireland

Hannah Kernahan’s public presentation of herself, as “the best of Catholic mothers” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 113), masks the mother who is prepared to go to any lengths to keep her favourite child’s love focused solely on herself. The discrepancy between Hannah’s presentation of herself and her private thoughts is betrayed mostly by her tone of voice, which is observed throughout the text by Angèle, and narratorial dislike of Hannah is indicated by the framework of verbal irony in which her characterisation is framed. Furthermore, Hannah’s antipathy towards Angèle is revealed in the text through Angèle’s eyes, as she begins to read Hannah’s bodily signals in contrast to the words she speaks. Walshe writes: “Hannah Kernahan is Kate O’Brien’s most intriguing characterisation in this novel, a woman of great charm and beauty, perceptive and civilised, yet dishonest and cruel.” (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 94) The first physical reference to Hannah in the text is to her voice, which is “civilized and soft” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 9). As Hannah questions Angèle about how she came to be in Drumaninch, her tone is “delicate” (17) and “gentle” (19) throughout. Despite her shock at Angèle’s unexpected appearance at Waterpark House, Hannah’s tone is “amiable” (9). Her duplicity is deftly demonstrated by the considerable contrast between her body and her spoken language, which is initially revealed in the text when Angèle is first introduced to the rest of the Kernahan family. Hannah explains the reason for the secrecy about Angèle’s existence to her son, Martin, in a “frivolous” tone (12), which Angèle finds hurtful. When Martin presses his mother for an explanation, Hannah continues the tale in a voice of “great good humour” (14). The tone of her voice contrasts with the words she uses in relaying why she had continued to keep her husband’s code of secrecy after his death. In the general busyness of her life, she says to Martin, “the important matter of [Angèle’s] existence had long ago escaped my memory” (14). This is the first indication in the text that Hannah may not be as straightforward as she first appears. Although Hannah places the blame for the secrecy surrounding their Uncle Tom’s family conveniently on her dead husband, the continuation of the secret of his marriage appears to be attributed to salving Hannah’s ego. After the cruelty of her remark about forgetting Angèle’s existence, Hannah then switches tack by “suddenly smil[ing] with great sweetness at Angèle” (14). She tells

her that her arrival is a “very lovely, rare surprise” (14). When the tale is done, Angèle assesses her aunt. To Angèle’s eyes, Hannah “looked very pretty, very vulnerable” (16). “Prettiness” is the second most significant and most commonly used adjective applied to Hannah, and her smile is “attractive” (11). Angèle regards her further: “Her silvered brown hair was soft and untidily curly; her crumpling, fair skin looked as if it would still be delicious and cool to touch; her eyebrows and lashes were brown and delicate still.” (16) This rather lingering description of the forty-eight year old Hannah, who has been widowed for thirteen years, conveys her attractiveness, and foreshadows the spousal-type relationship between Hannah and her son.

In reply to Angèle’s explanation of her reason for visiting the Kernahan family, her cousin, Martin, expresses the hope that Angèle will stay with them for a time. Hannah’s response to Martin’s wish conveys her dislike of Angèle’s unexpected visit, albeit in a veiled manner: “‘She’s not very likely to give herself time to, Martin dear,’ said Mrs. Kernahan. ‘You see, she belongs to the world – not to our old backwater.’” (19) The use of “backwater” is significant here, as it suggests a stretch of stagnant water, as well as a place unaffected by progress or new ideas. The image contrasts with the progression of Angèle’s experiences in Drumaninch, which are contextualised by the fact that Angèle is conscious of the flow of the nearby river throughout her stay. Additionally, important scenes take place by the river, firstly with Tom and lastly with Martin, when Tom accidentally observes Angèle kissing Martin goodbye (223, 235). Hannah’s remark makes it clear to Angèle that she is unwelcome, different, foreign and worldly, as she draws attention to the distinction between Ireland and the world outside Ireland. Thus, Hannah does not define herself in the text as being part of “the world”. Here then, the symbolic aspect of Hannah’s characterisation is indicated, as the intense relationship between her and her eldest son is paralleled by her focus on her immediate surroundings. As she is uninterested in anything that does not concern Tom, similarly, “the world” and its concerns, in this case, the issue of Irish neutrality in the face of a world war is of little interest. The contrast with Hannah’s remark, which is conveyed in a “soft” tone of voice, is registered by Angèle, who is “unnerved by so many currents of mood” (19). As a result, Angèle asks herself a question that foreshadows the hostile manner to which her aunt later subjects her, as she wonders: “Was this Aunt Hannah cruel?” (19) With this question, the suggestion is raised that Hannah’s soft-spoken, gentle exterior masks a strong character, single-minded and ruthless in the maintenance

of her comfortable position at Waterpark House, and in the retention of the affections of her favourite son, Tom. The antipathy to change is suggested by the imagery evoked by the name of Hannah's house. There is no suggestion of movement; rather Waterpark brings to mind a body of still water. In addition, in the symbolic dimension of Hannah as cultural ethos, Hannah, in her determination to ensure that Tom sees her in a particular way, is redolent of de Valera's determination to ensure that the Irish people would support his political views on Ireland's non-participation in the war.

Dalsimer astutely described *The Last of Summer* as O'Brien's

most explicitly Freudian novel to date ... her lovers are each involved in the romance of parental love from which only one escapes. Equating Irish political insularity with family life, O'Brien uses these damaging, unresolved oedipal conflicts to symbolise Ireland's distance from the larger European scene. (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, 73)

The mother-son relationship is the dominant relationship in *The Last of Summer*, as Hannah deliberately and systematically destroys the relationship between her son, Tom and his fiancé, Angèle, to retain her position as first in her son's affections. Hannah is, therefore, as Reynolds noted, a study of "frustration finding compensation in power" (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 80). McCarthy described the "smother mother" in Irish fiction as one who prevents the severance between childhood and adulthood in her children, by insisting on an "adherence to her principles" (McCarthy in Kennedy, 97). In *The Last of Summer*, Hannah applies her "smother mother" techniques to her firstborn son, in order to influence his life according to her wishes. The critic, Ruth Robbins, when discussing Julia Kristeva's reflections on maternity in "Stabat Mater", writes in *Literary Feminisms*, that Kristeva describes love as

a disruptive force in culture – a force that both shores up and undermines the institutions of culture: it is necessary, for example, to Western conceptions of the family; and yet it can also unsettle family life by authorising illicit activities such as adultery, or marrying out of the group of which the family approves. (Robbins, 132)

Hannah's love for Tom reflects the idea of love as "a disruptive force", as it impedes Tom's future. Declan Kiberd argues that the literary portrayal of mother-son relationships has a deep significance in Irish writing and writes, "the very intensity of

the mother-son relationship suggests something sinister about the Irish man, both as husband and father” (Kiberd, 381). In a description that evokes the depiction of Hannah and Tom’s relationship, Kiberd writes: “The space vacated by the ineffectual father was occupied by the all-powerful woman, who became not just ‘wife and mother in one’ but surrogate father as well.” (381) Fathers rarely feature as significant characters in O’Brien’s fiction, except in *Without my Cloak* and *The Land of Spices* where fathers shape the lives of their offspring, despite what in O’Brien’s autobiographical writings appears to have been a good experience with her own father. The relationship between Hannah and her eldest son, Tom, is intense and is a dramatization of the psychic excesses of the unfulfilled mother. The recollections of the lines from Racine’s *Phedre* by Angèle, throughout the novel, serve to compare Hannah to the heroine who, in the play, becomes obsessed with her husband’s son, as well as highlighting the misplaced passion of the relationship. The intense nature of the relationship is also suggested in the text when Jo, Hannah’s daughter, says in “fun” to Angèle that Tom has “the Oedipus complex” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 238). The Oedipus complex, which Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) discussed in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) in relation to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, understands that the male child wishes to eliminate the father and become the sexual partner of the mother.²⁰ Tom does not appear to have become a separate self, as his mother is still the source of his pleasure and comfort. In the absence of his father, Tom has not had to relinquish his “desire” for his mother in order to identify with his father. Here, O’Brien inverts the Oedipus model somewhat, as it is Hannah who dominates the relationship, as the text suggests that to all intents and purposes Tom is, in his mother’s eyes, her “partner”. He appears to be the substitute “Tom” for Angèle’s father, Tom, with whom Hannah fell in love with as a girl.

With the rendering of this particular mother-son relationship, O’Brien dramatises the consequences of misplaced emotion that manifests itself in a twisted form of power. The image of the selfless woman of the Constitution is evoked as O’Brien dramatises the negative consequences of a woman who emulates the ideal of focusing her life solely on the home. With no other focus, the maintenance of Hannah’s existence, described by her daughter, Jo, as “whatever concerns Waterpark constitutes

²⁰ See Sigmund Freud. “The Interpretation of Dreams” (1900) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans and Ed. James Strachey. Vol. 5 (1900-1901). London: Vintage [Hogarth Press, 1964], 2001, pp. 261-4.

her life” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 26), is essential to her equilibrium. Tom, in the absence of his father, is the mainstay of this situation, as the male breadwinner of the family. In his substitute father role, Tom’s attentions are focused solely on his mother. Thus, the threat of another woman demanding Tom’s affections has the potential to shatter the very foundations of Hannah’s life in Waterpark House. Hannah is aware of the nature of power, as indicated in a scene where Hannah asks her companion, Dotey, to prepare a room for their guest. Hannah’s request is made in a voice that “was gentle, faraway, but Dotey bounced under its immensely veiled command.” (20) Hannah has Dotey “helplessly and for ever in her power and knew this” (108). In relation to Tom, the carefully chosen mode of conduct and words that Hannah uses to convey reasonableness, while masking her emotions, are a means of power. In this way, when Tom reveals his plan to marry Angèle, Hannah realises that her conduct in Tom’s presence must be exemplary: “She must be whatever he most required, most anxiously expected her to be. She must be what he knew – mother, perfect, unfailing, More than ever now.” (158) The possession of time allows Hannah to focus her attention on her son, and in what interests them both, the maintenance of their comfortable lifestyle at Waterpark House. Moreover, Hannah has full confidence in her powerful position in Tom’s life: “Hannah almost smiled again, as she apprehended the strength of her position. I’ll be there, she thought, and I don’t change or fail him. ‘Crude pleasures’ were the most unmanageable things in life.” (158) Here familial bonds are juxtaposed with erotic love, as is typical of O’Brien’s fiction. However, in this case, Tom does not make the choice between familial love and erotic love. Rather Hannah makes the choice for him, by using her power over him to sow doubts in his mind, until he capitulates unknowingly to her wishes. Hannah thinks of Tom’s marriage only as a threat. A wife would entail “allegiance to boons not of her bestowing and authority she could only guess against in darkness; a change of orientation and of heart. The end of a long reign; the surrender of the only kingdom she had ever won and held.” (146) The words “reign” and “kingdom” convey the realm of patriarchal power, which in turn draws attention to the implications of misplaced power. In the depiction of her thoughts in relation to Tom’s taking of a wife, Hannah’s power is based on insecure ground, in that it is dependent on another. As a result, Tom’s eventual marriage will remove her foundation of power, and as a result, her sense of self worth. It is Hannah’s financial acumen that has salvaged Waterpark House after the excess spending by her late husband. Moreover, in the Ireland of 1939, Hannah, as an upper middle-class woman,

has no other outlet for her considerable business talents. Thus, her son, as the male figurehead of the household, is necessary for the preservation, in the world outside Waterpark House, of the business arrangement Hannah has forged between them. For instance, in a scene in which Tom is ruminating on his mother's virtues, and the years he has spent at her side, he reflects: "From his first years she had been beauty, grace, and goodness personified – and he took his place *in charge of her* with an immense and proud delight." (76, emphasis mine) While Tom expresses a patriarchal worldview here, inside the walls of Waterpark House, it is Hannah who is in charge, as Tom seeks her advice on all aspects of the running of Waterpark House and its concerns. The transference of Tom's devotion to another would, therefore, result in a loss of status for Hannah that she is not prepared to relinquish.

Hannah's successful use of Tom, successful in that he thinks that he is in charge of his own affairs, reflects de Beauvoir's description of the power struggles of the woman who is in actuality powerless: "In exalting the fruit of her womb, she elevates her own person to the skies." (de Beauvoir, 597) Hannah dramatises Freud's view, expressed in "On Femininity" (1933), that women's sexuality is based upon the three elements of feminine psychology, that of narcissism, masochism and passivity, all of which are connected to an innate form of inferiority complex known as "penis envy". Freud argued that the latter is the foundation of his theory of female psychology.²¹ Many feminists have subsequently argued that Freud's version of gender and other theories about human nature were based on accepting the limits of bourgeois Viennese life as universal and as prescriptive, rather than interrogating the parameters in which he worked. Additionally, in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), Juliet Mitchell posed the theory that the notion of penis envy could also be concerned with the penis as a symbol of social power and the advantages that go with it, as similarly discussed by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics*. In any case, in Freud's argument, the definition of female encompasses the notion of lack, incompleteness or deficiency, which serves to posit an explanation for Hannah's heightened fears of the potential dilution of her son's affections. In a situation in which she has no other means of achieving a sense of fulfilment and power, Tom acts as her "penis", and is crucial, therefore, to her sense of

²¹ See Sigmund Freud. "On Femininity" (1933) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 22 (1932-1936). Trans. and Ed. James Strachey. London: Vintage [Hogarth Press, 1964], 2001, pp. 112-135.

power. Hannah dramatises the negative psychic consequences of the woman who is expected to selflessly give to others by her “life within the home”.

The extent of Hannah’s selfishness as a mother is dramatised by the fact that at no point in the text does O’Brien attribute to her any consideration of Tom’s feelings or wishes in regard to Angèle. Hannah, in this regard, is the direct opposite of the selfless mother portrayed in the Constitution, as she is prepared to sacrifice her son’s happiness to secure her own position. Moreover, Hannah’s actions to prevent Tom’s marriage to Angèle are portrayed in contrasting terms to her public display of Christian practice in attending Church and conducting friendships with clerics. Her first instinct when Dotey tells her about seeing Tom slip a letter under Angèle’s door is to contact her friend, Father Gregory, asking him to call in order to give her advice on a “family anxiety” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 134). Hannah’s actions indicate the commonplace interaction between religious personnel and the middle-class laity. Her distress at Dotey’s news is conveyed in the text by her “drawn” mouth (132) and “shaking” hand (133). However, as Dotey thinks to herself, “for all that she would smile away at you the same as ever” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 133). Dotey, as with everything to do with Hannah, appears to see this as an attribute. In her state of dependence, Hannah must be worthy of Dotey’s devotion in order for it to be justified, as Dotey has no other outlet for her loyalty and affection. As Hannah ponders the possibility of the changing of her circumstances with Tom, her usual calmness deserts her. Her growing alarm is manifested by the depiction of her bodily reaction:

Emotion seemed to sway and lap within her like a sea, and made her dizzy. Tom. Tom. What was this danger that threatened him, and so threatened her, and all her care of him, all her understanding, all their quiet, united, harmonious, loving life? (134)

The words used here are more suited to a marital relationship than to a filial one. Thus, Hannah’s reaction to Tom’s falling in love is one of jealousy, as her thoughts are in terms of Tom as a spousal substitute, as the *Phedre* references throughout the text imply. Tom has no idea that his mother is devastated by his decision to marry Angèle, and despite Hannah’s shock when Tom presents her with the fact that he is engaged, she manages to convince him with her words that her tears are in fact, tears of joy. Her performance is convincing, as while looking at her, Tom’s naivety in relation to his

mother's character is conveyed, as he "thought he had never seen her beautiful face so beautiful as now, tear-wet and smiling at him. His whole heart praised her and adored her." (158) "Praise" and "adore" are words generally used in terms of worship, and there is a notable evocation of religious imagery connected to the mother-son relationship in the text.

Hannah's companion, Dotey's complicity in promoting Hannah's role as emissary of exemplary conduct sees Hannah's devotion to Tom in piously expressed terms: "Isn't it only natural – and a lovely thing to see, thank God – the saintly devotion of a mother and a son. Like Our Blessed Lady herself, at the foot of the Cross" (113). Dotey expresses the view "that Hannah worshipped her son Tom inordinately" (113). To "worship" is a term usually applied to God or a higher being. Similarly, Tom "worshipped his mother, and he knew ... that she was wonderful, especial, like no-one else, and quite undeserving of the trials she had undergone, and carried with such dignity" (75-6). Hannah's "trials", in Tom's view, include Hannah as the recipient of the love of the three Kernahan brothers, a difficult marriage, the death of two of her children, financial difficulties, and early widowhood (76). Moreover, the reference to the "Cross" recalls the sacrificing of Jesus for the redemption of humanity. Similarly, in *The Last of Summer*, Tom denies himself the future he wants, for what he believes is Angèle's sake, as his mother has manipulated him to think. In the context of Hannah's symbolic role as representative of Eire, the term "sacrifice" also brings to mind the nationalist-Catholic zeal that underlay the 1916 Rising. In *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*, Mary Kenny writes that Patrick Pearse in particular, used the "metaphor of Ireland as a crucified Christ" and viewed the revolutionary goal as the achievement of "a reawakened Ireland redeemed through a risen Christ" (Kenny, 60).²² The mood of blood sacrifice is also captured in *Pray for the Wanderer* in a scene where Tom Mahoney and Matt Considine reminisce, in the company of Una's sister Nell, about their college days. Tom describes Matt for Nell, and tells her:

²² The 1916 Rising was a significant event in terms of the intertwining of Catholicism and nationalism in Ireland, and Kenny describes how the relationship was formed in the wake of the 1916 Rising. As the fifteen executed leaders began to take on an iconic status, and stories of the martyrdom of the leaders began to circulate, fuelled by the accounts of the mostly Capuchin monks who attended the condemned men before execution, the Church benefited from its newly expressed interest in the revolution because of its care for the dead and its zeal for martyrdom. Initially, the surprise rising had been seen by the Church as a traitorous act against a legitimate force engaged in battle with an anti-Catholic enemy, as at the time, the British Empire was at war with Germany. Kenny writes that the executed men "died with valour and, almost without exception, with an inspiring sense of religious martyrdom" (Kenny, 58).

‘In those days death for Ireland, glorious young death, was stamped all over his face. That was the mood we were in – especially the girls.’
‘Well, it was an effective mood,’ said Nell severely. ‘It accomplished a lot.’”
(O’Brien, *Pray*, 37)

Nell’s reply captures the acceptance of the notion of blood sacrifice in exchange for Ireland’s freedom. In *The Last of Summer*, Hannah “kills” her son by preventing his future, to safeguard her notion of “independence”, in an integrative echo of the republican and revolutionary discourse of the sons’ of Eire’s necessary sacrifice for her, which underwrote the 1916 Rising. Divine favour for this achievement, as indicated in the Constitution dedication, is here bestowed by the local curate, Father Gregory. When talking with Tom he tells him that in his opinion, Hannah is a “saint” and that Tom is lucky, as “no man could have a greater blessing than that at his side” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 58). The wording used by Father Gregory, “at his side”, evokes images of a companion and wife, rather than of a mother, and as such, the text critiques the closedness of such a relationship, the non-productive insularity of Irish republican neutrality.

Tom Kernahan is strongly contrasted with his younger siblings, who have studied, travelled and lived elsewhere for long periods of time, while he has remained at home. On the death of his father, Tom, aged fifteen years, “became, too soon, a man for his mother’s sake.” (75) The incestuous implication of the relationship between Tom and his mother is highlighted in the text when Tom reflects on the “darker side” of his life at Waterpark Houser, with its “shames and needs which a mother could not possibly be expected to imagine” (77). Occasionally, he reflects that, “It might sometimes seem as if early manhood was easier, more naturally controlled, in those who were more free than he, who were not so tenderly loved by so sensitive and devoted a parent” (77). While Tom’s siblings leave home to pursue an education, Tom remains at home to run the family estate. All Tom might say about this, the narrator writes, “was that in the twelve years in which he had been his mother’s support and companion he had sometimes missed his brother and sister very much indeed, and more vaguely, the habitual intercourse with contemporaries which they enjoyed” (75). Tom, therefore, remains in childhood as well as in the family home, and is denied an outlet for progression and development. The undeveloped characterisation of Tom suggests his role in the novel as a representative for Angèle’s father and the past. Unlike Angèle’s

father, however, Tom represents tradition and security, two elements missing from Angèle's childhood, as her mother worked as an actress and supported the family. The suggestion is raised in the text that Angèle is attracted to Tom as a father figure, as they are not depicted as having much in common in the text. If she marries him, Angèle reflects, she would "become what her father had refused to be, a Kernahan of Waterpark House" (128). In the text, therefore, Tom is a cipher. He is the conduit for Angèle's half-conscious longing for her dead father, which is suggested in the text when their physical similarity is remarked on by Jo's friend, Norrie (36), although Angèle herself cannot see the resemblance (42).

In the days following the announcement of the engagement between Tom and Angèle, Hannah begins the careful monitoring of her "conduct" (158). She continues to "smile" (161, 162, 173, 179, 195, 199), look "pretty" (161, 195), "bright-eyed" and "unperturbed" (161). She behaves appropriately towards Angèle whenever Tom is in the room (162, 189), and "impeccably" (181) towards Tom. Her "laugh" (162, 166, 191, 194) is constant, but she remains "watchful" (180). Thus, Hannah takes care not to alienate Tom in any way. At the same time, Hannah feels, the narrator writes,

a little contemptuous too of simple masculinity, that could believe life was in fact as he now thought he was shaping it, and that he had only to smile backwards in salute to her flawless love as he ran after his new passion, leaving her empty, widowed, occupationless. (181)

The word "widowed" is striking in its inappropriateness in this context, as again attention is drawn to the misplaced "passion" of Hannah's love for Tom. In the small community of Drumaninch, the hint of a possible liaison between Tom and Angèle is soon the subject of gossip and the local doctor, Dr. O'Byrne, whose daughter, Norrie, is in love with Tom, calls to see Hannah to assess the situation. O'Brien draws on the authority of a man to critique Hannah, as Dr. O'Byrne is employed here as a commentator on the family dynamics using a modern voice of reason, science and progress. The doctor does not spare Hannah his candid views of Tom's vulnerability in light of his upbringing, when faced with someone as exotic as Angèle. In addition, he does not have a blind admiration for Hannah and describes her love for Tom "as selfish a case of mother-love as has ever come to my knowledge, so help me!" (137) In this way, Dr. O'Byrne reflects Michel Foucault's view of the medical profession as part of

the “panoptic” State that maintains its surveillance of society by the power of, to use Foucault’s term, “discursive practices”,²³ as he is rendered as seeing Hannah for what she is. Additionally, he verbalises her inner fear and brings his judgement to bear on those fears. However, despite his misgivings about Hannah and out of love for his daughter, he raises the subject of marriage between Norrie and Tom. In this way, his behaviour is contrasted with Hannah’s towards Tom, as he actively attempts to achieve, on his daughter’s behalf, her desire to marry Tom. Thus, in the depiction of the modern man of science, there is narratorial approval for the parent who allows the desires of his daughter to override his own thoughts about her future. The subject of Norrie and Tom’s possible marriage is not a surprise to Hannah, who “had seen this proposition draw inevitably nearer; she knew that she would loathe it when it came, and that she would play against it as long as she could, for postponement, for indecision, for the long finger” (136-7). As a result, she has refused the idea “outward acknowledgement” (136). In spite of her realisation of the doctor’s reason for visiting, Hannah “looked all innocence” (136) and her voice remains “gentle” (137). As she does during her encounters with Angèle, Hannah monitors the tone of her voice to hide her true feelings on the subject of Tom’s eventual marriage. However, the doctor, aware of Hannah’s all-consuming focus, is prepared to do battle for his daughter’s wishes. He pre-emptively dispels his suspicion of Tom’s interest in Angèle by preparing “to roughride the feminine guile of his opponent, but genially and while seeming to accept as natural and genuine the facet of herself which she was about to present to him” (139). The reference to “the facet of herself” illustrates his awareness of Hannah’s private persona in contrast to her public “performance”. Moreover, there is narratorial irony here as Dr. O’Byrne is about to employ “feminine guile” in attaining his daughter’s happiness. Here, O’Brien manipulates essentialist notions of gender as both characters in this scene employ “guile” to achieve their aims. By offering a substantial dowry, Dr. O’Byrne makes the match between Norrie and Tom a genuine proposition, and tells Hannah that he has Norrie and Tom’s happiness at heart. Hannah’s reply betrays her position:

‘I know that. Tom’s happiness is, I confess, almost my one earthly concern.’
The Doctor frowned a little.
‘Easy, easy,’ he said. ‘No son can bear that kind of load, you know.’ (151)

²³ See Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality* (Trans. Robert Hurley). London: Penguin 1998.

At this, the narrator writes, Hannah's eyes turn "cold" (151) conveying her displeasure, but her voice remains polite as she bids the doctor goodbye and asks him to give her regards to Norrie. Hannah gives no credence to the doctor's warning about the demands she is placing on Tom by devoting all her love to him.

Hannah calmly causes the first difficulty by asking the family to keep the "great news" of the engagement to themselves for a few days: "There are things about it which we must discuss a little" (163). The application of secrecy alerts the Bishop, to whom Tom and Angèle have applied for a dispensation to marry on account of being first cousins, to a possible problem. The Bishop, who "admired Hannah very much" (202), sees her request for secrecy as an indication of her disapproval and consequently, denies their immediate request. He cannot speed up the process of a dispensation, he tells them, but will contact the Papal nuncio about their request. In the meantime, he advises Angèle to make a quick visit to France alone and then return to Ireland before war breaks out. The Bishop's advice is pivotal to the unfolding of the breakdown of the relationship between Tom and Angèle, and his admiration for Hannah positions him as a weapon in the carrying out of her scheme to halt the marital proceedings. At the mention of France, Tom notices Angèle's reaction and is concerned and anxious at the "vivid longing in her face" (202). As Angèle speaks to Tom's sister, Jo, about the possibility of Tom accompanying her to France, Jo tells her that Hannah will not allow it, as they are "unmarried". There is narratorial irony here in that as cousins, there is no impediment to Tom and Angèle travelling together, especially as Tom's brother, Martin, does in fact accompany Angèle to France at the end of the novel. Moreover, Jo tells Angèle that Hannah's concern would be that Tom, as a young, healthy man, could incur difficulties if war broke out (207). Again there is irony here, as Tom's brother, Martin, decides to enlist in the French army, a decision approved of in the text with his sympathetic portrayal. Angèle realises that by asking Tom to accompany her to France, she will place him in an impossible situation with his mother. The insularity of the world to which he is subtly confined is signalled by Angèle's exclamation: "Oh, why is she so selfish with him, Jo?" (207) Jo attempts to explain: "It isn't *all* selfishness,' she said. 'It's a sort of tangle of pride and love and various disappointments, I think. Still – I admit you have your work cut out.'" (208) The "disappointments" Jo mentions suggests Hannah's unhappy marriage as the reason for the investing of all her emotion in Tom, which suggests the validation of Dalsimer's argument about the mutual

attachment between Tom and Hannah, as well as Kiberd's argument about the power of the mother as a result of the ineffectual or absent father. Additionally, the attempt to explain Hannah's "selfishness" suggests O'Brien's attempt to explore and understand mothers rather than condemn them.

In *The Last of Summer*, O'Brien juxtaposes the selfish Hannah with neutral Ireland in the face of a world war, and replicates it in Hannah's deliberate ousting of Angèle. Hannah's indifference to the world outside Waterpark House is rendered throughout. As Jo tells Angèle, "[Hannah] lives entirely in Waterpark. I mean, whatever concerns Waterpark constitutes her life." (26) This brings to mind Una Costello's similar boundary of her world being within the environs of Weir House, as well as the wording of the Constitution "by her life within the home". Thus, Waterpark House, in a similar vein to Weir House in *Pray for the Wanderer*, has the hallmarks of a fantasyland with its quiet, contented routine. In a scene where Martin tells the family that Hitler "will take Danzig and Poland any day now. When he does there'll be some news", his mother replies: "For those who're interested" (O'Brien, *Summer*, 48). Hannah's reply symbolises the insularity of Ireland, as one of the newspapers Hannah reads daily is *The Irish Press*, which served as an instrument for the promulgation of de Valera's policies (224). Martin, in his role as foil to his insular brother, continuously attempts to engage his mother's interest in the approaching war, with little effect:

'There's hell's own trouble going on in Danzig, Mother.'
'Danzig's a long way from Drumaninch, my son.' (179)

Moreover, Hannah, as the matriarch of the self-sufficient Waterpark House, can also be read as a representation of the higher classes who were less likely to suffer deprivation, and could afford to be complacent. Angèle, as the representative and commentator for the European position in the text, finds Hannah's attitude difficult to accept: "Aunt Hannah was very safe indeed compared with the women of France, and she was perhaps a bit smug and brutal about that, a shade too uncontrolledly set on preserving her own safety" (48). Here, Angèle reflects the European position on Ireland's perceived lack of empathy for humanity in a world war. Hannah's deflection of the subject of war suggests an inability to identify with the suffering of others that brings to mind Una's bewilderment in *Pray for the Wanderer* at why everyone cannot be as happy as she is

(O'Brien, *Pray*, 134). At the same time, Hannah's choice of words, "houses", diminishes both the scale of the disaster, and the consequences, as she declares: "It's nothing whatever to do with us. A plague on both their houses." (O'Brien, *Summer*, 193) Hannah's indifference to world affairs and her position on neutrality are not upheld in the text, as two of her children choose to participate in the war. Martin chooses to join the Allies, notably, the French rather than the British because, he explains to Angèle, "although I think G.B. will be in on the right side this time, I'd feel funny in the King's uniform" (215). Hannah's daughter, Jo, resolves to join a Belgian rather than an Irish convent, where she feels she will be of more use. (The Irish Catholic Church had strong links with Belgium on account of the number of Irish priests that had been trained in the *Louvain*, a seminary in Belgium). There is no verbal or imaginary remorse attributed to Hannah in the text at the loss of two of her children to a Europe preparing for war. Hannah is focused solely on Tom, as he, unlike his siblings who have spent long periods away from home, validates Hannah's existence, seeks her opinion, and shares her interests in their immediate surroundings.

Just as Martin and Jo attempt to dilute Hannah's extreme behaviour, they carry out a similar function in relation to Irish neutrality, even though they ultimately support the European position. Martin explains the Irish position to Angèle: "This country is Heaven's ante-room,' he said to Angèle, 'whether we like the idea or not.'" (48) As an ante-room is a small room leading on to a bigger room, Martin's sentiment suggests an Ireland on the sidelines. On the one hand, the image of the ante-room evokes Ireland's physical closeness to the UK and Europe. On the other hand, it suggests detachment in terms of Ireland as an island. A further speculation would be that Ireland's position is evoked by the image of a doorway between two attached rooms, which can be open or shut. In addition, by invoking "Heaven" here, the argument about Irish neutrality is situated in a moral frame. Thus, Martin and Jo, in a similar vein to their expressions of loyalty to their mother in the text, despite her questionable behaviour, are deployed as mouthpieces for the expression of ambivalence in relation to loyalty to one's country of origin. In contrast to the ambivalent Irish position, Angèle's views on Irish neutrality, as a European, are to her mind, straightforward: "But the war is easy, for an Irishman,' she said, turning cold eyes on Martin. 'Either you're neutral, as you're told to be, or else you are free to go and take part in it.'" (197) The implication here is that Europeans do not have the luxury of such a choice. However, Wills argues that Irish

people were very much affected by the war, despite the country's neutral stance. There were shortages in food and fuel to contend with and the constant fear that Ireland could be targeted. In addition, Terence Brown writes that a minority believed "that to remain a spectator in such desperate times was to place Ireland in grave moral jeopardy" (Brown, 173). In a similar vein, Brian Fallon argues that one consequence of the neutrality stance was a lingering "core of genuine moral shame that Ireland did not openly take sides in what was obviously a struggle against an evil tyranny" (Fallon, 214).²⁴ In the novel, when war is declared Hannah, to Martin's fury, exclaims: "'Why all this fuss about *Poland*?'" (O'Brien, *Summer*, 217) Hannah dismisses the cares of the outside world and brings the breakfast-table discussion firmly back to her immediate surroundings: "I thought we were neutrals in this house." (218)

In *The Last of Summer*, narratorial disapproval of Hannah is unambiguously conveyed throughout. In contrast to their brother's naive "worship" (75) of their mother, Martin and Jo are aware of Hannah's shortcomings. On meeting his cousin, Angèle for the first time, and hearing the explanation of her existence, Hannah's

²⁴ The issue of Irish neutrality is complex and involves political, economic and moral arguments. De Valera's neutrality policy was widely supported and approved of by the Irish people, as his stance was not to allow the interests of any other country to be placed about those of his own country. His diplomatic skill in such a situation was admirable considering the constant pressure from Britain and the USA. Brian Fallon argues that de Valera "was a product of a school of thought which insisted that small nations had the right to stay out of wars in which they were not directly involved and could achieve nothing positive" (Fallon, 211). See Brian Fallon. *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930–1960*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999. Ireland was one of many small countries, such as Belgium, Holland, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries that decided on non-participation. In practical terms, Ireland had few military resources and no navy, so there was an element of realism in de Valera's stance. As the war in Europe progressed, however, neutrality strategies in Ireland were weighed in favour of the Allies in that German soldiers captured on Irish soil were interred, while allied soldiers were returned home. At the same time, bureaucratic and government delaying tactics meant that refuge was given to very few Jewish children. For a more extensive discussion on this topic, see Mary E. Daly. "Cultural and Economic Protection and Xenophobia in Independent Ireland, 1920s-1970s" in Borbála Faragó and Moynagh Sullivan. Eds. *Facing the Other: Interdisciplinary Studies on Race, Gender and Social Justice in Ireland*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 6-18. RTE Television's *Hidden History* Series brought unsavoury facts to light in a documentary that recounted that some Nazi collaborators took refuge, unhindered, in Ireland, during and after the Emergency. Flemish refugees were brought in via Trappist monks, a link that existed on account of the number of Irish priests who had been trained in the *Louvain* in Belgium. For Flemish refugees, Ireland was seen as the perfect haven, being Catholic and anti-communist, as well as the base for the Republican movement, with which Flemish refugees identified ("Ireland's Nazis". Broadcast on RTE 1, 16 January 2007. Presented by Cathal O'Shannon). Various factors account for Ireland's sheltering of war personnel. De Valera was at pains to maintain a balanced attitude towards both Allies and Axis countries and this stance was replicated in the reporting of war events by eliminating the personal dimension as much as possible, thereby lending an air of detachment to the descriptions of the conflict. Moreover, it would have taken some considerable time for the atrocities committed by the Nazis to become common knowledge, especially as newspapers were heavily censored, and after six years of being "shielded" from the horrors of war, events were difficult for the Irish people to comprehend. See Wills, *That Neutral Island*, pp. 274-5.

younger son, Martin, exclaims in mock surprise: “‘Sure wasn’t Uncle Tom the bachelor of bachelors, the wanderer with the broken heart?’” (13) Moreover, when Martin introduces Angèle to his sister, Jo, he says: “‘You know, Jo – Uncle Tom, who never looked at a woman again!’” (21) Here, the worldly Martin, who serves as a foil to his brother, Tom, who has never left home, is repeating an oft-told tale, while at the same time drawing attention, with Angèle’s arrival, to its now obvious inaccuracies. Martin’s targeted teasing of his mother suggests an awareness of her reasons for preserving the tale of his Uncle Tom’s supposed demise in France. Although his mother’s shortcomings had made Martin “watchful against her, and though he believed he was no longer her fool, he admired her; and he knew that she still had some power over him which it half-pleased him to accept” (186-7). Moreover, he attempts to warn Angèle off while at the same time excusing his mother’s behaviour. Martin tells Angèle that her engagement to Tom is impossible, in words that convey his awareness of where his mother’s affections lie:

‘It’s no good, Angèle. It’s a miserable battle, and you’ll lose it. She doesn’t want you. She hates you – in a way.’

‘Why?’

‘She’d hate anyone Tom loved, I think. She honestly can’t help that.’ (220)

Martin’s choice of the word “battle” indicates his awareness of the unnatural relationship between Hannah and Tom, as he positions Hannah and Angèle as rivals for Tom’s affections. Of course, in the Freudian sense, they are, as Hannah appears to have transferred her desire for Angèle’s father onto her eldest son. It can be argued that the narratorial disapproval of Hannah is primarily on account of her role in the text as the symbol of Irish neutrality. Thus, the relationship between Hannah and Tom is a personification of O’Brien’s relationship with her homeland. Hannah makes no such apologies for the error of her particular mothering, even when confronted with the impact of her obsession with Tom by both Dr. O’Byrne and Angèle.

Angèle eventually realises Hannah’s true feelings about their marriage. When telling her about Tom phoning the Bishop to ask for a dispensation, Angèle detects “a variation of tone” (191) in Hannah’s voice. In contrast to Tom, who is still unaware of his mother’s displeasure, Angèle suddenly realises,

that Tom's mother was her enemy, and that marriage with him on his terms embraced also this ordeal, of living for ever in rivalry, indeed, in an antagonism which could never be expressed, with one whose love for him would always be as unrelenting as it was egotistical. (192)

The dramatisation of a rivalry between a mother and a fiancée vying for the love of one man points to the inappropriateness of Hannah's love for Tom. Moreover, the flawed nature of Hannah's love is highlighted by Angèle's use of the words "unrelenting" and "egotistical". The former evokes intensity, as well as something everlasting, while the latter is about self, in contrast to the idea of bestowing love on another. As Angèle realises that Hannah will, in fact, be her lifelong "rival" if she marries Tom, Hannah eventually allows Tom to become aware that there is a problem. As Hannah broaches the subject, in response to Tom's request to tell him what is bothering her, she conveys a reluctance to speak. The extent of her skill at manipulating her son is made evident by the words she uses:

'I'm the only one who could dare it, actually. And – if you misunderstand me – well, I suppose I'll have to put up with the consequences.'
'I won't misunderstand you, Mother,' he said humbly. 'I promise. After all, I know you.' (227)

The irony here is that Tom does not "know" his mother. In contrast, she uses her knowledge of his character to steer his wish to marry Angèle as a selfish act, when Angèle is clearly, as Hannah puts it, "'unhappy about the war and France and being caught so far away from all her people at such a tragic time'" (228). Here Hannah is prioritising the familial bond over erotic attraction. Thus, Hannah achieves her aim of ousting Angèle by voicing her "worries" (226) to Tom about Angèle's plight in the face of war. She talks about the differences between Tom and Angèle (229-30), and Angèle's similarity, being an actress, to Tom's younger brother, the worldly, artistic Martin (230). Martin's role in the text as foil to his brother is emphasised by Hannah's thoughts on Martin that contrast strikingly to her musings on Tom. Martin's reading material, Joyce's *Ulysses* (108), sets him apart, in Hannah's eyes, as a man of the world, in contrast to Tom who runs Waterpark House, which is, as Jo tells Angèle, the extent of Hannah's world. Thus, Martin represents Europe and the outside world. Moreover, he is rendered in approving terms in the text, as he accompanies Angèle to France, and thereby rejects the cultural insularity of a neutral Ireland. The difference between the

brothers is registered by Dotey earlier in the text. Martin is in Mellick when the news of the engagement is announced, and Dotey comments: “‘Isn’t it a shame for him now, the wanderer, not to be at home with us all for this great occasion?’ said Dotey. ‘Praise be to God, but there’s something very fidgety about that boy, so there is.’” (167) As a “wanderer”, Martin is interested in the world outside Waterpark House, and as a result he does not share either his brother or his mother’s worldview. In addition, Martin is aware, unlike his brother, of the potential for disruption caused by Angèle’s arrival. He is also aware that his mother will not welcome any change to her life in Waterpark House or to her relationship with Tom.

In this way, Martin is pitted as different in his mother’s eyes and suitable for Angèle. Tom, on the other hand, is associated with Ireland. Angèle’s cousin, Jo, expresses the symbolic relationship between Tom and Martin and their eventual choice of abode, as she tells Angèle: “‘For two pins I could make an analogy between Eire and Europe and the boys and you.’” (82) This is the choice that Angèle has to make, as choosing Tom means remaining in Eire where she is not welcome. As Tom later explains the concerns raised by his mother, Angèle realises that she has been outmanoeuvred: “It is hopeless, she thought.” (235) Angèle has no other option but to return to France: “All right, Angèle thought wearily. All right. There’s a war on, and I’m lonely. I’ll go home. You win, Aunt Hannah.” (236) Hannah maintains her innocence about her hand in the break-up of Tom and Angèle’s relationship to the end. To Angèle’s accusations, she replies: “‘Reasons I gave him? But what on earth could you mean, Angèle? [...] You’re talking like a lunatic, Angèle.’” (239) Angèle tells Hannah the damage she has wrought on her son: “‘[D]id you know, could you possibly know, how you cut pieces out of his courage and his goodness last night – so that I’d go?’” (239) Hannah’s reaction to Angèle’s remark is physically manifested, as Uncle Corney on his arrival into the room, observes that Hannah’s “colour was high and angry” (240). The success of Hannah’s skills in relation to the one person that matters to her are rendered by the fact that at no stage in the text does it cross Tom’s mind to attribute any blame for the failure of his relationship with Angèle to his mother. Tom’s passive “choice” to remain with his mother, involves a failure to grasp a future on his own terms, as well as a rejection of the world outside Ireland. Even if Tom does eventually marry his neighbour, Norrie, there is a sense that Norrie, as Tom’s long-known friend, will not be able to engender the emotion Tom has experienced with

Angèle. At the same time, he is capable of being happy with Norrie, as his sister Jo surmises, in terms that position Tom as conservative and insular, that “he was very simple, and needed to be happy in conformity and in the known routine of things” (170). Thus, Hannah will continue to be first in his affections.

Hannah appears unperturbed by Martin’s intention to enlist in the French army. When Jo’s friend, Hugh, asks Hannah if the news of Martin’s intention to enlist is true, she “smiled” saying: ““That’s right, Hugh. He doesn’t seem to understand that the Irish are neutral.”” (241) There is no reference in the text to her feelings about Jo’s departure either. Thus, both Martin and Jo represent the approved narratorial position by actively choosing to participate in the war, despite their ambivalence on the subject of loyalty to one’s homeland. Moreover, Kiberd writes:

This repudiation of the biological parent in a colonial situation takes on a revolutionary character, since it involves not just a rejection of authority but of all official versions of the past; and it proclaims a determination to reinvent not only the self but the very conditions which help to shape it. (Kiberd, 385)

Using Kiberd’s analogy, here, Martin and Jo, by rejecting Hannah, are rejecting Ireland and its regime, while Angèle, by rejecting Tom, is rejecting a life grounded in the familial past. In this novel, Martin, Jo and Angèle leave Ireland in order to seek their own values, in contrast to Tom who by remaining at home, aligns himself with the values of the past. Moreover, Angèle, as model for O’Brien, is, in this text, firmly rejecting an Ireland that is rooted in the past, and unconcerned with the wider world.

In the final scene of the novel, as news that war has been declared spreads, everyone gathers together in Waterpark House. Dr. O’Byrne and Norrie arrive: ““We thought we’d look in on our way from Mass, ma’am,’ he said, ‘seeing the black day it is. Even for us poor neutrals!’” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 241) Hannah agrees that it is a day for being with friends and begins to play the role of charming hostess. She can do this because her personal battle has been won. She has saved her favourite son for herself, but at the cost of her two other children. Martin accompanies Angèle to Europe and to war, and Jo decides to “take the veil” (206) in a European convent. As Hannah reads “two newspapers every day, quickly and attentively” (180), she is aware that two of her children are going to a probable war zone. In this context, Hannah’s indifference is

striking, especially as Angèle initially mistakenly understands Hannah's reluctance to discuss the impending war as being due to having sons old enough to participate in it. Hannah is concerned only with her own immediate affairs. Martin and Jo's decision to leave is the beginning of the permanent physical parting of the family. Tom's thoughts reveal his awareness of this, and expose his attachment to childhood and the past:

Affection between the Kernahans was an active, constant force, a rhythmic anxiety which they concealed fairly well, but which held placidity off from them, and made them all a shade neurotic. [...] He remembered childhood with devotion, and was constantly hurt and made anxious by the breaches, which the grown-up years made and made again in a unit which once had been impregnable. (74-5)

Martin also expresses regret about the division of the family, as he tells Angèle: ““You can always be sad when you think of family life, and the warm illusion it is, and the way it has to split up and leave its units to cool off as they can.”” (216) Martin's words express the exploration of the theme of the mutability of the family. Jo will seek an alternative community in a convent. Martin will be a “wanderer”, as Dotey has called him, and Tom will remain in Waterpark House, bound to his mother. A family member, a cousin, has been the catalyst for change, but no new families will be formed. In a country that premises the family as “the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society” (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.1.1), this suggests that not only can the family unit be destructive and restrictive, but also that the establishing of a family is not the ambition of every individual.

Conclusion

The novels I have discussed in this chapter interrogate the State understanding of “the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society” (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.1.1), as successful models of relating are suggested in each, and the family itself, in its own “natural primary and fundamental unit group” constantly threatens itself from within. In *Pray for the Wanderer*, it is Una’s brother-in-law who threatens the contentment of the family, with his London ways and strong views on Irish culture. In *The Last of Summer*, the arrival of an unwelcome French cousin upsets the equilibrium of Waterpark House and its residents. In these novels, therefore, threats to the family come from an external source that is at the same time from within the extended family. Thus, the Family, as well as being a support to its members and a source of love, is presented in the texts as a unit always living in the shadow of its own dissolution, always in the process of policing its own nature in order to maintain itself as “the fundamental unit group of Society”. Thus, the very “naturalness” of its claims of privilege over all other group relations is seriously interrogated.

In the novels discussed, the notion of woman/mother, as rendered in the Constitution, and mother as representation of Irish culture or Mother Ireland, is shown to be the most dangerous site of this tension, and the member who develops the most extreme self-policing skills, which are then applied to the rest of the family. In “Art, Unconcerned and Lawless: Transgression in the Fictions of Kate O’Brien”, Eibhear Walshe writes: “The progress of O’Brien’s vision from the first novel in 1931, to her last one in 1958 is the progress from entrapment and spiritual deadlock in fictive Mellick towards liberation and self-determination in Europe.” (Walshe in Logan, 47) This is true of her unmarried characters and in *Pray for the Wanderer* a male character is the instrument of escape from “entrapment and spiritual deadlock”. In *The Last of Summer*, it is a woman, but she is French, and although initially seduced by Waterpark House and marriage to her cousin, Tom, Angèle returns to Europe. While the representations of Una Costello and Hannah Kernahan indicate some sympathy in terms of the narrowness of such roles by the rendering of negative, misplaced or excess emotion in the characters, no avenue of escape is provided in O’Brien’s fiction. Una

Costello, in *Pray for the Wanderer*, is still vital and productive, in O'Brien and de Beauvoir's sense of the term, as she is pregnant with her sixth child in the novel. However, Una has the means to ensure that the attendant labour associated with many children is not part of her daily life. Hannah Kernahan, in *The Last of Summer*, maintains her sense of worth beyond the reproductive role by sabotaging her son's future in order to keep him by her side. In so doing, she sacrifices her son's future. Each is an example of the excesses of believing faithfully in the State and Church ideologies of motherhood. In her portrayals of the mother and her position in the family, O'Brien is less conservative and traditional than critics such as Dalsimer and Reynolds have suggested, as the "ideal role of homemaker" in the family, as well as the family itself, as rendered in the 1937 Irish Constitution as the archetypal example in Irish society, is rendered problematic in the texts. Here, O'Brien's questions about motherhood providing total fulfilment suggest the redress of society rather than an outright condemnation of the failure of mothers.

The next chapter will consider the representation of marriage in O'Brien's fiction, focusing in particular on "married" women, Caroline Lanigan and Molly Considine in *Without My Cloak* and the newly married Lilian Morrow in *The Flower of May*.

CHAPTER THREE

WIFE

Introduction

Whilst the last chapter examined how the Church and State discourses of marriage and family conditioned women's relationships with her children, this chapter examines how the same discourses conditions a woman's relationship with her husband. This chapter analyses O'Brien's exploration of the terms of marriage outside a woman's duty to her children, namely wifely duties to a husband as his helpmeet and available comforting body, but also as the provider of his children, through analysing the characterisations of Caroline Lanigan and Molly Considine in *Without My Cloak* as well as Lilian Morrow in *The Flower of May*.

In *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, Lorna Reynolds reported that O'Brien "always spoke of marriage as an undertaking of desperate gravity" (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 36). Nell Mahoney, in *Pray for the Wanderer*, notes the sheer scale of the enterprise of marriage: "Marriage, to her, seemed exacting beyond the courage granted to humanity. Not so much in its central function as in its ramified implications, the sheer measurelessness of its spiritual, emotional and physical claims." (O'Brien, *Pray*, 163) And as the sociologist Kay Inckle writes in "Tragic Heroines, Stinking Lillies, and Fallen Women: Love and Desire in Kate O'Brien's *As Music and Splendour*", "O'Brien's writing is consistently preoccupied with her very critical appraisal of the conventions which dominate heterosexual relationships" (Inckle, 56). The "conventions" here are the portrayal of the dichotomy between human experiences, especially in the context of sexuality, at odds with Catholic teaching and divine expectations of human behaviour, as promulgated by Church teachings, which serve as the primary tension throughout O'Brien's work. In *Without My Cloak*, the juxtaposition of human experience with expectations of fulfilment in the "undertaking of desperate gravity" that is underwritten by a familial, religious and societal framework is dramatised in the portrayal of the unhappy wife, Caroline Lanigan. In *The Flower of May*, Lilian Morrow is employed as a cipher for the discussion of the religious and societal implication of marriage by the intellectual characters in the novel, while Molly Considine in *Without My Cloak* embodies the implications of recurrent childbearing within an institution that has procreation as its primary function.

Just as woman as mother is framed by Catholic teaching on women's roles in the 1937 Constitution, married persons are also subject to religious ideological parameters that make "spiritual, emotional and physical claims" (O'Brien, *Pray*, 163) on the individual in a union that is entered into on indissoluble and irrevocable grounds. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, for instance, the marriage bond is described as having been "established by God himself in such a way that a marriage concluded and consummated between baptized persons can never be dissolved. This bond ... is a reality, henceforth irrevocable" (*Catechism*, 367). As the family is recognised in the Constitution as "the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society" (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.1.1), the institution of marriage, upon which the family unit is based, is safeguarded in the 1937 Irish Constitution. Article 41.3 is modelled on Catholic teaching, as Basil Chubb documented in *The Government and Politics of Ireland*,¹ and states:

<i>Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937. Article 41, The Family</i>		
3	1	The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack.
3	2	No law shall be enacted providing for the grant of dissolution of marriage.
3	3	No person whose marriage has been dissolved under the civil law of any other State but is a subsisting valid marriage under the law for the time being in force within the jurisdiction of the Government and Parliament established by this Constitution shall be capable of contracting a valid marriage within that jurisdiction during the lifetime of the other party to the marriage so dissolved.

This has been subsequently amended by the referendum of 1995, but in its original form was inextricably linked to expectations that women, in order to be proper wives, must also become mothers. As a result, much emphasis is placed on women's role in marriage in Catholic writings. For instance, in his encyclical on Christian Marriage, *Casti Connubii*, Pius XI (1922-39) defined woman's status within marriage as follows:

¹ See Basil Chubb. *The Government and Politics of Ireland*. 3rd ed. London: Longman [1970], 1992, p. 66.

[B]y this bond of love, there should flourish in it that ‘order of love’, as St. Augustine calls it. This order includes the primacy of the husband with regard to the wife and children, the ready subjection of the wife and her willing obedience, which the Apostle commends in these words: ‘Let women be subject to their husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife, and Christ is the head of the Church.’ (Section 26 in Carlen, Vol. 3, 395)

Here, Pius XI presents the idea that the authority of “the man of the house” over his wife and children is as divinely ordained as that of a bishop over his clergy and flock. Up to the point in the encyclical where the Pope included the words of the bishop and theologian, Saint Augustine (354-430), he had addressed the duties of marriage equally to both husband and wife, as did Saint Paul in his *Letter to the Corinthians* (I *Corinthians* 7-8). In that Letter, Paul spoke on the subject of marriage in answer to questions raised by the people of Corinth, and he maintained an egalitarian stance towards both participants. For instance, Paul wrote: “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” (7.4) The expected subservience of wife to husband, as expressed by Pope Pius XI, appeared in Church writings from as early as fifty years after the death of Paul. The *Letter to the Ephesians*, for example, originally attributed to Paul, but now believed by scholars to be the work of a later author, is, as Karen Armstrong argues in *The Gospel According to Woman: Christianity’s Creation of the Sex War in the West*, “fundamentally opposed to Paul’s egalitarianism. Christ is no longer identified inseparably with a Church but is superior to it and independent of it, as a husband is independent of and superior to his wife.” (Armstrong, 261-2)² Moreover, Armstrong argues, the author of the letter “sees the Christian life in terms of subordination of one Christian to another” (262).³ In this

² A similar viewpoint is expressed in *Colossians* 1:18 and 3:18. It is notable also, that in the 101 references to the bible and to the writings of the Church Fathers in *Casti Connubii*, there are only three references to Paul’s egalitarian *Letter to the Corinthians*; I *Cor.* II.9, I *Cor.* VII.3 and I *Cor.* XIII.8.

³ This view reflected hierarchical and patriarchal Ancient Roman systems of government, which were adopted by the early institutional Church as a result of the Emperor Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in the fourth century. In the earliest centuries of its existence, Christianity was seen as a major threat to the Roman Empire on several fronts. Firstly, Christianity was a new religion that proclaimed one God, an alien concept for the Romans, who worshipped many gods. Moreover, its “newness” was unacceptable to a Roman society which placed much value on tradition, so although the Jewish religion was objectionable to many, it had at least an ancient heritage, which could secure it some measure of tolerance, however grudgingly conceded. In addition, Christian views on equality threatened an economy that depended on slavery, although it must be noted that the Christian Roman Empire, in the event, did not overturn slavery. Christian teachings also provided safeguards to women that were not available to them either legally or culturally. The New Testament commanded that husbands should treat

context, Caroline, in *Without My Cloak*, is subject to her husband and to the maintenance of the family reputation, despite her personal unhappiness. In this way, O'Brien politicised the bourgeois marriage by exploring the ramifications of Catholic ideology, and this study is continued in *The Flower of May*, with a more sustained account of the ceremony itself.

Within the Catholic marriage bond, woman is subject to the authority of the Church in the matter of procreation, and this has been interpreted to mean that a woman's body is the property of her husband, which rendered the prosecution of marital rape highly problematic until 1990. Equally, a woman's body was the property of the family itself for increasing it, and nourishing it. Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903), quoting from *Genesis* i.28, set out his views on the purpose of marriage in *Rerum Novarum*: “No human law can abolish the natural and original right of marriage, nor in any way limit the chief and principal purpose of marriage, ordained by God's authority from the beginning. ‘Increase and multiply.’” (Section 12 in Carlen, Vol. 2, 244) Subsequently,

their wives with the same consideration and love that Christ manifested for his Church, and adultery by men was taught to be an equally serious wrong as adultery by women, which was a new concept for Roman society. As a result, women embraced the new religion and played an important role in the perpetuation of early Christianity in the first few decades after the time of Jesus. The inclusion of both sexes in the early Church reflected Jesus' interaction with women, as well as His pronouncements on equality: “So there is no difference between ... men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus” (*Galatians* 3.28). Women also played a part in the ministry of the early Church as deaconesses, as can be seen by the reference to “Phoebe who serves the church” in *Romans* 16:1, and the naming of other women who worked for the service of God. Christianity, for all these reasons, was seen as quite a radical religion. The new religion grew slowly in the first and second centuries and although there was considerable expansion in the third century, it was the support given by the emperor Constantine in the fourth century that contributed to its expansion throughout the Roman Empire. There are conflicting theories as to why Constantine himself supported what was at the time, to some extent, still a minority religion. Eusebius of Caesarea, whose *Church History*, the classicist Averil Cameron writes, “turned into a glorification of Constantine” (Cameron, 47), and who later became his panegyrist, recounts that Constantine had a vision, before the battle that cemented his power as emperor, which convinced him that God was on his side. In contrast, Zosimus, a late fifth or early sixth century pagan wrote that Constantine realised that Christianity was the only religion that would offer him forgiveness for his many crimes, as both Constantine's wife and son died in mysterious circumstances. Whatever the reasons for his support of Christianity, and perhaps Constantine was influenced by his Christian mother Helena's views, it is doubtful, as Cameron points out that “Christianity would have become the dominant religion without imperial support” (77). With growth comes organisation and accordingly, the Church, Cameron argues, became organized and run like the empire itself – along male patriarchal lines. Women, who had played a part in the ministry of the early Church as deaconesses, began to be excluded from Church ministries and decision-making. This was formally consolidated in a ruling made at the Council of Laodicea in 352 which forbade women to serve as priests or to preside over Churches. See Averil Cameron. *The Later Roman Empire: AD 284-430*. London: Fontana Press, 1993. See also T. D. Barnes. *Constantine and Eusebius*. Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 1981. See Zosimus' *New History* for a negative view of the Emperor Constantine. See Tacitus' *Histories* for an account of the Jews in the Roman Empire. I am indebted to Mark Humphries, Professor of Ancient History at Swansea University for his helpful comments and advice on this topic. See Mark Humphries. *Early Christianity*. London: Routledge, 2006.

the Church's position on contraception was set out in Pius XI's 1930 encyclical, *Casti Connubii*. Pius wrote:

Since, therefore, the conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious. (Section 54 in Carlen, Vol. 3, 399)

... and through Our mouth proclaims anew: any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offence against the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin. (Section 56 in Carlen, Vol. 3, 400)

In *Without My Cloak*, Molly Considine and her husband Anthony do not “deliberately frustrate” the purpose of the conjugal act and as a result are the parents of eight children. Molly knows that her husband “deplored for her the discomfort of incessant childbearing and would do much to lessen it, but saw no help within the social and religious code they both upheld” (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 76-7).⁴ In this marriage, the “social

⁴ Even in the aftermath of the first wave of the feminist movement, as Mary Kenny writes, “the Catholic view that God and nature intended sexual intercourse to be fruitful was quite widely held as a correct principle, even if it was not always practiced or observed” (Kenny, 127). See Mary Kenny. *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*. Revised and Updated Edition. Dublin: New Island, 2000. With the reassertion of “natural law” promulgated by the Church, and upheld by the ban on contraception enacted by the State, the lack of public discussion in Ireland about contraception continued up to the 1960s. A study conducted by Betty Hilliard in Cork City on women who did not work outside the home and who became mothers in the 1950s and 1960s, shows a high birth rate, and motherhood as the central role of their lives. The study demonstrates the long-lasting and deep-rootedness of the Church's sway over the institution of motherhood as well as contraception. In “Motherhood, Sexuality and the Catholic Church”, Hilliard wrote: “in talking about their experiences of sexuality, motherhood and the Church, the respondents painted a picture of domination, ignorance and fear” (Hilliard, 139). A striking aspect that emerged from the study was the ignorance with regard to the actual process of childbirth. This created a culture of fear about childbirth, about pregnancy itself and of continuous childbearing. Thus, the reproductive aspect dominated sexual activity and intercourse was beset with fear. As very few of the respondents had even heard of contraception, they had no control over their own sexuality. The consequences of sex rested entirely in the realm of women, as, Hilliard wrote, “despite the risk of pregnancy and a lack of enjoyment, there was a strong sense of a husband being entitled to the sexual availability of his wife” (146). There is little evidence that men were targeted to abstain from sex with their wives in order to relieve the situation. This suggests the validity of the theologian Uta Ranke-Heinemann's argument in *Eunuchs for Heaven: The Catholic Church and Sexuality*, that it was interference with a man's role in procreation that was of most concern. Ranke-Heinemann's argument is supported by the fact that men who could not reproduce were forbidden to marry until 1977. (Ranke-Heinemann, Chapter 20) See Uta Ranke-Heinemann. *Eunuchs for Heaven: The Catholic Church and Sexuality*. Trans. John Brownjohn. London: Andre Deutsche [Hamburg, 1988], 1990. In addition, a long-standing belief, derived from Ancient Greek medical conviction, was that the uterus was merely a vessel for the man's seed and did not play an active part in the reproduction process. This defective biological notion underlies the reasoning behind the actual disregard for women's physical and mental health in their capacity as bearers of children. For the women of Hilliard's study, Church social teaching with regard to the evils inherent in the prevention of conception was a central issue in their lives. As far as the participants were concerned, Hilliard wrote, “sex was for procreation. This was the specific purpose of marriage” (Hilliard, 146). Church scandals proved to be a major turning point in these women's perceptions of the Church, as they undermined so

and religious code” is upheld, while the novel politicises the issue of contraception, as Molly and Anthony’s mutual desire is framed in terms of the consequences of repeated pregnancies. In this chapter, therefore, I argue that O’Brien’s observation that the demands of marriage are perilous does not come from her adherence to the Catholic law that underwrites the Constitution, but from a wider psychoanalytical basis that takes into account the psychic price paid for by women in marriage, both as wives and as bearers of children.

Novels

Without My Cloak, O’Brien’s first novel, was published in 1931 and set in the late nineteenth century. In the Introduction to the 1984 edition of *Without My Cloak*, Desmond Hogan writes: “For a real understanding of Kate O’Brien’s work it is essential to read *Without My Cloak*. Its presence is always there in her other work. In it she swore the affidavits of her fiction.” (Hogan in O’Brien, *Cloak*, xvi) While Hogan’s claim is a large one, it can be substantiated, as the themes of family loyalty, freedom, desires, and religion are reiterated throughout O’Brien’s fiction. *Without My Cloak* tells the story of the Considine family who from humble beginnings grow to a position of prominence and wealth in Mellick, O’Brien’s fictional Limerick. The new freedoms of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century had given Catholic merchants the opportunity to acquire wealth, and consequently, a dramatic rise of a new merchant class, as dramatised by the Considine family, occurred in Ireland.⁵ While the focus in the novel

many aspects of how these women had lived their lives. Hilliard concluded her 2000 study by noting that in the respondents “a new degree of reflexivity and awareness appears to have developed; in particular an awareness of having been dominated by forces outside themselves which had far-reaching effects on some of the most intimate aspects of their lives, including fertility, sexual relations and religious practice” (154). A crucial observation of Hilliard’s was that “although there were some references to political figures, power and control were almost universally associated with religion by respondents” (155). This reflects the power of the Church in affecting State regulations in this regard. See Betty Hilliard. “Motherhood, Sexuality and the Catholic Church” in Patricia Kennedy. Ed. *Motherhood in Ireland: Creation and Context*. Cork: Mercier Press, 2004, pp. 139-159.

⁵ The 1903 Wyndham Act and amending legislation of 1909, made money available for the buying of land which enabled occupiers to become land-owners. It was a victory solely for farmers, as the agricultural labouring classes were not included. The result of proprietorship after decades of land agitation facilitated the continuity of social patterns and attitudes of the latter half of the nineteenth century into Irish rural life of the early twentieth century. In addition, it is likely that the experience of the famine would have engendered prudence in the managing of assets. Concerns with the preservation of family land and status became the prevailing concern, as the possession of land equalled status. Economic consolidation reinforced class structures, which depended on the prospect of inheriting a family-owned business. Emigration and late marriages facilitated the stability of this structure. Breen et al write: “The social class structure represents the way in which the distribution of resources for economic participation is organised in a society” (Breen et al, 11). See Breen et al. Eds. *Understanding Contemporary Ireland:*

is on the male lineage of descent, Honest John, Anthony and Denis Considine, Anthony's sister, Caroline Lanigan, is a significant presence in the text. As an unhappy wife, Caroline serves as a fruitful exploration of the particular demands of heterosexual patriarchal marriage, when marital expectations are not fulfilled. In contrast, her sister-in-law, Molly Considine, is very much in love with her husband, but their physical relationship is framed by the risks involved with multiple pregnancies. By accepting Hogan's suggestion of *Without My Cloak* as a template for O'Brien's work, analyses of the dynamics of the family in which wives are positioned, can also be explored in the rendering of the wedding ceremony of Lilian Morrow in *The Flower of May*, as the narratorial and character-employed commentaries on the ceremony, with which the unfolding of events after the marriage are related, serve as a useful example for widening the scope of the discussion about the demands on the individual woman in the Catholic marriage.

Although most of the narration in each novel is omniscient, in both *Without My Cloak* and *The Flower of May*, there are crucial instances of embedded narration in which the reader is conscripted to specific perspectives when particular characters are also employed to act either as an ironic filter or as a sympathetic prism, with regard to the negotiation with the sacramental and societal implications of marriage in both novels. For instance, in *Without My Cloak*, Caroline's brother, Eddy, serves as the closest observer of Caroline. He is a pivotal character in the novel, a catalytic presence in the lives of others. His is also the view with which the reader is most asked to identify. Eddy is the facilitator for the revelation of Caroline's inner life story. The unusual spelling of his name (usually Eddie) suggests a metaphorical role in the text, referencing a patch of swirling water that stirs up and agitates the smooth flow of, in this case, the Considine way of life. As Caroline's brother, Eddy possesses the closeness needed for the reception of her revelations, and his attachment to her is intense, as his words to his friend Richard convey: "She's always somewhere in my mind, I think." (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 181) Equally, being domiciled in London, he has the geographical and emotional distance necessary for his role as an unjudgemental sounding board, as Eddy is no longer involved in either the daily personal interaction of

State, Class and Development in the Republic of Ireland. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990. Thus, in Ireland, the distribution of resources related to land ownership. The long-awaited realisation of owning one's land ensured a rural Ireland wary of change shored up by a government who took pride in perceived self-sufficiency.

the Considine family or in the local community. Equally, he functions as the first of what became O'Brien's characteristic outsiders or "wanderers", bringing ideas and possibilities to closed family structures and insular national practices. Not only is Eddy an outsider geographically, but the text suggests that he might also be an outsider to a conservative society predicated on heterosexual marriage, as he is described as an "agreeable, courtly fellow, something of a dandy, something of a faddist" (42-3). Eddy is unmarried, vague about his life in London and consequently, a source of unease to his sister, Teresa, who acts as matchmaker whenever Eddy visits home. Teresa believes that "[i]f they didn't get him married off soon, he'd be set in his peculiar bachelor ways" (44).

In *The Flower of May*, the opening wedding ceremony of Lilian Morrow and Michael O'Connor is commented on with narratorial irony. Bill Morrow and Fanny Morrow are utilised in the text to witness and discuss the unfolding of the events of Lilian's wedding ceremony, and its aftermath, in a religious and societal framework. Lilian's cousin, Bill, with whom the reader is asked to identify, comments on the ramifications of marriage throughout the ceremony. Bill Morrow is married with three children, is a solicitor, a drunk and notably cynical about marriage throughout. In contrast to the upholders of the law and the Constitution such as Jim Lanigan in *Without My Cloak* and Tom Mahoney in *Pray for the Wanderer*, who embrace the ideology of heterosexual patriarchal marriage, Bill Morrow is scathing about the ideological implications of the ceremony of marriage. Lilian's sister, Fanny, who rejects the idea of marriage for herself is, as a result, fascinated by the ceremony and afterwards, by the way in which Lilian assumes the role of wife. Thus, this double lens, one from inside the State structures of marriage, the other from outside, provide a telling critique of the consumerist cynicism that underwrites the pieties of the heterosexual Christian marriage described and advised by the State.

The middle-class credentials of the brides are also a factor in the depiction of marriage in O'Brien's novels. The sociologist Pat O'Connor writes in *Emerging Voices: Women in Contemporary Irish Society*, that "ideologically women's 'destiny' lies in subsuming their identity in, and committing their time and energy to 'the family'" (O'Connor, 89). Caroline and Lilian's marriages are typical of the bourgeois patriarchal marriage that O'Connor describes as an "economic contract between the

families of the partners and concerned with property, social position, authority and legitimate sexual procreation” (94). In addition, both Caroline and Lilian’s marriages are rendered in a middle-class framework with the emphasis on beauty as a marketable commodity.

Caroline is the beauty of the Considine family, and she is described as an ornamental commodity, as, for instance, when she is introduced to the reader as having “silky, jewelled beauty” (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 12). This reflects the status of her father Honest John, who takes great pleasure in her appearance, and secures her betrothal to a man with a substantial income. Caroline’s husband, James Lanigan (also called Jim in the text), is “a fine fellow, of distinguished appearance, and coming of dignified middle-class stock” (41). Jim is “dumbly happy in the possession of her”, and views Caroline as “the glory and decoration of his life” (86). Caroline is aware of her status as commodity, as a remark to her brother, Eddy, suggests: ““Oh, yes, he’s proud of me. That’s his consolation – to parade me.”” (58) The language attaching to her, therefore, is one of precious property. On her marriage, value is transferred to her husband, as Simone de Beauvoir described in *The Second Sex*: “The woman’s body is something he buys” (de Beauvoir, 450). Thus, the Considine name enhances the status of Caroline’s husband, who is described as suitably handsome, and a person of good social standing. In that sense, Caroline is suitably beautiful, always correctly and stylishly attired and from an upstanding family, which enhances Jim’s position in society. In addition, Caroline provides her husband with six children, which also adds to her father’s quota of grandchildren. Caroline, on first impressions, therefore, is the beautiful, dutiful daughter and wife, who has behaved, in familial terms, exactly as expected. Thus, Caroline’s beauty and wealth has facilitated the socially acceptable match to James Lanigan, who as a lawyer is an authority figure in the community, and who is symbolically linked to the laws of the land that dictate such a role for her. Her father, Honest John, deems the marriage “exactly the right sort of marriage for a Considine” (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 41). The woman as chattel is dramatised in *Without My Cloak* in both Caroline and Molly’s marriages. Anthony thinks of Molly as his loving little wife, “whose life and thoughts were bound up irrevocably and uncomplicatedly with his” (31). Moreover, Anthony is in charge, as narratorial irony indicates that when Anthony loses his temper with Molly, he lets it “fly above her frightened head” (27). Molly’s secondary role in the marriage is rendered by the fact that it is Anthony who narrates her

story, thereby underlining the omission of women's voices in relation to dictates concerning their own psyches and bodies in perpetuating the model family bred for the good of the State.

In a similar vein to Caroline's marriage in *Without My Cloak*, the suitability of Lilian Morrow's choice of husband, as the general view of the congregation goes, is that "Lilian was making an excellent match" (O'Brien, *Flower*, 10). Lilian is also a beauty, and on securing the suitable Michael O'Connor, Lilian begins her role as wife by furnishing her house in Stillorgan Road to the highest standard. Just as Caroline's "silky, jewelled beauty" (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 12) reflects her husband's status, Lilian is concerned with playing the part of the wife of a wealthy man of status. Marriage, therefore, for the wealthy classes, is a matter of prestige and as Adele Dalsimer wrote in *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study*, "the external impression it makes matters more than the feelings it embodies" (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, 12). The wives discussed in this chapter marry "suitably", firmly rooted in the public *mores* of family, Church and society, but the private experiences of marriage ranges from sadness, resignation, with bright moments of fleeting love. The wives in *Without My Cloak* and *The Flower of May* are constrained by social and religious *mores* and fated to endure loveless marriages, continuous pregnancy and death.

The Wedding Ceremony

The Flower of May opens with the wedding of Lilian Morrow and Michael O'Connor, which is described by the omniscient narrator in deeply ironic tones. Although a wedding evokes scenes of happiness and gaiety, there are many foreshadowing notes of doom and gloom, voiced mainly by a drunken, cynical member of the Morrow family, Cousin Bill. The usual family comments about the bride's appearance and the suitability of the groom are recorded in the thoughts of the congregation, and lead onto these deeply ironic and hyperbolic musings:

Lilian was *their* lamb, led, in a manner of thought, by them to this fine sacrifice; and all feelings added up they looked with a gentle emotion on their offerings. [...] And Lilian herself, a radiant cloud of beauty, appeared exactly what young women desire to be on this, their one, day – a white symbol ... of that which,

having been wooed, can never again be realized after the folding-away of the Carrickmacross.⁶

‘No man goes to bed with his bride,’ said Bill.

The ceremony went through ... without a hitch. (O’Brien, *Flower*, 10)

With this passage, O’Brien ironises the deep spiritual solemnity of the ritual. The words “lamb”, “sacrifice”, and “offerings”, evoke the sacrament of the Blessed Eucharist, which is, in Catholic terms, the sacrifice and sacrament of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, under the appearances of bread and wine, instituted by Christ at the Last Supper. The “Lamb of God” is a liturgical title for Christ that is recited three times before the distribution of the Eucharist at mass.⁷ But of course, the sacrificial lamb here is Lilian, being led to the slaughter of de Valera’s definition of heterosexual marriage. A *Catechism of Catholic Doctrine* explains that Christ instituted the Eucharist “in order that we might have an acceptable sacrifice to offer to God, and a heavenly food to nourish our souls” (*Catechism of Catholic Doctrine*, 84). Here, in this opening passage of the text, Lilian is sacrificed as the nourishment to feed the institution of patriarchal marriage, in which the two participants symbolically become one. That “one” is gendered, as the female is subsumed into the identity of the male. This is signified by the woman’s taking of the male name, and her vows to “obey” her husband. The merging of husband and wife into the person of husband is deliberately caricatured and serves to question the cost of being a wife, to fulfil such ideological dictates literally.

In *The Flower of May*, it appears that Lilian will be entering into a similar role of submission. Lilian’s “bridal white” (O’Brien, *Flower*, 9) is a symbol of purity, while the preceding words “their one day” conveys the limited period of Lilian’s prestige before she loses herself in a marriage where the days no longer belong to her, and time is not her own. The futility of exalted expectations, exalted because there are few other options available to middle-class women, is further emphasised by the narrator’s use of the words, “can never again be realized” (10). Lilian, who “appeared exactly” as she should, is a “white symbol” in that on her wedding day the bride must be beautiful, as well as virginal. In addition, the description of Lilian as a “symbol” picks up the

⁶ “Carrickmacross” is a lace fabric made in an ornamental openwork design.

⁷ The Scriptures provide ample background to this image. In the Old Testament, God commands the sacrifice of a Lamb in preparation for the Exodus (*Exodus* 12:5), and the lamb is the basis for the liturgical ceremony in celebrating the Passover as well as an archetype for the messianic lamb. In the New Testament, the title is applied directly to Jesus by John the Baptist (*John* 1:29-34) and in Christian art, the Lamb serves as a symbol for Christ.

sacrificial theme, as through the symbol of bread and wine, the faithful participate in the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. In the religious context, a symbol bids one to look beyond what the senses perceive as being present and available. Thus, Lilian serves as a symbol for the deep shadows present in the Sacrament of Marriage, so close in sound to the sacrifice that haunts the over-hyped expectations and dreams. She is also ironically symbolically “white”, for her desires spill outside those sanctioned in and by marriage and she disturbs and unsettles the presumption of monogamy and of fettered female desire. Lilian’s subsequent adultery is foreshadowed by the cynical commentator on marriage in the text, Cousin Bill, who quotes from the New Testament *Letter to the Ephesians*, which is read during the wedding service. Bill remarks to Lilian’s brother, Joey: “I don’t know why anyone who reads it gets married.” (11) The verses from *Ephesians* recite the husband’s role as head of the household and the edict that a wife should submit to her husband.⁸ But Cousin Bill’s thoughts are with the groom as he quotes: “*Viri, diligite uxores vestras sicut et Christus dilexit Ecclesiam*” (Men, love your wives just as Christ loves the Church) (11). The groom, in this case, will honour this principle and is almost immediately put to the test by his new wife, Lilian, who places constant financial demands on him, and later commits adultery with the brother of her sister’s friend, André-Marie de Mellin. The text makes clear that grace supplied to the couple in the sacrament cannot, despite its seeming superpowers, keep desire within the marriage.

The administration of the Sacrament of Matrimony by the Church is for the provision of grace to the couple involved. Pius XI explained his concept of divine grace, as well as the rewards for consenting to marriage in the 1930 papal encyclical on Christian Marriage, *Casti Connubii*. Pius XI wrote:

By the very fact ... that the faithful with sincere mind give such consent, they open up for themselves a treasure of sacramental grace from which they draw supernatural power for the fulfilling of their rights and duties faithfully, holily, perseveringly even unto death. Hence this sacrament ... adds particular gifts, dispositions, seeds of grace, by elevating and perfecting the natural powers. (Section 40 in Carlen, Vol. 3, 397)

⁸ See *Ephesians* 5.21-33. Scholars express doubt as to whether this passage was actually written by Paul as “nowhere do the undisputed Pauline Letters call for the subjection of wives” (*Harper Collins Study Bible*, 2199, n. 5.24). See *HarperCollins Study Bible*, NRSV. London: HarperCollins, 1989.

In this passage, grace is described as a supernatural gift from God, which assists persons in achieving eternal salvation through the Sacrament of Matrimony, as well as bestowing on the participants the qualities needed to live within the requirements of natural law. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,

This grace proper to the sacrament of Matrimony is intended to perfect the couple's love and to strengthen their indissoluble unity. By this grace they 'help one another to attain holiness in their married life and in welcoming and educating their children.' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 367)

In *Without My Cloak*, Caroline explains her interpretation of marriage that reflects this view, to Richard Froud:

'[T]he priest told me that a sacrament is a means of grace – and that the sacrament of matrimony would give me grace to be a good and happy wife. I didn't know what he meant. But often afterwards I wondered what I had done wrong that I hadn't been given that grace.' (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 191-2)

Caroline has not, in her terms, received this “grace”, and has been deemed unworthy, in her own eyes, by God, for the receipt of the “particular gifts” to fulfil her “duties”. From the believer's perspective, therefore, a failed marriage is a source of personal failure and divine disregard. The Catholic marriage is imbued with enormous expectations that if not fulfilled can be viewed as no less than a catastrophe. As Armstrong argues, in circumstances where marriage is imbued with such high expectations, “marriage has been transformed into an earthly paradise; expectations are raised for both men and women that cannot possibly be fulfilled. For woman particularly, as marriage is her only world, this is catastrophic.” (Armstrong, 290) Caroline gradually realises that her expectations of marriage, in the context of the Sacrament of Matrimony, were unrealistic but understandable. She explains this to Richard: “‘I didn't know what marriage was. You see, Richard ... you see, for Catholics marriage is – is a sacrament. It's not supposed to be so much a personal matter as something you undertake to do because it's – well, really I suppose because it's God's will.’” (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 191) In the text, Caroline positions Catholic marriage as a duty undertaken for the “common good” of society. In this way, O'Brien questions the high cost paid for by the emotional health and self-respect of many women struggling to do the dutiful thing, when duty calls for the submitting of the will

to the “head of the house”, bearing children, and fidelity to others over the self. For Caroline, the struggle to do the right thing turns, for a short time, into the “impulse to struggle free” (Gilbert and Gubar, xii).

In *The Flower of May*, the struggle between patriarchal civilisation and its married discontents continues when the themes of the “common good” and the “personal matter” of marriage are wryly commented upon by the narrator:

In so artificially-poised an assembly as a wedding party, where behaviour simplifies itself into mass formations, momentarily – as a hint may dictate of unaccustomed tribe loyalty, or momentarily, again, of rash and random embracement of the new, which cannot be helped – in such a social moment it is difficult to pick out and follow one theme; more difficult to espy and follow one constant, one truth. Yet the story here to be told is of a constant, a truth; or rather of a vessel, a carrier of truth – seeking its groove, as it were, its rail, its inevitable direction; and certain moreover that the quest is normal and will be justified. (O’Brien, *Flower*, 20-1)

Here, Lilian is “the vessel”, “seeking its groove” in marriage. In this passage, O’Brien juxtaposes the “artificiality” of the ceremony, its fleetingness, “momentarily”, with the aftermath of the couple “seeking its groove”. Lilian’s “quest” is in marriage, which will follow an “inevitable direction”. The masking of individualism at social gatherings is alluded to by the narratorial question about the wedding party: “[T]hey are visible life and its mirrors; and they and their multiple reflections – which are which? – contain us and our questions” (21). This comment brings to mind the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s theory of the “mirror stage”.⁹ To take the aspect of the theory where the child begins to conceive of itself as a unified being, separate from others, here it can be argued that Lilian is now to be separated from her family, an experience de Beauvoir described for a young bride, as the “anguish of abandonment” (de Beauvoir, 476). In addition, the gaiety of the wedding celebration masks the myriad of thoughts and feelings beneath the surface of outward happiness, as the characters behave as is expected of them at such an “artificial” gathering. Julia, hosting the wedding celebration, masks her dislike of her daughter’s new family, while Fanny, despite the jokes about her being next to marry, masks her certainty that it is a path she is not

⁹ See Jacques Lacan. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1977.

interested in taking. In addition, the bridegroom is soon to be disabused of his notions about the “the glory he had won at the altar” (O’Brien, *Flower*, 203).

The speculations, jokes and comments about Lilian and Michael made by the O’Connor family at the reception are brought to an end by Father Fogarty, who reasserts the religious connotations of marriage. In a scene that reflects his growing discomfort with the tone of the jokes about the married pair, he reminds the guests, “[w]e witnessed the conferring of a great sacrament today,’ he said nervously. ‘I think we can confidently leave the two who received it to God’s grace.’” (14) Reacting to his words, Lilian’s sister, Fanny, reflects: “‘Priests tend to say interesting, enigmatic things,’ she thought. ‘I suppose it’s living alone that gives them that peculiarity.’” (14) There is irony in this remark in that confidence in the grace of the Sacrament of Matrimony is expressed by a priest, who as a committed celibate will never have to live in union with another human being. Thus, O’Brien juxtaposes the unfolding of Lilian’s experience of marriage in the context of the dichotomy between human experience and divine directives and pledges, as set out by the ritual of the Sacrament of Matrimony, in order to dramatise her interpretation of the “spiritual, emotional and physical claims” of marriage (O’Brien, *Pray*, 163).

Caroline Lanigan: Religion versus Psychology

In *Without My Cloak*, Caroline Lanigan encounters a friend of her brother named Richard Froud who is what Dalsimer calls “a metaphoric construction representing the possibility of Caroline’s escape” (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, 14). Caroline talks at length to Richard Froud about marriage, a conversation that she is unable to have with her husband, as she tells Richard that the time she has spent with him is ““all I’ve ever had and to the end of my days I’ll thank you for it.”” (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 196) Such unburdening in a way that can be described as freely associated, suggests that Richard’s surname is a play on “Freud”, and it would appear that the text encodes considerable playfulness with regard to the playful diminutive version of his first name, the contexts of Caroline’s dilemma and the phallogentrism of Freudian theory. Caroline discusses the full extent of her unhappiness in personal, religious and familial terms, despite the fact that Richard is, to all intents and purposes, a stranger to her, and he acts more as a catalyst and a sounding board than as a full interlocutor. Thus, he serves as a narratorial device for the foregrounding of Caroline’s inner story, in a space away from Ireland, and away from her own nuclear family. Moreover, the relationship between them is a therapeutic one, as it allows Caroline to reach a resolution under the auspices of modern discourses of psychology, and by her moving away from religious interpretations of being. In this way, the manifestations of Caroline’s unhappy marriage are juxtaposed in religious and psychological frameworks. One story, structured by religious dictates, happens in Ireland and is framed by her relationship with her religious-bound husband; the other, structured by modernising individualistic discourses of self-fulfilment and choice, happens in London and is framed by her relationship with Richard Froud.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud discussed the role of religion in relation to happiness, arguing that taboos, laws and customs place restrictions on choice, which promotes the idea that there is only one kind of sexual life open to everybody. This one kind of sexual life is further expected to be legitimately and monogamously practiced. Thus, the civilising process imposes restrictions on individuals, and as a result, Freud wrote: “[w]hat we call our civilization is largely

responsible for our misery” (Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 86). Freud attributed this to the fact that societal power outweighs individual power in the process of civilization and argued that in order to accommodate this process, the individual has to repress or suppress her instincts. Furthermore, it is then likely, Freud suggested, that fear of other’s opinion comes into play in containing modes of behaviour in a society.¹⁰ The development of the individual encompasses a struggle between the energy drive or libido (*Eros*), and the instinct of destruction or death (*Thanatos*), which works itself out in the human species. When the desire for aggression is internalised and the conscience or “super-ego”, as Freud termed it, acts as monitor on the ego’s desires, the ensuing conflict manifests itself as a sense of guilt. Wrongdoing can be hidden from an Authority, but not from the “super-ego”, which as a consequence, presses for punishment. Caroline’s struggle between *Eros* and *Thanatos* is dramatised by the wide chasm between the gravity of the Sacrament of Marriage and the “spiritual, emotional and physical claims” juxtaposed by Caroline’s bid for escape from her marriage and her bewilderment at the lack of happiness in a union that was undertaken within all the correct parameters. Caroline finds that the reality of her unhappy marriage engenders profound disappointment, especially when undertaken with the promises and expectations of the sacrament of marriage outlined with such authority by her priest. The pivoting ritual in Caroline’s story is the sacrament of marriage, as Caroline’s exemplar of marriage rests on a very literal expectation of the ritual, which serves as the primary tension in her story: “I prayed and prayed and made novenas, and for years I was positive that something would surely happen to make me love my husband.” (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 192)

Caroline does not love her husband and worst of all, there is no particular reason for that lack of love. Caroline’s marriage has been made on material terms, rather than

¹⁰ Freud’s argument about guilt is represented in the texts as O’Brien’s heroines, who “sin”, in terms of Catholic teaching on sexuality, expect retribution and consequences for their actions. However, while on the one hand acknowledging those consequences, O’Brien does not attribute feelings of actual guilt to her female characters. In *Without My Cloak*, for instance, the peasant girl, Christina finds, to her surprise, that she cannot bring herself to “feel” the sin of loving Caroline’s nephew, Denis. Christina, the text indicates, was “conscious, as a well-trained Catholic, that she was gambling an eternal heaven for a fleeting one, and newly aware with a shock that made her smile that it was possible to commit what priests call mortal sin without the faintest sense of guilt” (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 308). Although, the acknowledged constraints of religion and society pervade the love scene between Denis and Christina, Christina “gave herself up, with the catechism’s ‘perfect knowledge and full consent’, to her desire for Denis” (308). In contrast to Caroline, Christina chooses to fulfil her desires despite knowing and acknowledging the cultural and religious obstacles. See Kate O’Brien. *Without My Cloak*. 3rd Ed. London: Virago, 2001.

personal ones. But it is the lack of the latter that causes her unhappiness. The foreshadowing of Caroline's marital unhappiness is conveyed by the ironic tone used by the narrator in the description of her marriage: "Her marriage had been staggeringly correct and had come to pass without the least manoeuvring." (41) The word "staggeringly" implies that Caroline's marriage is so suitable with regard to Jim's status, looks and prospects as to be almost exaggerated in terms of it as a perfect union. Moreover, "staggeringly" conveys unsteadiness, which hints at instability in Caroline and Jim's marriage. Caroline's father, Honest John's impression of Jim is that he is "a bit dry and dictatorial for his age" (41). In addition, Caroline's brother, Anthony, ponders on his sister and "wondered idly ... that ten years of life with that thin-lipped fellow – he didn't care much for Lanigan – had dimmed so little of her radiance" (41). The description of Caroline's beauty encompasses the fairy-tale myth: "Her eyes were brilliant lightning-blue; her hair was the fairy-tale raven's wing, and fairy-tale blood-red came and went in her cheeks." (41) The repetition of "fairy-tale" evokes stories of the perfect marriage in tales such as Snow White with the expectation that the beautiful woman lives happily ever after with her handsome prince. Caroline possesses the beauty of the fairy-tale heroine, she also chooses what she assumes to be the handsome prince, but they do not live "happily ever after". Additionally, in the fairy story, the prince wants to buy, from the seven dwarves, the coffin in which the beautiful Snow White is displayed for all to see and admire, which brings to mind Jim's notion of Caroline as "the glory and decoration of his life" (86). Here Jim's view reflects the fairy-tale, as the object of his desire is framed as a fantasy rather than as a reality.

Jim's inability to live in the reality of his marriage, and with the substance of the woman to whom he is married, is narrated in Eddy's thoughts on Jim's failure to love Caroline "naturally":

If only Jim had had the very ordinary fortune to give back to his wife the sensual release he took from her... Eddy Considine, connoisseur of love and passion, allowed himself to wonder for the thousandth time what manner of man his brother-in-law was, who was either so unversed in woman as not to be aware how he had failed his wife or was too proud and timorous of the flesh to speak to her of such a thing or to try and set it right by a new wooing. Poor Jim! Poor married man, who had no words with which to steer desire, who was dumb and, as Eddy thought, not more than a beast in the country of love! Poor Jim, who had no bridge to throw between night and day, between flesh and spirit! (173)

The irony in Eddy's thoughts is intense, as Jim, despite his status of authority as a lawyer, in a profession that demands skill with words, "has no words" to resolve his marital situation. Jim is aware that his wife does not desire him, as he recalls one occasion when he heard "revulsion" in her voice as she asked him, in despair one night, not to touch her again (86). Jim honours Caroline's request but as a result is "wounded", "sick", "perplexed" and tormented". Moreover, he had "been shocked to the last reaches of his heart by the flagrant misery of her voice" (86). However, Jim is unable to reach out to Caroline, as "[h]e belonged chronologically and in spirit to a time when the sexual problems of marriage had to be left dumbly to darkness and the night" (87). Despite Jim's access, as a man, to contemporary pioneering humanistic medical and scientific discourse, and the eloquence that is a necessary element of his profession, he is unable to overcome the cultural context of sexual repression in terms of personal discourse. Jim "has no words" to bridge the gap between the public world in which personal emotion is not spoken of, and the private world that he and his wife unhappily inhabit. It is as a result of Jim's "failure", Eddy surmises, that Caroline's nerves are "frayed to tatters from loathing of a man's desire, from disturbance and frustration of her senses" (173). Thus, Caroline's relationship with her husband is rendered as polite and superficial, and she is aware that there is something missing in her life, "as if she saw the shape of joy but was never allowed to feel its warmth" (141).

Caroline and Jim's marriage exemplifies a middle-class family space, described in "Women, Domesticity and the Family: Recent Feminist Work in Irish Cultural Studies", by Clair Wills, "as a place of contestation between tradition and modernity, where domesticity was embraced but privacy and bourgeois forms of intimacy were held at bay" (Wills, "Women, Domesticity and the Family", 53). The Lanigans maintain the appearance of the modern, civilised middle-class family with domestic staff in the house to ensure high standards of domesticity, thereby upholding the communal ethos promulgated by Church and State. At the same time, Caroline's aspiration for personal fulfilment cannot be either verbalised or acted upon, thereby rendering intimacy between the couple null and void, as well as sacrificing the individual need for the communal good. Caroline's "impulse to struggle free" (Gilbert and Gubar, xii), therefore, takes place in the private sphere, treated here by O'Brien as a political space in which the battle between tradition and modernity takes place, as acting on that impulse has implications for the public face of the family. In this way, the

contrast between outer appearances of exemplariness and Caroline's inner unhappiness is established. The public presentation of the marriage is reflected by Caroline's embodiment of the dutiful, Catholic wife, who remains for twenty years in an unhappy marriage. The inner Caroline is rendered in the text with the carefully built up sense of oppression that climaxes as an overwhelming feeling of suffocation. Thus, Caroline's unhappiness is manifested in the framework of Freudian repression, rendered by Freudian slips in references to her body, as the conflict in her life centres on bodily desires that she has difficulty in expressing, even to herself, juxtaposed with religious edicts and expectations, as well as familial constraints. Her body was given to her marriage, for her husband and for procreation, but here it tries to reclaim her spirit for her by exceeding its duties and proscriptions within the family. A key trope in O'Brien's work is the management of energy in her characters, whether they express or deny their "life force". Thus, their bodies are at odds with what they would aspire to, and the resultant unhappiness is betrayed by the desires of the body, and in the bodily expression of that unhappiness. Moreover, Caroline is compared to her brother, Anthony, "with his vitality and glow of health, attributes that had brought her gallantly through much childbearing" (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 41). However, Caroline's "vitality" is denied full expression in the context in which she lives, and her seeming contentment is betrayed by her body's expressiveness of discontent – her Freudian slips. As a result, Caroline's outer public presentation is interrupted for the reader by glimpses of the inner Caroline, which is exposed in the text through her eyes, hands and voice, the speaking body of psychoanalysis.

The thwarting of Caroline's energy is depicted in physical terms: "She never lifted her face to the sun nowadays that her body was not conscious of frustration." (141) However, Caroline is not given an insight into the exact cause of her "frustration", as reflects the sheltered upbringing of a nineteenth-century middle-class woman. Moreover, bodily manifestations of unhappiness and dissatisfaction come to a climax for Caroline in Spring, with its promise of the beginning of a new cycle of life, as indicated in a scene where her nephew, Denis, finds her in the garden that is abundant with flowers, "weeping hysterically" (143). Denis is deeply disturbed by the "figure of woe and despair" (143), but as he is too inexperienced and young to comment editorially on Caroline's despair, the reader is returned to the insights of the omniscient narrator, who draws Caroline's unhappiness as pitted between the manifestations of an

unnamed physical desire in Freudian terms, and the moral edicts concerning the channelling of desires and energies. She was

weeping for untested youth, for twenty years of wifhood ... for unimportant things of whose existence she only knew by hearsay – love and frivolity and foolish talk and lovers' friendliness, and the pleasures and satisfactions of passions for which an ironic god had surely built her. (143)

The text depicts Caroline's predicament sympathetically, as she knows about love only "by hearsay", and the comment on Caroline's passions, "for which an ironic god had surely built her", raises the question as to why a being is created that possesses passions that cannot be satisfied within specific familial, religious and societal codes. A partial answer may be taken from O'Brien's unpublished screenplay, *Mary Magdalen*. While it cannot be assumed that one of O'Brien's texts, given her long career, answers another one, there is an argument that there are certain questions raised by one text that find some level of resolution in another, however partial. In O'Brien's screenplay, the theme of the unimportance of human emotion, in terms of the promise of eternal life after death, is highlighted by the emphasis placed on eternal matters throughout. For instance, when Jesus fails to arrive in time to prevent the death of Lazarus, Mary explains to her sister: "I don't think he's concerned with human feelings, Martha." (O'Brien, *Mary Magdalen*, 49) This ties in with Catholic ethos that places a higher value on the heavenly soul over the earthly body, and the *Catholic Dictionary* explains that the soul, which is created directly by God, is "immaterial, rational, and immortal". In this context, the soul is of high value in contrast to the mortal body that dies. Throughout the text, Caroline prays to Our Lady of Victories to whom she has a little altar in her bedroom. In this way, Caroline's inculcation of duty to her husband implicit in the Sacrament of Matrimony, as well as to the ideal of the "common good", is dramatised by her continuing religious faith despite the disappointment of her marriage. On one occasion, in a mood of optimism that her prayer will be answered, she imagines, that "[s]he would not have been surprised if He had made her fall in love with Jim then and there, for that simple thing alone was needed to put her life in order. And how easy for God!" (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 97) The trust in the promise made by Jesus to "ask and you shall receive" (*Luke* 11:9) is also rendered in Caroline's hopes. As a result, that night, Caroline invites Jim to embrace her. Her body, however, does not match her mind's intention, as when his arms tightened around her, "and his mouth was on her neck, she

caught back a shudder with skill she had taken long to learn but which two years' disuse had not overthrown" (88). The representation of Caroline's anguish at the unfortunate state of her marriage in light of the promises assured by the administration of the sacrament of marriage demonstrates the profound nature of the ritual, which was underpinned by the solemn promises promulgated in papal encyclicals.

The narrative signals Caroline's plight through subtle physical descriptions rather than through overt plot or discussion of inner turmoil. Her beauty "was burning frostily now" (41) and her eyes "were guarded" (42). However, Eddy, as the occasional visitor is placed in a better position to observe the changes in Caroline between visits. As he thinks about her he wonders, "oh, what were Caroline's eyes and mouth forever wanting?" (140) He decides that the change in her beauty is due to defiance: "It seemed to [Eddy] that youth shone so gallantly through Caroline because it had become defiant and was refusing to lie down" (140). It is Caroline's suppressed emotion that refuses "to lie down", and the emergence of emotion is indicated by her constantly moving hands, that become "joined" (52) and "linked" (84), as Caroline's sense of suffocation comes to a climax. One morning at breakfast, she "knew that she must get a breath of air before she died." (148) Thus, almost on a whim, Caroline, by engineering an opportunity to escape and capitalising on it, flees home, husband and children. The facilitator of her escape is the unknowing alibi, Mrs. Dominic Hennessy. In a similar vein to Eddy whose distinctiveness from the other members of the Considine family is pointed to, Mrs. Hennessy also stands apart from her neighbours, which allows for her use as the means of Caroline's escape. Although Mrs. Hennessy is married to the "well-tailored" and "legal-looking" (147), Mr. Dominic Hennessy, she is closely watched by the Mellick community. This is because she is a sophisticated Dubliner. The city of Dublin, therefore, is set up as a place of possibility and in Caroline's case, a source of sin, as while there, she lies to Mrs. Hennessy about the reasons for her visit, and enacts her plan to escape. Although Mrs. Hennessy's dutiful behaviour as a Catholic wife and mother of seven appears exemplary, there is a feeling among her peers that she is "fast" (147). She enjoys the company of young military men and possesses "a pair of exquisitely useless white hands" (147). The description of Mrs. Hennessy suggests the uneasiness generated by those who stand out in any way, and thus she serves as a perfect foil for Caroline's flight.

Caroline seeks refuge with her favourite brother, Eddy, in London. The image of suffocation and physical oppression is again repeated in relation to Caroline when telling her woes to Eddy, on reaching London. The relating of her story makes her “choke and catch her breath” (172). Caroline is fully aware of the implications of her actions:

She was running away. It was an unheard-of thing, a ruinous, preposterous, inconceivable thing, a sin, a disgrace, a family shame, a scandal, a ringing mockery, a butchering of all their pride to make a Mellick holiday. Torture for Jim, and the jibings of the town. (148)

Caroline’s focus here is on the religious and societal effects of her actions, rather than on her own personal unhappiness. Moreover, Caroline’s hope that her actions will change her situation is framed in religious terms. Eddy tells his friend: “I believe she thinks that if she lights enough candles to-day in the Oratory God will oblige by bringing the end of the world to-morrow night.” (181) In London, Caroline falls in love with Eddy’s friend, Richard Froud. Richard symbolises the idea of an alternative life, one that is modern and progressive, an idea that Caroline explores, but it is one she ultimately rejects, as familial bonds prove too strong to break. Thus, Eddy’s domicile in London facilitates Caroline’s escape, and his lack of tradition with regard to the necessity of a chaperone, allows Caroline to spend a day alone with Richard. Caroline’s falling in love is a presentiment to the experience as a rite of passage for O’Brien’s heroines, whatever the rights and wrongs of the suitability of the love object or the durability of the affair. Thus, Eddy also facilitates the development of Caroline’s character, through her experiences in London. As a result, she learns about the nature of the heretofore unnamed “frustration” she had experienced. Moreover, in London, as Caroline drives with Richard, the murmuring of the Thames, instead of signalling change, movement and possibility, initiated by the symbolic catalyst, “Eddy”, evokes for Caroline the river at home, the “river of all the generations that she knew” (183). This image brings to her mind all the family members, various people of the Mellick community and Jim, all of who are “borne forward involuntarily on the flood”, as if “in an earthquake rush to overtake her” (184). In that moment, as Caroline is metaphorically drowned, the implications of leaving her family behind are revealed to her, through eyes that become “disconsolate” (184). Caroline finds that she cannot forsake all she knows for the possibility of happiness.

Caroline's actions are discovered when Mrs. Hennessy meets the person with whom Caroline is supposed to be visiting in Dublin, Jim's aunt, Mrs. Munnings. Mrs. Munnings is perfectly positioned in the text to grasp the situation, despite Mrs. Hennessy's attempts to cover up her enquiry about Caroline, as the ironic description implies:

Mrs. Munnings was a woman with a presence; she was sixty-five and lived virtuously in Mount Street, the widow of a once-popular and rakish barrister. She stalked through life nowadays with an expression in her eye that made it clear that if she had, for reasons best known to herself, stood this, that, and the other from Thady Munnings, she was by no means going to stand anything similar from other people. (151)

Thus, the hyperbolic Mrs. Munnings is "virtuous" and an upholder of the patriarchal ideal that necessitates the submission of a woman in marriage, even if it is difficult. As a result, she is not going to support any other woman escaping her duty. Mrs. Munnings wastes no time in obliquely informing Jim about the news of Caroline's departure to London. The need for caution is signalled by the fact that the news of Caroline's sudden trip to Dublin is already "all over the town" of Mellick (156). The rapid spreading of the news indicates the claustrophobic aspect of life in Mellick, which parallels Caroline's feeling of suffocation. The family quickly put a plan into action to counteract the rumours circulating about Caroline's absence. The spur for the quick action by the family is positioned in class terms, as the family are concerned at the damage the gossip might do to the prospects of Millicent Considine who is being wooed by the eminently suitable Gerard Hennessy. Millicent's mother and Caroline's sister, Teresa Mulqueen, concur: "Wasn't it common knowledge in Mellick that no Hennessy had ever been allowed to take a wife from where the breath of scandal passed?" (157) Teresa sums up the situation. A jilt from Gerard Hennessy would not only be a disappointment for Millicent and her mother, Teresa muses,

and heaven knew that was bad enough, with the girl so hard to get off. Nobody wanted another old maid, but being one man's leavings wasn't going to help her with the others... But the real sting was that the Considines had begun to accept the Hennessy alliance and that Mellick knew this. [...] If it fell through now, therefore, Mellick would laugh. (158)

Here Teresa positions the family's public standing as the most important aspect of the situation. Millicent's "marketability" is compromised on account of her implied lack of beauty. Her precarious status is emphasised with the role of "old maid" being a strong possibility, as she is proving "so hard to get off". Moreover, her reputation can be tainted and her prospective marriage called off by the unexpected action of a member of her extended family. The passage also demonstrates the powerful concept of women as carriers of respectability, as the entire family can be compromised by the behaviour of one person. As Kate Millett argued in *Sexual Politics*, the Family "is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. Mediating between the individual and the social structure, the family effects control and conformity" (Millett, 33). The preservation of this ideology is represented by the Considine family's inability to countenance Caroline's attempted escape from the family and consequently, they rush to shore up the fracture.

In this way, the interrelationship of patriarchal institutions, that of the family, the State and the Church, that serves to preserve the co-operation of family and society in maintaining the "common good" (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.2.1) is dramatised. Narratorial irony and disapproval underlies the unfolding of Anthony's thoughts, the male head of the Considine family and his brother Father Tom, who symbolises the moral authority of the Church, as they absorb the news of Caroline's flight:

They saw to the last reaches of this offence against them and down to its smallest implication. It would occur to neither of them to set his sister Caroline above his surname. They could be kind, but she must be submissive. This madness! This sudden heaving up of dark, undiscussable things to jeopardise them – panic and wantonness and bedroom sulks, flung out to the world without shame, to make a fool of Jim, begrime them all, and set the town in a laugh! (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 159)

The primary consideration in the thoughts of the patriarchal pillars depicted here is the family reputation and status, and Caroline's personal distress must remain an "undiscussable" matter. That Caroline chose to discuss it was too transgressive, and her only hope of kindness was to return to a state of submissiveness. Such a relationship between what the Church deems discussable, and the freely associating modes of discourse practised by psychoanalysis, demonstrates the operations of secrecy and non-telling of "undiscussable" acts that not only facilitated unhappiness in marriages, but

also domestic violence and sexual abuse, both in families and institutionally. A similar reaction is recorded in the thoughts of the female members of the Considine family, that also reflect gendered double standards, as Teresa's view on Caroline's flight suggests: "It was beyond the span of Considine thought that a wife should leave a husband. A husband might conceivably desert a wife – but – oh well, what was the good of raving?" (158) Teresa's thoughts on the unthinkable of a wife leaving a husband suggest that even when both partners are tied into a lifelong alliance, there is still inequality. Her brothers assume that there is a man involved, to which Teresa retorts: "'If she's been so mad,' she said, 'as to run away from one man after twenty years of it for no reason than to go straight to another–'" (160)

In addition, Caroline's flight is judged in the reflections of Anthony and Father Tom as being the "pitiful antics of a woman not far from her dangerous time" (159), which situates her actions as those of a menopausal woman, with the menopause situated in terms of madness. Eddy too is ambivalent, as on the one hand, "[i]t was the commonplace of her ill-luck that hurt him", while on the other hand, "[a] physiological commonplace – that was all Caroline's trouble, drench it however the silly creature might in tears and modesty and hesitation" (173). Despite Eddy's love for Caroline, he is initially annoyed at the fuss created in his orderly life, "and all for a lovely goose who didn't know her day was over" (154). Here the reference to Caroline's day being "over" brings to mind the association between the end of the childbearing years with the aging female body. Caroline, because of her dutiful behaviour, could stretch her day until she was no longer childbearing, whereas for Lilian Morrow, her one day was not to last beyond the wedding itself. As de Beauvoir explained,

woman ... is still relatively young when she loses the erotic attractiveness and the fertility which, in the view of society and in her own, provide the justification of her existence and her opportunity for happiness. With no future, she still has about one half of her adult life to live. (de Beauvoir, 587)

Caroline has produced and reared six children, and is still beautiful and vital, but this still bountiful energy has no outlet, which for Caroline is catastrophic.

Caroline's hopes for a "miracle" are quashed as her bid for escape lasts only a few days as the family, Anthony, Father Tom and Teresa, rather than her husband,

swing into action in order to bring her back to Ireland. Anthony is shocked by Jim's refusal to persuade Caroline to come home, and asks: "What sort of husband was this, that knew nothing of love and pursuit? Was it any wonder that a woman left him?" (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 168) Similarly, Caroline reflects: "Where could you hide in Mellick from a loving husband? Where could you hide from twenty years of 'my dear' and arid passion." (148-9) Jim's "aridness" is reflected in his "cold" laugh (166) to Anthony's question about there being another man involved, and his "little dry laugh" when Anthony tries to persuade him to bring Caroline home (167). Caroline tries to explain the bonds that restrain her to Richard: "All the people I've ever known in these twenty years... I'm crushed by them, Richard. I'm owned by them." (195) Here, Caroline confirms her status as chattel, and she chooses to return to the family as is expected of her by her family, her religion and society. The implications of Caroline's struggle, in Freudian terms, "civilization" instead of "id", are rendered through Richard Froud's eyes. He sees her

grieving because these things all meant so much to her, and yet did not mean enough. He saw a face full of small personal sorrow for little things of the flesh that would die with the flesh. And yet it was to him very strangely as if he looked on an eternal face, stricken eternally. (184-5)

The reference to eternity brings to mind Caroline's lifelong vow made during the wedding ceremony. Thus, as a Catholic, Caroline has no recourse to divorce, and consequently, cannot leave the family. In addition, divorce in Ireland was not socially acceptable, and after Independence, not legally available.¹¹ Freud's argument about unhappiness in societies, which he argued stemmed from the unrealistic demands of civilisation, is rendered by the demand that Caroline remain in an unhappy marriage, despite having been briefly exposed to the chance of happiness with another man. Additionally, the expectation of Caroline's submissiveness on the one hand puts the family entity in a position of control and on the other hand suggests the patriarchal dependence on the selflessness of women for the maintenance of the family structure and reputation. Moreover, the notion of taboos, as Freud argued, is implied with the use

¹¹ When the possibility of making facilities available for divorce in the Irish Free State was raised in 1923, the then Taoiseach, W. T. Cosgrave, Louise Fuller writes, "sought and complied with the advice of the hierarchy that 'it would be altogether unworthy of an Irish legislative body to sanction concession of such divorce', and the issue was closed never to resurface again while he was at the head of government" (Fuller, 4). See Louise Fuller. *Irish Catholicism Since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004.

of the description of “dark, undiscussable things” (159) in relation to Caroline’s escape, as rendered in the thoughts of her brothers, which reinforces the notion of repression in Caroline’s situation. Ultimately, Caroline’s unhappiness is of little concern as her urge to run is framed in terms of the reflection on the family. Moreover, as Caroline realises, it is of supreme importance that family appearances, in terms of reputation and status, are preserved.

Caroline’s mind is in turmoil, and questions rush through her brain as she contemplates her husband, on her enforced return, but in contrast to the expression of her thoughts to Richard, she is unable to express her thoughts to her husband: “Her wheeling, snapping nerves, her hunting eyes said incoherent things... Her lips said nothing. She wrung her hands. ‘Jim, oh, Jim!’” (202) Caroline’s “hunting” eyes search her husband’s face for answers, but again he is unable to respond: “‘My dear,’ he said and took a step towards her. Then he drew back as if pulled in spite of himself, drew back and left the room.” (202) Jim is unable to apply his professional skills of oration to his private world, and walks away. Thus, no resolution for either spouse is achieved by Caroline’s return. Caroline’s return to the family reflects the ideal of the “common good” of the Constitution, as well as the idea of the greater good in religious terms, as rendered in *Mary Magdalen*. When talking of Christ, Mary tells her friend, “I said he asks for nothing – but in fact all the time in every word he asks the impossible!” (O’Brien, *Mary Magdalen*, 59) In *Without My Cloak*, “the impossible” for Caroline is to return to a miserable situation. The most evocative dramatisation of Caroline’s bitterness at her thwarted escape is indicated by her strong reaction to her nephew Denis’ bid for happiness. Denis, by falling in love with the peasant girl, Christina, is acting with his heart rather than his head. Despite Caroline’s own experience of falling in love with Richard Froud, she is unsympathetic towards Denis when his situation is revealed. Her response towards him is “an angry contemptuous lifting of her brows” (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 377). Caroline cannot deal with the possibility of Denis marrying the “wrong” person and being happy because that would undermine her religious faith irrevocably and render pointless the awful re-sacrificing of herself to her marriage.

Caroline’s ensuing unhappiness is manifested in corporeal terms, and her physical decline from “raven” beauty to “greying” (451) old woman advances rapidly after her return. There are references to her “irritable” (451) mouth, her “sharp” and

“impatient” (426) tone of voice, especially during interactions with her husband, her bitterness and her frequent headaches (426, 434, 451). Caroline’s headaches suggest a symptom of hysteria, which acts as a barrier towards an emotional and physical engagement with her husband, and moreover, frequently causes Caroline to retreat to a dark room away from her family. Freud wrote that sexuality channelled into a monogamous union with the understanding that a woman should have no previous sexual experience, inevitably led to the impossibility of forming a complementary and happy union. In “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness” (1908), Freud argued that this, in turn, causes neurosis.¹² Retreat is Caroline’s only means of escaping from family constraints, duties and responsibilities. While outlets were provided for men, no such opportunity existed for women, which suggests the veracity of society’s unvoiced admittance, as Freud argued, that such repression of sexuality cannot work. In the context of professional advice from therapist, Richard Froud, and priest, Caroline chooses to return to her family, thereby aligning herself with home and repression. Caroline’s failure to achieve self-liberation provides a depressing end to her adventures, an ending that appears to serve as a warning rather than as an example, given the light going from her eyes.

¹² See Sigmund Freud. “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness” (1908) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 9 (1906-1908). Trans. and Ed. James Strachey. London: Vintage [Hogarth Press, 1964], 2001, pp. 177-204.

Lilian Morrow: The Material Girl

Lilian Morrow also functions symbolically to interrogate marriage in *The Flower of May*, and in contrast to Caroline, whose body assumed a key importance in “telling” her “undiscussable” story, there is a dearth of corporeal references to Lilian in the text. She is described in abstract terms and rarely speaks, and Lilian does not give her body to her husband in fulfilment of her marriage duties, but to another man. What descriptions of her there are suggest her consumerism, as “her air was aristocratic”, she “dressed ... expensively” (O’Brien, *Flower*, 49), and is always “elegant” (187). In contrast to the repressed Caroline, who ultimately submits to the demands of the Sacrament of Matrimony, Lilian treads another path. She embarks on an extra-marital affair and channels her energies into the extravagant furnishing of the marital home. While she publicly undertakes the role expected of her as a middle-class woman, she compensates for her frustrated desires when the marriage does not fulfil her expectations, but her consumerist compensations fit neatly into the ideology of bourgeois marriage itself. Lilian, therefore, is, like Caroline, also “sacrificed”, as the institution of marriage dictates and demands, but unlike Caroline, who sacrifices herself to others, Lilian sacrifices herself to things, and her self to being a “thing”. Her body is not given for others, but for objectification. Despite her mother Julia’s misgivings about her daughter’s choice of groom, Lilian is “led” by her own family “to this fine sacrifice”, which is the rite of passage required for the establishing of a new family. Lilian is beginning a new phase of her life, as marriage, in the context of a woman’s sole ambition, represents the boundary crossing from childhood to maturity. The story of Lilian’s journey as wife is set up in the context of the fleeting pageantry of the wedding day, followed by the reality of a lifetime commitment. Having gained a husband, Lilian, as de Beauvoir argued, has “no *other* future, this is to be her whole lot on earth” (de Beauvoir, 477). Both her sister Fanny and Fanny’s friend Lucille express the notable change in Lilian’s presentation in just a few months of marriage. Lucille’s thoughts as she regards Lilian, whom she attended school with, are glacial, and implicitly reflect de Beauvoir’s argument:

‘How *absolutely* beautiful she is,’ she thought coldly, ‘how much she is mistress of her beauty. She wears it like a weapon, like a coat of arms. Already she has

mastered it completely; she knows it to be her estate; she will invest it for sound dividends all her life.' (O'Brien, *Flower*, 187-8)

Lucille had “despised” Lilian at school, but fails to grasp that in Lilian’s worldview, beauty is her *only* “estate”. Having secured a wealthy husband, Lilian embarks on living up to the image of the wealthy young socialite. Lilian’s sister Fanny also expresses surprise at the sophistication so quickly acquired by Lilian: “I suppose it’s being rich, and having to be the wife of a successful Dublin man. I suppose it’s her duty. But, thought Fanny, you’d almost imagine she had been put through some rapid course of schooling in the business!” (189) However, as de Beauvoir argued, “There is exaltation in beginning an enterprise, but nothing is more depressing than to become aware of a fate over which one has no control.” (de Beauvoir, 477) As a result, Lilian, with her life’s ambition achieved at such a young age, throws all her energies into the furnishing of her new house and the updating of her wardrobe. She is primarily concerned with outer appearances and ensuring that she looks the part of the wife of a wealthy man of status. Unlike Caroline, who chooses to deny the fulfilment of her newly awakened desires, Lilian has no such qualms and chooses a form of compensation rather than repression. Thus, Lilian serves as a strong contrast to the selfless woman of the Constitution and the “ready subjection” of the wife in a Catholic marriage as set out by Pius XI in *Casti Connubii*, and despite her appearance on her wedding day as a “white symbol”, is not as she seems. Her cousin, Bill is the first character in the text to express his misgivings about Lilian. As he watches the ceremony, he thinks: “‘It would be a fearful thing to marry Lilian’” (O’Brien, *Flower*, 12). Bill’s wife, Kitty, makes a similar observation, surmising that “Lilian Morrow was by nature her own life-companion and no one else’s.” (16) Lilian’s self interest is further remarked on by Bill to his cousin, Joey: “‘I think,’ said Bill, ‘that it’s conceivable that Christ loves his Church in some better terms than your sister Lilian, for instance, has up her sleeve for Michael O’Connor.’” (11) With this remark, the juxtaposition of the self-obsessed Lilian who has just embarked on a role that demands selflessness is dramatised.

It can be argued that Lilian’s story is an inversion of the genre of romantic fiction in that it begins with the perfect wedding that afterwards unravels in a disastrous fashion. The disappointment begins immediately when Lilian and Michael leave the

wedding party to embark on the “lonely, experimental pleasure of a honeymoon” (19). Lilian is disappointed at the honeymoon destination chosen by her new husband, as instead of honeymooning abroad, the couple are staying in Ireland. As Lilian’s mother kisses her daughter goodbye, Julia “saw the girl’s beautiful blue eyes flash oddly, shadowed and disturbed” (13). But Julia offers no words of consolation or reassurance, as she “knew, and knew that already Lilian knew, that the world was, in its appearances, designed for men and their pleasures” (13). Moreover, Julia also knew that “Lilian would know how to graft her pleasures on to those of the man she had married” (13). Here, the subservience of woman, as well as the issue of misplaced power, is made explicit, as Lilian’s manipulation of her new husband in order to fulfil her wishes is foreshadowed. In addition, by remaining silent, Julia is complicit in maintaining the secondary role of the woman in the marriage institution.

A few days after the ceremony, the newlyweds make a surprise visit to Glasalla in County Clare, where Julia and Fanny have gone for a few days. Lilian’s embodiment of her new status is conveyed through her sister’s eyes. To Fanny, Lilian appears “bright-eyed” and “radiant”, while her husband, Michael O’Connor, is “handsome and looking happy. Laughing, bright-eyed both” (48). At the same time, Fanny is struck by the excessiveness of Lilian’s liveliness and wonders why this “bright” Lilian is “play[ing] a part ... Does marriage change people so much?” (50) As she reflects on this, the “mystical words ‘the grace of the Sacrament’ did float across her mind” (51). Here, Fanny questions whether the “change” in the newly married couple is as a result of the “grace” received in the Sacrament. Fanny’s question is ironic, as Lilian *is* “playing a part”. Her “brightness” is as a result of the flattery of André-Marie de Mellin, the brother of Fanny’s friend, Lucille, who had gone to the aid of the stranded honeymooners when their new car broke down. Lilian and André’s affair is foreshadowed by Cousin Bill who on meeting him remarks: “‘What a pity Lilian’s married,’ said Cousin Bill softly to Fanny. ‘This noble sprig would have been exactly her idea of a brilliant *parti*.’” (34) Soon after the unexpected arrival of the honeymooners, André, much to everyone’s surprise, also arrives at the house. He explains that it had occurred to him that he might offer to take Julia and Fanny back to Dublin in his car. Lilian’s aunt, Aunt Eleanor, is suspicious, and her suspicions are confirmed in the text by Fanny. As she stands on the threshold of the room and observes the occupants, the local lighthouse beam “poured enhancement over Lilian,

making briefly a myth of her as she sat in dreaming idleness near Grandfather; and it struck without mercy across André-Marie's face. His eyes were upon Lilian at that moment." (58) The reference to Lilian as a "myth", in light of her beauty, evokes the story of Helen of Troy. In a similar manner to Helen, Lilian will abandon her husband emotionally and physically (depending on the version of the myth recounted), as she embarks on an affair with André.¹³

Lilian begins her married life by throwing her excess energies into the zealous decoration of her home. Her brother, Joey, tells Fanny that Lilian "'is letting herself go with grandeur in that house! Michael must be out of his mind!'" (185) Thus, it appears that Lilian is compensating for private unhappiness by public displays of well-being. Likewise, her husband Michael, to the concern of his family, compensates by turning to alcohol, and Fanny observes the change in her brother-in-law, during a visit to Mespil Road. To Fanny's eyes, he seems tired and nervous, and after he leaves, Bill's wife, Kitty, remarks,

'Poor Michael! What a pace he's going at lately! He's really killing himself over the business of being happily married!'
'But marriage *is* death,' said Bill. 'Doesn't he know that? It's the death of us all.' (202)

Bill's reply to his wife's remark is a negative one, and a literal one, as the marriage ritual involves the complete submission of the self to another, an impossible achievement. Michael's "killing himself" implies that he is fully aware of his inadequacies in Lilian's eyes and feels compelled to address this by playing the part of the "happily married" husband. In contrast to Lilian's self-confidence, Michael's confidence is dented and Fanny's friend, Lucille, observing him, surmises that "'having been completely self-confident he has suddenly been frightened'" (203). Lucille, who as Fanny's friend, is employed here as a detached observer of Lilian and Michael's marriage, surmises:

Bridegrooms may often go through that experience, she supposed, before they are moulded as husbands. Lilian could not ever be an ordinary wife, and

¹³ For the various accounts of Helen of Troy, see Apollodorus. *The Library of Greek Mythology*. Trans and Introduction. Robin Hand. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997; Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans and Introduction. Martin Hammond. London: Penguin Books, 1987.

probably she had married a young man very passionately in love with her who nevertheless needed for his ultimate peace that his bride should become an ordinary dear wife. There was plenty of time for that to happen, but were the elements of ordinary dearness in Lilian? Was this young man already afraid of the glory he had won at the altar? Or was the anxiety that burnt through all his gaiety no more than a compound of those commonplaces which novelists charter for the newly married? Was he working too hard because in pride about his beautiful wife he was spending too much money? And was he loving too much, both sensually and with his heart, because he could do no other? (203)

As similarly used in relation to Caroline's woe in *Without My Cloak*, Lilian and Michael's difficulties are deemed "commonplaces", and Lilian is neither an acquiescent wife nor "an ordinary dear wife". Here the "commonplaces" will not be resolved and moreover, under the terms of the commitment they have made to each other, there is no escape for those who are unable to resolve their difficulties within the institution of marriage. The reference to "the glory" Michael "had won at the altar" refers back to Lilian as a "white symbol" on her wedding day, while at the same time, drawing attention to Michael's equally unrealistic expectations of marriage. The suggestion is raised here that in pursuing a beauty Michael has, perhaps, overlooked the fact that Lilian is concerned only with herself. Here also the text draws attention to the unrealistic portrayals of living "happily ever after" by alluding to the creation of the imaginary by a novelist. In this way, O'Brien signposts herself with women's writing, while at the same time, signalling that to dispense with the "happily ever after" ending is to part from the parameters of the genre of romantic fiction.

In this story, initial difficulties in the marriage are not misunderstandings that can be relatively easily overcome. Lilian has taken on a lifelong commitment that fails to live up to her expectations. As a result, Lilian, as the participant of the marriage union that has been subsumed into the identity of her husband, asserts her existence by embracing to excess the material goods that are dependant on her husband's duty to provide for her. She also takes a lover. In this way, Lilian's portrayal reflects Nancy Armstrong's argument in *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719-1900* when she writes: "To become an individual ... the subject must ... surmount the limits of an assigned social position." (Armstrong, *How Novels Think*, 8) Moreover, the "signs of excess" that are manifested in Lilian are not redirected towards, as Armstrong terms it, "a socially accepted goal" (8). Additionally, Lilian's actions are also disruptive in terms of the lifelong commitment to another taken in the Sacrament of

Matrimony. Thus, Lilian embodies O'Brien's strongest disruptive rendering of a Catholic spouse. That she is present in the novel that rejects the family, Ireland and Catholicism can also be taken to encompass a rejection of lifelong monogamous unions. The rejection of marriage is firmly stated in the novel by Fanny on several occasions. For instance, as she watches Lilian drive away with her new husband, Fanny says: "I'd love to be driving away off in that contraption," said Fanny. 'By myself,' she added." (O'Brien, *Flower*, 13) Later, when the groom's father remarks that Fanny is "in the market now" for marriage, Fanny's response is telling: "Fanny slipped from her father's light hold" (20). Additionally, Fanny, the text states, "had no intention of going Lilian's way" (37), "or of marrying the first suitable intendent for her hand" (66). John Jordan did not refer to Lilian in his 1954 review of the novel, and "the evanescence of perfection in human relationship (*sic*)" (Jordan, "Note of her Themes", 56) that he attributes to the friendship between Fanny and Lucille, is arguably more relevant to Lilian and Michael.

Lilian's offence against Catholic doctrine is taken into account in the text. Her mother Julia accidentally observes Lilian and André while on an evening walk and becomes aware of the affair. Despite her concern, Julia does not speak to her daughter, and the opportunity to confess is not established between them. Instead, the confessional aspect of the practice of Catholicism is dramatised by Julia confiding in the nuns who nurse her through her fatal illness. This reflects Foucault's arguments in *The History of Sexuality* about the development in eighteenth-century Western society of "confessing" to power mechanisms in the fields of medicine and psychiatry, as well as the practice of confession to the priest as the dominant discursive means of producing the truth.¹⁴ As Catherine Smith argues in "Irish Confessional Discourse in Kate O'Brien's Novels", confessions in O'Brien's novels are "representative of the interplay of truth and sex, which Foucault sees as the central concern of many agencies of power" (Smith in Quinn and Tighe-Mooney, 117). The notion of power is dramatised in *The Flower of May* by the fact that the nun in whom Julia has confided, takes it upon herself to speak to Lilian after Julia's death. Thus, Sister Eucharia, as representative of the moral voice in the novel, takes the opportunity of imparting a subtle warning to Lilian in the presence of her aunts, father, sister and lover. Sister Eucharia, reflecting the

¹⁴ See Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1*. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin, 1998.

contemporary confidence of the Church to speak on matters deemed central to its interests, explains to the family that Julia's asking for Lilian in the sense of wanting her there as she died is not exactly the case. Her last words were, Sister Eucharis says, "Lilian, child, I beg you—" (O'Brien, *Flower*, 276) Sister Eucharis continues to emphasise the fact that although Julia talked about all her family with "calm, proud love" (276), only with Lilian, she says, was it clear that she "went into her last illness with something on her mind about you – you especially out of all her family." (276) She goes on to vocally speculate about Julia's anxieties; and her final words on the subject are carefully chosen to induce guilt in Lilian: "Anyhow, you can all be assured that whatever was troubling her is resolved now – for her." (277) Lilian's response to this onslaught is not recorded. After Julia's funeral, Lilian's Aunt Eleanor sends for Lilian, as she decides to raise the subject of the O'Connor family's concerns about Michael. As an example of O'Brien's ascetic "holy woman", Aunt Eleanor also represents the moral authority. However, Lilian cuts off Eleanor's expression of concern, saying,

'He's hard to please,' said Lilian hardly. 'And he *does* drink a lot lately.'
'I understand he didn't, before his marriage?'
'Oh, how do we know?'" (288)

With this remark, Lilian indicates her lack of knowledge about the man she has married. In addition, her self-possession remains intact even when her Aunt confronts her about the affair, and tells her that her mother observed the lovers embrace at André's house. Despite this, Lilian continues to deny it: "[T]his dream, this nightmare Mother had is sheer hallucination! I swear to that, Aunt Eleanor!" (288-9) Eleanor's conversation with Lilian does not lead to an exchange of confidences, and her silence suggests self-possession, as well as the lack of the need to "confess". Moreover, there is no indication in the text that Lilian is assuaged by guilt as a good Catholic should be, yet this is not the occasion of the disapproval in which she is held by the various narrators: the opprobrium she receives has much more to do with her overt consumerism rather than her religious straying.

Neither Lilian nor Michael make any attempt to address their marital situation, a trait of inaction that parallels Julia's failure to speak to her daughter before the wedding or to address her with the knowledge of Lilian's extra-marital affair, as well as Caroline

and Jim's similar failure to communicate in *Without My Cloak*. It is Lilian's sister, Fanny, who eventually succeeds in putting a stop to the affair, when it is brought to her attention by Cousin Bill and confirmed by Lilian's husband, Michael (317-23, 324-330). An affair, one month into their marriage, is catastrophic for Michael and Lilian, and Michael's idealisation of his "white symbol" has been shattered, as indicated by his curiously detached remark: "But to see my love, my lovely love, destroy herself to feed that boulder's momentary conceit—" (322) Here Michael appears to position Lilian as an object of desire, as there is a lack of personal emotion in his remark that reflects Lucille's comment about Lilian as "the glory he had won at the altar" (203). In a similar vein, Lilian does not express remorse for her sexual behaviour, which indicates her emotional distance from her husband, and moreover, separates desire from the Catholic association with sin and guilt. Remorse is not a feature that is evident in O'Brien's characters, as the moral aspect of illicit sexual encounters is fully taken into account and actions taken in full acceptance of the consequences, thus confronting sin and guilt in the context of the negotiation of desire. For instance, Caroline, in *Without My Cloak*, does not express remorse for her attempted escape or for falling in love with another man. In addition, in the same novel, Christina Roche has a sexual relationship with Denis Considine in full consideration of the religious context:

When she committed herself to Denis, she did so, as has been seen, with eyes wide open, solemnly brave and asking no quarter from the great law of her church. Because she desired him beyond the strength of her strong religious sense, she took him and risked damnation [...] she told herself that retribution would be all the harsher because her audacity had been great and cool. (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 322)

At no point in the text does Christina regret the experience of loving Denis. As the template novel for O'Brien's *oeuvre*, remorse, as is expected of a good Catholic, is not an element of the experience of love. In this way, O'Brien politicises sexuality, and also reflects Freud's arguments about repression in the civilisation process. Moreover, as the water imagery throughout the novels indicates, if the flow of a river is blocked, it will find another channel. While Caroline and Lilian choose different courses of action, neither is in a position to undo the original ritual that forced their contrasting reactions. As Judith Butler writes about gender norms, in "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*", that evoke similarities to O'Brien,

To the extent that gender norms function under the aegis of social constraints, the reinterpretation of those norms through the proliferation and variation of corporeal styles becomes a very concrete and accessible way of politicising personal life. (Butler, 45)

In contrast to the bitterly unhappy Caroline Lanigan, and the disillusioned Lilian Morrow, Molly Considine in *Without My Cloak*, is happy and contented in her marriage, but faces her own deadly challenge.

Molly Considine: The Embodiment of “Unchecked Fecundity”

Conflict between Catholic ideology about unimpeded reproduction and the physical realities of multiple childbirths is located in the thoughts of Una Costello’s sister, Nell Mahoney in *Pray for the Wanderer*. As she ponders “the binding vows and obligations of marriage”, a rite that has the procreation of children as its primary aim, Nell’s thoughts reflect the dilemma of the Catholic believer, as she “could not admit, any more by her fastidious nerves than by her religious training, the pitiful exigencies or crude materialistic ethic of birth control – though baffled indeed, too, by the appalling problems and horrors of unchecked fecundity.” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 109) The rendering of Molly Considine in *Without My Cloak* dramatises the debate about the Catholic ideology of non-impeded fecundity juxtaposed with the physical toll on a woman’s body, as Molly embodies the physical consequences of the fulfilment of desire, and serves in the text as a cipher for the raising of questions about “unchecked fecundity”. Molly, therefore, literalises the rigid code of sexuality that can be expressed only in terms of procreation in a monogamous union. Her story is told through her husband Anthony’s voice, a male voice that reflects the fact that it is the dictates of the all-male Church authority that is in charge of Molly’s fertility. Molly’s story begins when she and Anthony move into their new house. The new house is called River Hill, another example of the water imagery throughout O’Brien’s texts, in which the flow of life is symbolically stopped or facilitated depending on the circumstances in which characters find themselves. Here it serves as a metaphor for the course of Molly’s life, in which water rushes downhill in one direction until it comes to an abrupt stop.

Although Molly is situated in corporeal terms in the text, that of desire, pregnancy and childbirth, in contrast to Caroline, Molly’s physicality lacks vitality. She is framed in terms of beauty and fecundity as it is her beauty that stimulates the desire of her husband. In the first reference to her in the text, she is presented through Anthony’s mind’s eye in their new house, “where a woman mused before her mirror in the candlelight” (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 24). Molly’s regarding of herself in the mirror conveys dreaminess, sensuality and beauty, as well as the idea of Molly as a “reflection”. The motif of the mirror is repeated in the description of the intimate

relationship between Anthony and Molly, which sets the tone of their relationship in the frame of desire. The couple embrace on Anthony's arrival home: "Familiar, sensual peace crept into them... The man's eyes dreamt over her reflection in the mirror, and she took pleasure in it too. How lovely she was!" (27) There is a scopic element to this description, and in addition, Molly is a complicit part of the male gaze. In this scene, "reflection" suggests the idea of Molly as an extension of Anthony, as well as an object of desire, as he is the one bestowing the gaze. Moreover, Molly's insubstantiality as a character is repeated: "Cloudily the two saw her reflected." (27) In "Kate O'Brien: Feminine Beauty, Feminist Writing and Sexual Role", the critic Patricia Coughlan asks:

Why does a woman novelist, and at that a writer of well-attested lesbian orientation in her own life – and therefore someone whom one might have expected to see women as active or desiring subjects on their own account – perpetuate the representation of women in this objectified way? (Coughlan in *OPD*, 62)

To answer this question, Coughlan explores what she calls the "curious contradiction" in O'Brien's fiction between her "feminist project, however little it is overtly named as such, with the fictional representation of the physical appearance of these heroines" (61).¹⁵ Scopic here and in Coughlan's essay is understood in the sense developed by the feminist film critic Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Mulvey argues that the viewer, or in this case, the reader, by being invited to concentrate on the appearances of the characters, is drawn into the role of gazer. In her article, Mulvey, taking as a starting point the way film reflects established interpretations of sexual difference, and appropriating Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory as a political weapon, terms this focus "the male gaze" (Mulvey, 203). The gaze, therefore, is the privilege of the male subject and an expression of patriarchal power, which reduces women to the status of object. Mulvey writes: "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly." (203) In this way, Mulvey argues that the female reader identifies with the image depicted, a process developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego. Secondly, the female reader collaborates with the male gaze, thereby judging other women (and herself) by male

¹⁵ Katherine O'Donnell does not find Coughlan's argument that O'Brien appropriates the "masculinist construction of women as aesthetic objects" (Coughlan in *OPD*, 75) persuasive. See Katherine O'Donnell. "'But Greek ... usually knows Greek': Recognizing Queer Sexuality in Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle*" in Patricia Boyle Haberstroh and Christine St Peter. Eds. *Opening the Field. Irish Women: Texts and Contexts*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2007, pp. 74-91.

standards. In this way, women readers shift between the active masculine and the passive feminine identity by being co-opted to observe as both male-identified viewers and rival objects.¹⁶ Applying Mulvey's theory to the novels would place O'Brien in this context, in charge of whom, what and the way the reader "sees".

In her article, Coughlan focuses particularly on the outstanding and almost mythical beauty of the eponymous Mary Lavelle as an example of beauty as an unconscious element of the heroine's sense of self. Although the novel is outside the scope of this thesis, I would argue that the emphasis on Mary's beauty as "boyish" and "androgynous" (O'Brien, *Lavelle*, 67) problematises the argument about the gaze as patriarchal. In addition, although the lovemaking scene between Mary and Juanito is described through Juanito's voice, the act itself is initiated by Mary: "Mary took a decision while she kissed Juanito... [...] 'I'm going away to-morrow, Juanito, and I want you now.'" (305) In my view, O'Brien's work suggests that gender is not a dichotomous category. Moreover, scopic descriptions of male characters are also applied in the texts. Denis Considine, in *Without My Cloak*, for instance, is described as "ridiculously handsome" (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 231), and there is a lengthy description of the physical "slow changes of his body" during adolescence (232). In *The Last of Summer*, Angèle views her cousin, Tom Kernahan, as follows: She "observed that the details of his face were a match in simple beauty for his beautiful outline" (O'Brien, *Summer*, 39). The word "outline" draws attention to Tom's physical body, and it is Angèle who is the viewer. Furthermore, in *The Ante-Room*, Vincent de Courcy O'Regan is observed as follows by Dr. Curran: "[w]here moonlight broke in a stream of coldness, a tall man stood with his head uplifted to the sky. ... looking far more glorious than any sane man cares to do. Looking like a myth, a god in marble." (O'Brien, *A-R.*, 150) Here a heterosexual male gazes upon another heterosexual male. Thus, O'Brien does not apply the scopic criterion upon her female characters alone, and her work challenges Mulvey's thesis with the sabotaging of gender norms, as the bearer of the look throughout the novels is not confined to men alone. In addition, Coughlan recalls a seminar discussion at the Kate O'Brien Weekend in 1990 where Lorna Reynolds

¹⁶ For a critical assessment on how Mulvey's psychoanalytical approach falls short, see Terje Steinulfsson Skjerdal. "Laura Mulvey Against the Grain: A Critical Assessment of the Psychoanalytic Feminist Approach to Film" (1997) at <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/2152/mulvey.htm>, accessed 02/02/09. Skjerdal argues that Mulvey's argument is simplistic in its condemnation of all Hollywood film, that her thesis does not take issues like race and class into account, and that a psychoanalytic methodology that sees the masculine as normative and the feminine as deviant is not, therefore, easily applicable to film.

stressed “O’Brien’s belief in, and sense of reverence for, an ideal sphere of art and beauty ... utterly removed from, and ... above, gender and sexuality” (Coughlan in *OPD*, 72). There is an example of this in *Without My Cloak* where Molly’s brother-in-law, Eddy, observes her as follows: “Molly was decorativeness unflawed, standing by the fire all white and seductive, with misty eyes and snowy sloping shoulders and on her breast the ruby that Anthony had given her” (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 75). Despite the implication of Eddy’s homosexuality, he uses the word “seductive”, which suggests that Eddy, in keeping with the worldly aspect of his portrayal, appreciates Molly’s attractiveness aesthetically. Thus, while Coughlan finds herself respectfully “diverging from Lorna Reynolds’s views” (72), there appears to me to be sufficient incidents throughout O’Brien’s texts that disrupt the notion of the gaze being the preserve of the heterosexual male alone, to support somewhat Reynolds’ claim on O’Brien’s behalf.

Molly, unlike Mary Lavelle, is aware of her beauty. In a scene where she is being admired by her husband, he thinks: “[T]o-night she was exciting him with the invitation of a bride. How well she knew it too” (75). Molly’s complicity is implicated by Anthony’s remark. He tells her: ““You must be the loveliest woman in Christendom this night”” (76). Her response is indicated through Anthony’s thoughts: “She knew his mood of desire and was unfolded to it.” (76) The word “unfolded” is visually strong as it evokes the unfolding petals of an opening flower, as well as the “deflowering” of a woman. When Anthony compliments her, Molly replies with her eyes: “Veiled and soft smouldered her eyes’ kind answer to his ardour.” (76) Thus, Molly is actively complicit in the fulfilment of their mutual desire. However, in contrast to the bodily communication of mutual desire, Molly and Anthony do not verbally communicate on the issue of contraception, and Anthony’s attempt to physically retreat from Molly in order to spare her from pregnancy is not discussed between them: “Whether Molly guessed the motive of his efforts at asceticism he could not say, but he imagined that she did. [...] But he and she rarely spoke of these things and never with precision.” (76) The lack of communication between them reflects Foucault’s argument in *The History of Sexuality* that sexuality is formed by society,¹⁷ as in this novel, it is a topic spoken about aloud only by Father Tom Considine, the representative of the moral authority. His zealotry on the subject is ironically noted: “On the subject of

¹⁷ See Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1*. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin, 1998.

'morality,' which he seemed to take to mean exclusively man's conduct of his sexual life, Father Tom was fanatical." (36) Father Tom's pronouncements on the subject are conducted in a public forum, which contrasts with the absence of discussion in the private sphere, and demonstrates the regulation of the private expression of sexuality, by an outside authority. The Church as a civilising force is also a factor, as Anthony is described as a "finer and more civilised type" than his father (17). His "civilised" behaviour manifests itself in his attempt to spare his wife from pregnancy by being "abstemious with what the law called his conjugal rights" (76). In this way he is positioned as a modern man, although there are ambiguities in his portrayal. On the one hand, he embraces liberal traits in terms of his "conjugal rights", and his own freedom and tolerance towards others of the same class. On the other hand, he is conservative and class conscious when it comes to protecting, as well as enhancing, his status in the community. At the opening of Molly's story, Molly has been spared from pregnancy for thirteen months now. Anthony reflects that "[t]o fast completely from the passion Molly could rouse in him was out of the question, but he had sought deliberately to discipline it of late and had been surprised and not a little proud over his uncharacteristic restraints." (76) Thus, the expression of desire is limited by religious edicts in that there must be no check on the possibility of procreation, and furthermore, the topic is not a matter for private discussion. In this way, Molly and Anthony's private mutual desire is constrained by public regulations, which reflects Foucault's concern about the way in which dominant discursive practice is internalised by those whom it disempowers, so that it does not have to be constantly enforced externally. Although both partners here are affected, it is Molly who physically and literally bears the effects of their mutual desire

In the rendering of the physical toll of "unchecked fecundity" on Molly, there is much emphasis on the decline of her beauty, which is, as discussed with regard to Caroline Lanigan and Lilian Morrow, a marketable commodity in the middle-class world. O'Brien also draws attention to the ways in which childbearing devitalizes women, and the physical toll of eight pregnancies is described in terms of the depletion of Molly's energy. This aspect of childbearing is also mentioned in *The Last of Summer*, in which there is a description of the "devitalized" wife of the local doctor. The latter, like Anthony, is depicted as a forceful character. The doctor's wife, the narrator recounts,

was a poor thing, having long ago become devitalized by childbearing and perhaps by the too-muchness of his personality; she had taken refuge in religiosity and excess of domestic fussing; she never went out except to the church, and had long been regarded as not quite 'all there' by Drumaninch. The Doctor never mentioned her, to praise or blame. (O'Brien, *Summer*, 65)

The doctor's wife is presented in the text as a victim of circumstances outside of her control. Narratorial sympathy is conveyed by the phrase, "she had taken refuge", as in the social and religious context, she can neither limit her family nor leave her marriage. She is never mentioned by her husband, and is not given a name in the text. There is a certain irony here in the fact that this "devitalized" woman is the wife of a medical man. Similarly, Molly's tale is rendered in Anthony's words, which heightens the sense of detachment. In this way, the lack of concern for repeated childbearing on the bodies and psyches of women imposed by the all-male institutional Church and the Irish State is literalised to an almost exaggerated degree, which serves to underline the fact that in 1930 and 1931 respectively, 278 and 246 cases of maternal mortality were recorded in Ireland.¹⁸ In Molly's case, pregnancy, "had indeed dimmed the morning radiance that Anthony had wooed" (27). As a result, "beauty's full radiance visited her now only upon occasion, rarely and more rarely" (113). Here the "dimming" of Molly's beauty is juxtaposed with the decreasing vigour of Molly's bodily energy, as a result of multiple pregnancies. Molly's decreasing vitality is paralleled by Anthony's description of her emotions during pregnancy, as she had "fits of weeping, of course, and fits of petulance and other woman's symptoms" (29). It is Anthony too who describes Molly's experience of childbirth in the text, as he endures the "historic pain of husbands in such hours" (29-30), and remembers "the screams" and Molly's "ordeal" (30). Anthony is aware "that childbirth frightened her, wilted and crushed her and gave her in her babies only very slender compensation, for she was by nature far more wife than mother" (77). As the news of Molly's ninth pregnancy unfolds, Anthony is upset that "her youth had been given over to the weariness and pain of pregnancy; motherhood had taken her vigour and was taking her beauty too – all for him." (115-6) On the one hand, the predicament of "unchecked fecundity" is sympathetically portrayed, while on the other hand, the physical effects are rendered in a detached tone that reflects the detached

¹⁸ See Caitriona Clear. *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000, p. 113, Table 5.1.

“sympathy” for mothers as expressed by Pius XI in *Casti Connubii* discussed in Chapter One. In another section of the encyclical Pius wrote: “[H]owever much we may pity the mother whose health and even life is gravely imperiled in the performance of the duty allotted to her by nature, nevertheless what could ever be a sufficient reason for excusing in any way the direct murder of the innocent?¹⁹ The “direct murder” of the mother exhausted and devitalized by recurring childbirth and childrearing is not considered here, as it is simply “the duty allotted to her by nature”. Thus, in Church writings, the mother, despite her much-lauded role, is, in actual terms, a minor player in the greater good project of the generation of offspring.

Molly’s death is anticipated in the text by the narratorial comment that she and Anthony were “doomed to find a *terrible* delight, again and again, each in the other’s body” (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 77, emphasis mine). At thirty-four, she dies giving birth to her ninth child. The description of the birth is stark: The ninth child played some bungling trick on her, used as she was to the routine of giving life. [...] Perhaps she was too tired to rise to the unexpected; perhaps ... she might have been too tired for her commonplace ordeal.” (117) The word “commonplace” here reduces Molly to simply the bearer of children, nothing more, and the description of Molly’s death reflects the insubstantiality of the portrayal of her life. In death she “slipped away suddenly, silently... Molly closed her misty eyes and made her escape.” (117) The description continues: “She died without a fuss, without scream or cry or prayer.” (120) The effect of Molly’s death on her family is short-lived. In the second year of his widowerhood, Anthony considers remarriage, on account of “his sensual restlessness and the unaccustomed masculine loneliness of his bedroom” (237). Molly’s eldest son, Denis, is affected by his mother’s death only to the extent of the effect it has on his father (126). Anthony discounts the idea of remarriage in favour of staying close to her son, Denis, and decides to keep a mistress instead. Notably, Molly’s name is not even mentioned in the narrative at this point and there is no sense that Anthony actually misses his wife on her own account, which negates the risks she took to please him. The detached tone in which her death is recorded reflects Anthony’s thoughts on his wife at the opening of their story: “He led, and his wife followed. It never occurred to him that she should not, or that there was anything else for her to do; he had not loved

¹⁹ See Section 64, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius11/P11CASTI.HTM>, accessed 25 March 2010.

her quite enough for that.” (31) Thus, outside of her role as his “dear little wife”, Molly “had no existence for him” (31). Molly, therefore, is rendered of little consequence, as a wife, a mother and as a person, despite her willingness to risk pregnancy and her “dutiful” contribution of eight children. Although the text indicates that Molly also pleased herself in terms of desire, Molly and Anthony’s mutual desire is not mutual in terms of the risks involved. Moreover, the terms of marriage, “increase and multiply”, place little burden on Anthony’s “vitality”.

While the Church on the one hand promotes the begetting of children, the act itself that engenders conception is at this point in time still framed as good only in terms of its creative potential. Molly’s active participation in the fulfilment of her desire is, therefore, problematic in this regard, and this ambiguity is represented in the text. Molly is “laid out ... on her blue-hung bed” (120). The symbolism of the “blue-hung bed” is indicated when Molly is showing the new house to her relatives. Molly’s sister-in-law, Teresa Mulqueen, views the bedroom and notices, “Flowers again, and blue silk hangings on the bed and over everything the half-murmur of a secret.” (49) Teresa is ironically employed to observe the atmosphere of the room, as “[t]he only great love that Teresa had known was the maternal.” (372) The clandestine aspect of the “half-murmur of a secret” is raised as the narrator wonders whether Teresa apprehended “that this was the room of a woman much desired of her husband and willing to be desired?” (49) Thus, the image of the “blue-hung bed” sets up the nature of Molly’s dilemma in terms of the risks associated with desire. The “blue-hung bed” also brings the punishment of execution by hanging to mind. Moreover, the reference to “the blue-hung bed” is made three times in the description of the aftermath of Molly’s death. It is an image utilised to encompass the dichotomy between pleasure and consequences, and Molly’s youth is emphasised as her husband regards his dead wife: “Anthony would stand by the blue-hung bed to which he had brought her in her beauty ... and ... would wearily marvel that death had taken his wife and given him back his bride, a cold facsimile of his bride.” (121) As a bride, Anthony recalls that the lace on Molly’s wedding dress was “all white as the bride’s white bosom” (28). Here Molly’s “white bosom” indicates the physical nature of Molly and Anthony’s marital relationship, in contrast to Lilian Morrow, who on her wedding day is simply a “white symbol” that indicates the lack of physical intimacy between Lilian and Michael.

A more direct Church disapproval is implicated in the description of the attendance of Molly's brother-in-law, Father Tom, at her deathbed. Father Tom administers blessed oil during "extreme unction" or the Sacrament of the Sick.²⁰ Although Molly is already dead when Father Tom arrives, he "laid the holy chrism ... as a last brotherly grace, on her cold hands and feet and eyes and lips and nostrils, that the sins of her five senses might stay with her earthly flesh, and be no burden to her at heaven's gate" (120). Father Tom's anointing of the body parts relating to "the sins of her five senses", suggests, in terms of the Catholic notion of carnal sin, that Molly has been punished for the enjoyment of her sensuality. Significantly, Anthony, as he views his wife's dead body, captures the ambiguity of their situation as he wonders, "what's the meaning of it Molly?" (122) The expression of her sexuality, in a situation when there is a taboo status imposed on the control of fertility, costs Molly her life. The dictates of a celibate moral authority renders Molly negligible in the "common good" "duty" of procreation, a hierarchicalising of lives that remains to this day in the denial of human rights to women with regard to their own reproduction, whereby a mother's dignity and quality of life is considered secondary, not equal, to that of the child she is carrying. After Molly's death, Anthony recalls that her love was a "generous, warm, unquestioning love, which seemed to wait open-armed for all his moods, tenderly, consentingly, voluptuously" (122). These references highlight Molly's role in the novel as the desired wife of Anthony. The sense of guilt induced by the struggle between libido and death is dramatised in the thoughts of Anthony after Molly's death, which suggests the developing consciousness of scientific arguments that Anthony as a modern civilized man might embrace, given time. As the object of Anthony's desire, and with no recourse to contraception, he feels responsible for her death: "'Because of me – because I loved you! I took everything you had – I killed you.'" (122) The irony of Molly's unspoken bargain with the risk of death is that Anthony has been physically unfaithful to her while on a trip to Holland, although he does experience remorse for his unfaithfulness (113-4). At the same time, he excuses his unfaithfulness on the grounds of Molly's pregnant state, as on account of her moods of "languor and discouragement", Anthony, when experiencing business troubles, no longer always found "solace from all such woes" in Molly's arms (119). The final words attributed to Molly in the text

²⁰ The sacrament provides the recipient with the grace to die well and is instituted chiefly for the spiritual strength and comfort of dying persons. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Dublin: Veritas, 1994, p. 335ff.

express her positioning in the text as desired wife, and the centrality of Anthony in her world. After telling Anthony about her pregnancy, for which he expresses regret, Anthony says:

‘It isn’t as if they mattered so desperately to you, all these babies!’
She took his face in her cold hands. [...] ‘Perhaps I don’t love them as much as some women seem to. But oh, I love *you*, I love *you*.’ (116)

Molly is not compensated for the demands on her body and her psyche by love for her children. Anthony recalls that she “had not been remarkably maternal; her children had tired and puzzled her except in moods of gay indulgence.” (121) Moreover, he remembers that “she had never been angry with her young, but always vaguely tender, timidly amused.” (122) These attributes, assigned to Molly by her husband, emphasise her role as cipher for the exploration of “unchecked fecundity”. Additionally, O’Brien problematises the views expressed in Catholic writings that women are by nature the natural nurturers of children.

The risk of death is one that Molly was willing to take, as after her death Molly’s opinion of sensuality is given, albeit in the third person, thereby reinforcing the sense of her being at a remove from her own story. She acknowledges that she

was willing to bear as many children as he gave her, not because she wanted them, but because the risk of having them was the price she must pay for his passionate love. She had often longed to tell him that their fused desire was the only real and perfect thing for her in a world of mists and shadows (122).

In Molly’s role as provider of children, Anthony’s love is her only means of validation. She is given a voice only after her death, as during her life she expresses herself solely through her body, and to Anthony alone. In the only active adjective used about Molly, the narrator continues on her behalf that “with *open* eyes she had made her own bargain with fate” (122, emphasis mine). Molly had chosen this course of action and, the text reveals, “would choose the same again” (123). Moreover, in a similar vein to Lilian and Caroline, Molly does not express remorse for the pursuit of desire. Molly’s bargain with fate was “that if love killed her as it might, she would have no grievance” (122). Here there is narratorial approval for Molly’s active role in the fulfilment of her desire,

whatever the costs. In this way, Molly is pitted with the heroines in O'Brien's texts who courageously, in her view, embrace the emotional and physical experience of love, without guarantees of endurance. Thus, in contrast to Church disapproval, there is narratorial approval for Molly, who "had had one courage, the courage of passion" (122-3).

To answer Coughlan's question raised at the opening of this analysis, Molly, while rendered as desired object in the eyes of her husband, is conscious of her beauty and reciprocates his desire. It is Molly's active role in the fulfilment of her desire that transforms her from object to subject. The negation of her role in the novel reflects the negation of women as self-determined individuals, as the risks of desire are fully backed, in terms of contraceptive measures, by Church and State edicts. Thus, it is the public imposition on the expression of private desire that is the target of O'Brien's critique in the regard, and while the Church may condemn the expression of bodily desire, O'Brien, as the rendering of Molly's willingness to satisfy her desire suggests, does not.

Conclusion

The wives discussed in this chapter all serve to different extents as a site in which the human dimension of the physical and emotional demands of living with another human being is juxtaposed with Magisterium decrees of life-long fidelity, affection and happiness, as promised by the administration of divine grace at the Sacrament of Matrimony. For Caroline and Lilian, therefore, there is no fairy-tale ending. Neither does the bestowing of grace at the Sacrament of Matrimony give them the qualities promised in *Casti Connubii*, “for the fulfilling of their rights and duties faithfully, holily, perseveringly even unto death” (Section 40 in Carlen, Vol. 3, 397). While Caroline’s marital dilemma is explored sympathetically, there is no endorsement of actual escape. In Caroline’s case, precedence is given to the Constitutional ideal of the “common good”, as Caroline’s duties are of greater concern, and autonomy, having embarked on marriage, would be to the detriment of too many people such as her husband, children and family. In late nineteenth-century Ireland, Caroline would not have been allowed to run off with a lover. Neither does O’Brien allow it to happen in fiction, as self-fulfilment in the novels is never achieved at the expense of the lives of others. That being said, there is no mistaking O’Brien’s sustained critique of the regulations that facilitate the repression of individual desires, especially in women, a critique that is particularly aimed at Catholic Church dictates. The religious context, in terms of the Sacrament of Matrimony, is markedly present in Caroline’s negotiation of the consequences of her bid for freedom, and Caroline voices the centrality of the sacrament of marriage in her life on many occasions in the text. The reality of her unhappy marriage against the assurances of the sacrament, which Caroline faithfully believed in, creates a dichotomy that she has difficulty negotiating, as the sacrament came with papal guarantees and promises of grace given in order to be a happy and contented spouse. Caroline’s reality is at odds with this, her struggles and choices reflect the situation for the Catholic believer, as they either accept lifelong unhappiness as Caroline does, channel their excess emotional lives through their children, or like Molly Considine, retreat into death. Both Caroline and Molly reflect different negative aspects of the private life framed by social and religious regulations of control on women

In Lilian Morrow's case, the question similarly raised about the unhappy Marie-Rose and Vincent in *The Ante-Room* can be asked: "If two were beautiful and very young and had the seeds of gaiety and rapture in them – must all be squandered still by that indefinable silliness called incompatibility?" (O'Brien, *A-R*, 137) In order to facilitate the ideal of the "common good" it appears in these texts that the answer is that indeed the individual must be sacrificed for the ideology of the "common good", once the commitment to establish a family is made. Even though the struggles are resolved in favour of the "common good" and not of the woman herself, this does not mean that O'Brien endorsed such submission. None of the choices made produce appealing lives, or lives that are portrayed as truthful, challenging critical perceptions of O'Brien's seeming approval of Catholic duty in heterosexual marriage. However, although all three women ultimately conform to familial demands, to some extent, their rebellions represent the instances of struggle identified by Gilbert and Gubar. As the critic Anne Fogarty argues in "The Business of Attachment: Romance and Desire in the Novels of Kate O'Brien", O'Brien's "involvement with family structures may be seen not only as an attempt on her part to explore the plight of women who are fated to be trapped in domestic relations but also as a reflection of the particular historical era in which these texts were produced" (Fogarty in *OPD*, 103). In terms of the time lapse of approximately forty years between the historical settings of the novels, both Caroline and Lilian are trapped, as are their respective husbands. How they react, however, is different, reflecting, it could be argued, the changing *mores* in the time span of O'Brien's writing career. Caroline endures twenty years of unhappiness before making a bid for escape. Moreover, she denies herself the experience of an affair. In contrast, Lilian embarks on an immediate affair. Thus, in *Without My Cloak* and *The Flower of May*, the very basis on which the family is founded is subjected to O'Brien's critical eye in terms of gendered, familial and religious dynamics, as idealistic demands are played out in individually rendered contexts. The suggestion is that there was little change for the women in O'Brien's fiction in terms of gender and familial dynamics within marriage. By employing the historical genre, O'Brien commented from a remove on the insular, patriarchal nature of marriage in Irish society in the first half of the twentieth century. Given the dominant position of the Church during this period, O'Brien's critique of the Sacrament of Matrimony and the social and religious regulations foisted on married people that includes the unhindered procreation of

children, was a brave and radical exploration of the psychical and physical demands on women harnessed into the project of the achievement of the “common good”.

Chapters Two and Three explored O’Brien’s literalised representations of the imposition of rigid codes of gender and sexuality, a sexuality that can only be expressed in a monogamous relationship between a heterosexual couple and with procreation as the primary aim of the physical expression of desire. The next chapter explores a selection of O’Brien’s single female characters on the cusp of choosing their futures, in struggles and moments of protest against prevailing ideologies. The choices available to women at that time were “Nun, Married, Old Maid” (O’Brien, *Spices*, 118), and Jo Kernahan in *The Last of Summer*, Nell Mahoney in *Pray for the Wanderer* and Agnes Mulqueen in *The Ante-Room*, negotiate the bonds of family and personal desire on the path to the different roles undertaken as a result of these experiences. O’Brien’s subtle but insistent engagements with Irish culture and politics is evident by the different treatment of the roles available to single Irish women across the time span of some fifty years that passes between the fictional settings of these texts. The texts are set between the 1880s and 1930s, a cultural context that encompasses pre- and post-Independent Ireland, as well as the development of feminist movements, and women’s increased access to education.²¹

²¹ While the education provided by nuns replicated the gender roles promulgated by society and the Church, the Dominican, Loreto and Ursuline Orders played a pivotal role in laying the foundation for the participation of women in third level education, which in turn, paved the way for female emancipation. See Deirdre Raftery and Susan M. Parkes. *Female Education in Ireland 1700-1900: Minerva or Madonna*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007, Chapter 4.

CHAPTER FOUR

“TO STRUGGLE FREE”: “NUN, MARRIED, OLD MAID”

Introduction

This Chapter returns to the defining literary action or instance identified by Gilbert and Gubar discussed in the Introduction, “to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society” (Gilbert and Gubar, xi-xii). Such struggles are, they argue, an indicator of the subtextual feminist currents that often haunt a text. This chapter focuses on the “struggle” for freedom of three single women characters in O’Brien’s fiction, Jo Kernahan in *The Last of Summer*, Nell Mahoney in *Pray for the Wanderer* and Agnes Mulqueen in *The Ante-Room*, before each chooses their future role from the children’s game, “Nun, Married, Old Maid” (O’Brien, *Spices*, 118). Each struggle is tacitly or explicitly connected to questions of feminist self-determination discussed in society at large, namely around the educational and professional opportunities available for women. Agnes is the protagonist in *The Ante-Room*, while Nell and Jo in *Pray for the Wanderer* and in *The Last of Summer*, respectively, are both peripheral characters, but it is their positioning in the texts, on the cusp of self-determination, that renders each of them of equal interest for analysis. Each struggles with the ideological confines and demands of family, and each registers a protest against life within it, before accommodating or escaping the “primary ... unit group of Society” (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.1.1). Jo, in *The Last of Summer*, by becoming a nun and rejecting the idea of establishing her own family, chooses to live in an alternative community, one that is also figured on the trope of family, but which is not patriarchal, as its head is a “mother”, and she will live only with “sisters”. In *Pray for the Wanderer*, Nell chooses eventually to marry her cousin, which signals her resigned decision to remain in the traditional family unit, as rendered in the 1937 Constitution, and in *The Ante-Room*, Agnes chooses to become an “Old Maid” rather than disrupt her family’s façade, and she remains within the family colluding in its deception.

In all three characters, aspects of O’Brien’s interpretation of Teresa of Avila can be seen. Jo is spirited, determined and sure about what she wants to do, while Nell is “austere” and compared to Catherine of Siena by Matt Costello, the narrator of *Pray for the Wanderer*. Nell and Agnes share the trait of being passionate when in love, and it is

Saint Teresa's account of her difficulties with potentially disruptive experiences of human love that is used as a model for Agnes' story of desire in *The Ante-Room*. The novel was published in 1934, during the end years of the Free State, but set in 1880 when the debates about Home Rule were in development, making the advent of Independent Ireland the relevant historical era. By displacing debates about Ireland's political life onto this also significant period of change, O'Brien engages with contemporary issues from a distance. In the novel, a visiting English specialist, Sir Godfrey Bartlett-Crowe, is surprised at the sophistication of his hosts. At the dinner table, Marie-Rose teases her sister, saying that she is "a new type" (O'Brien, *A-R*, 206). Sir Godfrey replies: "But I thought that Ireland suffered no new types. I thought it was the sanctuary of the old ideal feminine!" (206) By using the historical genre, O'Brien explores the powerful pervasiveness of whether Ireland as a "sanctuary of the old ideal feminine" had passed with the advent of Independent Ireland considering the central role women had played in the achievement of that ambition. The fifty-year span between the settings of the novels, 1880 to 1939, encompasses the development of feminist movements as well as educational opportunities for women of the middle classes, as both Jo and Nell have MAs, a high level of education which contributes to their protest against the confines of family life. As *Pray for the Wanderer* is set in 1937, and *The Last of Summer* in 1939, some fifteen years after Independence, comparisons and developments, if any, between pre- and post-Independence can serve as a useful backdrop for analyses of the struggles and choices of Jo Kernahan, Nell Mahoney and Agnes Mulqueen.

Outside of marriage and motherhood, the profession of nun was a role for women both approved of and encouraged by the Church. In *The Last of Summer*, Jo's desire, as the one desire that she avows to be sure of, is to become a nun. In a similar vein to the mother in the family whose role is positioned as an instrument for the good of the State, Jo desires to be "an instrument for God's service" (O'Brien, *Summer*, 175). Thus, Jo chooses to be part of an alternative community, one in which the emotional bonds are initially without the over-determination of feeling associated with her family of origin, and thereby she rejects the patriarchal family. In Nell's case in *Pray for the Wanderer*, the desire for a companionate future becomes complicated as she finds herself attracted to Matt Costello, the brother of her brother-in-law. In the background to Nell's attraction is the failure of her relationship with her cousin and former fiancé,

Tom Mahoney. Having been passionately in love with Tom, the experience has shown Nell the terms necessary for her happiness. Moreover, as a devout Catholic, Nell is fully aware of the demands of a Catholic marriage. As a result, her choice of suitor is negotiated through personal and religious edicts as Matt offers a “brilliant and amusing fate” for Nell (O’Brien, *Pray*, 135), while Tom embodies the traditional spouse that in marriage represents patriarchal authority. In *The Ante-Room*, Agnes’ desire is manifested as romantic desire for her brother-in-law, Vincent. As he is married to her favourite sister, Marie-Rose, Agnes’ desire cannot be fulfilled without serious consequences, and as a result, she works through a familial as well as a religious framework to reach a decision.

Novels

The plots of *The Last of Summer* and *Pray for the Wanderer* have been summarised in Chapter Two, and in this Chapter it is the female relatives of Hannah Kernahan and Una Costello that come to the fore. Jo Kernahan is Hannah’s daughter while Nell Mahoney is Una’s sister. The main sphere of interest in Jo’s story is her relationship with her mother and whether the difficulties of their relationship influence Jo’s decision about her future. In Nell’s case, it is the portrayal of the modern independent woman and whether the traditional society that surrounds her can accommodate that independence that is the focus of the analysis.

In *The Ante-Room*, set in 1880, Teresa Mulqueen, the matriarch of the Mulqueen family, “the old ideal feminine”, is dying of cancer, and the novel explores whether this will die with her, or be carried on in the life of her daughter, Agnes. Teresa’s impending death, and the novel, is set in the Triduum that begins with Halloween, also the eve of All Saints’ Day, and ends on the second day of November, the Feast of All Souls, a day when the Church honours and prays for the deceased. The pagan feast of Halloween is a dead time when the barrier between the living and dead is said to be thinnest, and this permeability is reflected in the narrative, as all other lives are caught between Teresa’s life and death, which configures the atmosphere in the house to the extent that Agnes feels herself that she is “dead” at the end of the novel. The tight timeframe in a house marked by approaching death is highly significant as it emphatically sets the plot in a pagan space colonised by Christianity. The rituals of the

Christian feast are haunted by the pagan pre-history of the time, in which supposedly supernatural events are possible, and Agnes' life and future is haunted by Teresa's own struggle between the "common good" (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.2.1), and her own self-determination. The familiar struggle of the individual woman in a society structured to minimise her own self-ownership, drives this text as much as any of O'Brien's others. In *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, Lorna Reynolds described the novel as the study of the inner conflict "within the mind and soul of the heroine" (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 52). In *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life*, Eibhear Walshe described Agnes' story as a "clash between family affection and individual desire" (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 55). Agnes does not ultimately make a deliberate choice; rather it is foisted upon her as a result of the enacting of her moral values, as she retreats from the man she desires, her brother-in-law, Vincent.

Although the omniscient narrator is dominant in both *The Last of Summer* and *Pray for the Wanderer*, there are important occurrences of embedded narration that serve to reveal the stories of Jo and Nell, neither of whom are protagonists in the novels, in contrast to Agnes, who is a central character in *The Ante-Room*. Although Angèle Maury narrates *The Last of Summer*, and her urbane European outsidership provides the filter through which Jo is viewed, we are also textually privy to Jo's interiority, a narratorial practice unusual for a peripheral character in O'Brien. This suggests Jo's role as an embedded focaliser, as besides Angèle, she is the keenest observer of her mother throughout the text, is always alert to her mother's machinations, and is often defensive about her mother with others. The use of Jo as an important narratorial observer of her mother's conduct suggests the primacy of the mother-daughter relationship in Jo's story, as well as the need to consider the influence of her mother's character and behaviour on the choice Jo makes about her future role in life. The occasional glimpses into Jo's inner world suggest her importance in the text, not only as a foil for Hannah, but also as a character designed to comment on the choices available to women at the time.

In *Pray for the Wanderer*, Nell Mahoney is rendered mainly through the eyes of Matt Costello, the male protagonist and narrator, who becomes attracted to Nell. She is also reflected in the narratorial perspective of Tom Mahoney, her cousin and former fiancé. Both men are positioned as suitors for Nell's hand, and she is discussed

extensively in the text by both men. Although the reader is occasionally privy to Nell's thoughts, in the main, she appears in the thoughts and views of other characters, and she is less subject than object in this way. Her textual operations are framed within reflections on the Irish cultural ethos of the time, with its harmonisation of Church and State values. The microcosm of the institution of marriage, on which the family unit is founded, is in turn filtered through Nell as someone who has been engaged to be married, and who is now placed as a potential marriage partner for a worldly playwright. Matt's interest in Nell acts as a catalyst for Tom to finally speak. In *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study*, Adele Dalsimer wrote: "Nell is the new Irishwoman, accepting all the old social values but expressing them in a modern way." (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, 52) Dalsimer's observation is dramatised by Nell's choice of suitor, which is framed in terms of what Matt or Tom might offer her, "the old social values" or "a modern way", as the novel indicates that these are dichotomous and that only one suitor can embrace Nell's "modernity". In this way, the terms of marriage for an economically independent woman, and the implications of her choices, are explored in the context of the social and cultural developments for women in 1930s Ireland, when autonomy for women was a viable possibility.

In *The Ante-Room*, Agnes Mulqueen narrates her own desire for Vincent, and her struggle with desire, which culminates in her ultimate decision to deny herself a relationship, positions her as a struggling subject with whom the reader is invited to journey with on her life's path. Agnes is also constructed in the text as an object of another's desire, Dr. Curran, her mother's attending doctor, who narrates his desire for Agnes. His role as observer of Agnes is indicated in a scene where he informs her that her mother has asked him to dinner. The invitation troubles her as Vincent will be present, and now Dr. Curran, "the only eyes whose acuteness she need fear would be upon her!" (O'Brien, *A-R*, 69) As a man of science, Dr. Curran is constructed as an authority figure whose comments on the Mulqueen family dynamic are set up as the objective outside measure of their stifling and smothering inner workings, and, outside of Agnes herself, he is the closest observer of Agnes in the text. Agnes' story is finally one of denial, a form of emotional death, as a result of, as Dalsimer wrote, being "guided only by her rigorous scruples" (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, 21).

The single women discussed in this chapter share the difficulty of achieving self-determination in a cultural context that primarily valued the self-less woman prepared to sacrifice herself in marriage. As products of a cultural ethos that demands the suppression and repression of female individualism promulgated by mothers who are in turn indoctrinated by institutional patriarchal authorities, daughters in O'Brien's texts can only achieve selfhood in the absence of their mothers. Thus, the negation of the mother figure is the price of separation and individuation essential to human growth and autonomy. Both Jo and Agnes live with mothers that are obsessed with sons, and both mother-daughter bonds are broken at the end of these novels, as Jo leaves her mother and the family home for Europe and the substitute "mother" of the convent, a European, non-emotionally invasive alternative to the smothering "Mother Ireland", while Agnes' mother is dying. Nell's mother is already dead. At the same time, the sympathetic portrayals of mothers such as Teresa Mulqueen, who recognises her mistaken mothering of Reggie, and Julia Morrow in *The Flower of May*, who frets about the decision to curtail her daughter's schooling, suggests O'Brien's attempt to look beyond the stereotype and ask about the influences to which mothers themselves are subject. This is particularly evident in the portrayal of Hannah Kernahan, as despite her destruction of Tom and Angèle's relationship, as witnessed by Martin and Jo, both her children attempt to understand her and to excuse her behaviour on the grounds of her unhappy experience of marriage, and the loss of children. They also acknowledge that despite her faults, she has been a good mother to them. Jo, for instance, while excusing her mother's obsession with Tom, tells Angèle: "Mother has always been very devoted to us." (O'Brien, *Summer*, 26) Martin tells Angèle that Hannah "has great qualities. [...] She was very sweet when we were kids." (221) In this way, while Hannah's character and behaviour impacts negatively on her daughter, the lack of accessibility to any self-determination in her own right is included as a factor in Hannah's portrayal, thereby casting a sympathetic rather than condemnatory eye on her behaviour towards Angèle and her own son. In this way, the mother, either by her presence or absence, is positioned as a significant site of influence in the consequent choices made by daughters.

Vocation, Education and Spinsterhood

Jo's vocation in *The Last of Summer* reflects the contemporaneous boom period of Irish women's attraction to the religious life, and the flood of vocations in the early twentieth century had its roots in the reform of the Church in Ireland in the nineteenth century. Religious life was the only other form of womanhood besides motherhood that the Church publicly advocated, conforming as it did to Catholic ideologies of de-sexualised womanhood. Moreover, there are strong similarities between the ceremony of profession and that of marriage, as postulants took on new, often male names, are called "Brides" of Christ, and for the ceremony, as described in *The Land of Spices*, dress in "white silk and lace veils" (O'Brien, *Spices*, 3). In addition, the ceremony of Profession is followed by a "Reception breakfast" that includes "white-iced 'Reception' cakes" (7). Likewise, in her study of nuns, Caitriona Clear links the "vocations" of motherhood and religious life, as she writes: "The spread of active religious communities of women in Ireland came about at a time when the secular emphasis on women's primary domestic vocation was very strong" (Clear, *Nuns*, 147). Nuns were models of Christian civility and professionalism, thereby commanding considerable societal respect. Clear writes:

The nineteenth-century ideal of woman, reinforced in Ireland by the misogynist tradition of an increasingly popular Roman Catholicism, demanded of women of all classes resignation, 'service', self-sacrifice and above all, obedience: obedience to the will of God, the will of men, to social superiors, and to the potent feminine mystique of the times. (136-7)

Humility and obedience became part of the expected behaviour for the Catholic woman and was perpetuated by the example of nuns through the educational system and the socialisation process. As a result, these model traits became part of what it was to be feminine and Catholic. This ideological ethos influenced standards of moral behaviour among the pupils attending convent schools, which was carried into their future households and was the genesis of women as moral guardians in Ireland. In addition, Clear points out, "children were also ... taught to respect their parents, to practise civility and charity in their dealings with one another, and to defer to their superiors" (115). In this way, submission to authority as well as deference to one's parents was inculcated in Irish children.

The nineteenth-century Irish Church harnessed the energies of the vast number of women religious by involving them in the pastoral work of the Church. In this way, women religious presented the caring face of the Church to largely powerless or oppressed people and to those in need, thereby giving nuns' important propaganda value. In addition, nuns were harnessed to play a role in Paul Cullen's civilising programme, and through frequent contact with nuns in schools, hospitals and institutions for the poor, people were indoctrinated to the new Catholic practices advanced by Cullen's post-famine reforms, as well as to the values of the middle classes. In "The Limits of Female Autonomy: Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland", Clear writes that Cullen acknowledged "their key role in the disciplinary drive over which he presided" (Clear in Luddy and Murphy, 19). Moreover, he described nuns as "the best *support* to religion" (Clear, *Nuns*, 57, emphasis mine). Thus, women religious were deemed by the Hierarchy as essential but secondary in relation to the male clergy. In a remark that reflects the selflessness of the woman of the home, as well as the notion of sacrifice, Clear writes that nuns maintained an important position in society "only by unremitting work, undemanding service, and unquestioning acceptance of second-class status both for their work and themselves" (166). Despite the lack of recognition by Church authorities for the work undertaken by nuns, it was a way of life that appealed to a significantly large number of woman, as by the end of the nineteenth century, Clear writes, "nuns were virtually everywhere – in schools, private and state-supported, in hospitals of every description, in orphanages and asylums of various kinds, and even small industries" (100).¹ By the early twentieth century, as Tony Fahey writes in "Nuns in the Catholic Church in Ireland in the Nineteenth Century", "throughout Europe generally ...nuns had come to outnumber male religious and clergy of all kinds by something of the order of two to one" (Fahey in Cullen, 8).

¹ As well as the usual reasons for attraction to this way of life, such as having a vocation or having no role in the family home, Caitriona Clear offers a fascinating reason for the proliferation of nuns in the late nineteenth century, based on her interpretation of the dispersal of plant throughout the country. Clear writes: "It is significant ... that the proliferation of large convents in Munster and Leinster throughout this period co-existed with a progressively high rate of mental illness among women in these two regions. Madness, or mental illness, often results from alienation, a sense of being useless, powerless, and irrelevant in society. Women's economic power and social relevance were gradually eroded in an era when their traditional occupations were disappearing and not being replaced, and when the falling marriage rate rendered a daughter a liability in the family economy. We cannot measure happiness, but we can, to a certain extent, measure unhappiness, and the regions with the highest rate of female unhappiness in nineteenth-century Ireland were also those in which the largest proportion of women opted for the religious life" (Clear, *Nuns*, 141). See Caitriona Clear. *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987.

As a result, most young girls had a personal familiarity with nuns, and many women had either family members or relatives in convents. Moreover, as Clear argues,

Women have traditionally depended more upon each other than upon men for advice, support and companionship, and this partly explains the strong influence which female relatives ... exerted upon each other in the choice of the religious life. (145)

Clear's argument is reflected by O'Brien's testimony in *Presentation Parlour* about her Aunt Fan's reason for entering the convent. O'Brien wrote:

Fan was not, physically or mentally, material for the life of rule and austerity. She was pious, but probably had no vocation to the religious life ... Simply she insisted that she could only face life where Mary was; she could be no longer separated from Mary – and so she was going to be a nun where Mary was a nun. (O'Brien, *P.P.*, 44)

In *The Last of Summer*, Jo's desire to go abroad reflects the depiction of Jo as an adventurous woman, as well as the high profile of Irish missionary personnel during the 1930s and 1940s. Missionary nuns visited schools frequently offering exciting vistas of foreign lands and adventure. In *Made Holy: Irish Women Religious at Home and Abroad*, the sociologist Yvonne McKenna offers a fascinating account of the attractions to religious life and of the life experiences of religious communities in the early twentieth century. McKenna interviewed a group of over thirty women, all of who were born between 1911 and 1950, and all of who had lived part, or all, of their lives as religious outside Ireland. McKenna writes that the life of a missionary, as well as being highly respected, offered the anticipation of adventure, a professional career, being part of an international effort, working in an exotic location, and the opportunity of doing valuable work (McKenna, *passim*). Vocations were prayed for in almost every home in Ireland and missionary work magazines were circulated and read, avidly and widely. In addition, McKenna confirms that the women of her study articulated their vocations to the religious life in the context of the social, economic, cultural and religious context of their times, "presenting it as a response to the gendered nature of society and the opportunities open, or closed, to them as women in it" (71). Moreover, the notion of sacrifice, which had positive connotations at the time, and "doing good" for others, was also important and the religious life was a means of achieving both eternal salvation and a measure of fulfilment in working to better the lives of others. Of her respondents,

McKenna writes: “Both in terms of Irish society during the period and Catholic ideology, sacrifice was a valued quality in women. Thus, it was not surprising that many of the women used discourses of sacrifice to describe their attraction to entering.” (60) For instance, in *Presentation Parlour*, O’Brien recounted that she believed her Aunt Mary, “was clean-cut for a vocational life... She thought that the natural thing was to give to life, and she never thought at all about receiving.” (O’Brien, *P.P.*, 63) Similarly, in *The Last of Summer*, Jo wants to be of use to others, and frames her vocation in this way. She tells her brother: “‘I’ve been four years now marking time at University College, and I have a perfectly good M.A. degree. That ought to make me useful enough.’” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 30) For many women, especially elder girls, the practice of working for others was part of their upbringing. Ultimately, in contemplating her vocation, Jo believes “that to postpone effort and conflict was almost to refuse them, and she thought poorly of a vocation to God’s service which withheld the happiest, the youngest years.” (174-5) In this way, Jo prioritises the notion of self-sacrifice as an element of her vocation, an ideological notion that also arises in the “vocations” of marriage and motherhood.

On the one hand, the secondary status of nuns among religious personnel was still prevalent in the early twentieth century, and McKenna writes that all of her respondents were aware that their vocation was considered less important than that of the priesthood. On the other hand, as the critic Elizabeth Butler Cullingford writes in “‘Our Nuns Are *Not* a Nation’: Politicizing the Convent in Irish Literature and Film”, by the twentieth century,

many traditional female religious communities – although their independence was always compromised by their allegiance to a patriarchal church, and their extinction under the onslaught of Western modernity currently seems assured – offered in their time a greater degree of autonomy for women than was available in ‘the world.’ (Cullingford, 34)

In *The Last of Summer* and in *The Land of Spices*, the convent is offered as an alternative and fulfilling way of life for a woman. In a remark about *The Land of Spices*, that can similarly be applied to Jo’s decision to enter a European convent, the feminist critic Mary Breen in “Something Understood? Kate O’Brien and *The Land of Spices*”, writes: “[A]n out-ward looking European perspective is presented as an

alternative to Irish Nationalism, the family is replaced by a successful community of women and women in the novel seek autonomy and agency outside the home and marriage.” (Breen in *OPD*, 188)

The alternative community presented in *The Last of Summer* is preceded by *Pray for the Wanderer*, wherein the topics of home and marriage in the Irish cultural context are explored within the family. Nell Mahoney’s function in *Pray for the Wanderer* is usually understood primarily as the conduit for the development of Matt Costello’s encounter with his homeland. However, Nell, as she is educated, financially independent and works as a teacher of history, can also be read as functioning as a commentary on the extent to which the increased educational opportunities for women in the 1930s really gave women significant control over their own lives. O’Brien shared a similar perspective to Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) on the importance of education for women. While O’Brien saw it as a means to autonomy outside the family and its duties, Wollstonecraft argued that if a society makes “women rational creatures and free citizens ... they will quickly become good wives and mothers” (Wollstonecraft, 113). O’Brien’s views on education for women are suggested by the forthright manner in which she explored the practice of consciously training women to fit into the Church and State mould in *The Land of Spices*. In convents, girls were educated to be wives and mothers and so their educational repertoire was narrowed to suit this. O’Brien protests against this in *The Land of Spices* by offering the idea of an educational system that trains girls for their own sake, and this is dramatised by the discussions between Reverend Mother Helen Archer and the proponents of nationalism, Father Conroy and the local bishop. The setting is 1914 and the Irish Language Revival is topical and hotly debated throughout. Father Conroy tells Helen Archer: “Our young girls must be educated *nationally* now, Reverend Mother – to be the wives of *Irishmen* and to meet the changing times!” (O’Brien, *Spices*, 92) As the discussion continues, Reverend Mother exclaims: “I fear I lose my sense of proportion, and of justice, when I think people want to make a political weapon of the education of children.” (96-7) In addition, the topic of the importance of education for its own sake is explicitly expressed by Fanny Morrow in *The Flower of May*: “I mean to have ... enough to go off quietly and get some decent education and sort things out. That’s all!” (O’Brien, *Flower*, 158)

By the end of the 1800s, the growing availability of education for women in Ireland had facilitated the option of economic independence that many women were to enjoy to a limited degree in the first half of the twentieth century when *Pray for the Wanderer* is set, and the improvement of educational opportunities for women is interwoven with Church and State policies. As second level schooling for women increased in the late nineteenth century, a demand was created for third level education. The Irish Catholic Church considered it a waste of time to educate women, who were destined to be wives and mothers, beyond that particular role, and did not soften its oppositional stance to higher education for Catholic women until the late 1880s. Even this was not prompted by concern for women but by sectarian issues, for Catholic women were attending Protestant institutions for higher education, due to the lack of Catholic alternatives. The new strategy on third level education was directed by Archbishop William Walsh, a member of both the Intermediate Board of Education and of the Senate of the Royal University of Ireland, and who had an interest in providing equal facilities for all Catholics, rather than women alone. The Intermediate Act of 1878 opened up higher education to girls, which was further enabled by the setting up of the Robertson Commission on University Education, which ran from 1901 to 1903. Women used the opportunity to successfully fight their case for equality in education and for co-education. It took another five years, with the acceptance of women into Trinity College in 1904 proving influential, before the 1908 Universities Act was passed. This allowed women to be admitted to all degrees and offices in the National University of Ireland.²

The Catholic Church was under no illusion as to the power it exerted through the educational system, and religious instruction was a key component of education in Ireland. As a result, the Irish hierarchy were defensive about any changes to educational practices. In *Church and State in Modern Ireland: 1923-1979*, J.H. Whyte recounted the bishops' resistance to any threat to their control. He wrote:

In 1904, following a proposal for the setting up of a Department of Education in Ireland, a joint statement from the bishops protested against any change in managerial control of primary schools. In 1907, a government proposal for the setting up of an Irish Council, which would have control over, among other

² See Deirdre Raftery and Susan M. Parkes. *Female Education in Ireland: 1700-1900*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007, Chapter 4.

things, education, was abandoned, partly because of the hierarchy's hostility to any reduction in its control over education. In 1919, an education bill, which proposed greatly increased grants for Irish education – but also tighter government control – was abandoned largely because of the opposition of the Irish hierarchy. (Whyte, 19)

The bishops' stance reflected the Church's view of the role of religion in the educational system, which was later explicitly stated by Pope Pius XI (1922-39) in his 1929 encyclical on Christian education, *Rappresentanti in Terra*, where he wrote: "And first of all, education belongs pre-eminently to the Church" (Section 15 in Carlen, Vol. 3, 355). In addition, Pius XI implicitly emphasised the priority in the education system of training girls to be good wives, mothers and homemakers, and he wrote: "In the first place comes the family, instituted directly by God for its peculiar purpose, the generation and formation of offspring; for this reason it has priority of nature and therefore of rights over civil society" (Section 12, 354). Maintaining a separate school for boys and girls was crucial, Pius XI continued, as between the sexes there existed a "difference of physical organism in inclination and disposition" (Section 68, 363). In this context, the training for stereotypical roles took precedence in the Irish educational system.³ Thus, while Nell in *Pray for the Wanderer* has an impressive education, it can be understood that her early schooling has been steeped in Catholic *mores* and traditions. In this way, O'Brien dramatises the choice between the availability of independence for women and the attraction of the perpetuated traditional role for women, that of marriage. Likewise, Jo in *The Last of Summer*, who has a similar level of education to Nell, also has independence available to her, but is attracted to the selfless role of nun.

The success of the Church's role in the education system was evident by Church and State co-operation which was officially rendered by the alliance between convents and other religious-run schools, institutionalised one year after the ending of the Civil War, when in 1924, Catholic schools were recognised by the Free State Department of Education as State schools. Education, therefore, was a key area in which the patriarchal values of the dominant group in society were reinforced and passed on, as this worldview was consequently adapted by the State in the Constitution as well as in

³ See "Our Age of Innocence" by Gráinne O'Flynn, and "Schools and Gender Roles" by Damian Hannan and Richard Breen in Mary Cullen. Ed. *Girls don't do Honours: Irish Women in Education in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Dublin: Argus (Women's Education Bureau), 1987.

subsequent legislation. The premising of religious education over all other aspects of education can be seen in Article 42.1 of the Constitution on Education which states:

The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral intellectual, physical and social education of their children. (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 42.1)

At the same time, in spite of the drawbacks of a gendered education system, education did pave the way for making it acceptable for women to work. In *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, Caitriona Clear writes:

The last two decades of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century saw almost a four-fold increase in the proportion of working women who were teachers, nurses, government officials, commercial clerks, nuns and other miscellaneous professional and semi-professionals. (Clear, *Nuns*, 18)

Female teachers in schools gradually replaced the profession of private governess, and by 1911, sixty-three percent of teachers were women.⁴ By the 1930s, opportunities for women had improved, and Nell Mahoney's status as teacher of history in *Pray for the Wanderer* reflects this development.

While women who sacrificed themselves in marriage to motherhood and uncomplaining wifeliness, or to the Church in vocation, found value in Irish society, women who sacrificed themselves for the "common good" outside these familial structures found themselves without status or recognition of their worth. With the emphasis on woman as wife and mother in Church and State writings, a single woman was not perceived of as a person of status, and the fate of the non-educated middle-class woman was precarious. Spinsterhood, as the third of the three options available to women in the game "Nun, Married, Old Maid" (O'Brien, *Spices*, 118), was, in this cultural context, the least desirable option. Spinsters were pitied, often ridiculed and frequently, dependent on male relatives. Like Agnes Considine in *Without My Cloak*, Mary Lavelle's aunt in *Mary Lavelle* and Fanny Morrow's paternal aunt in *The Flower of May*, they took care of many households in the absence of mistresses, which in turn

⁴ See Rosemary Cullen Owens. *A Social History of Women in Ireland 1870-1970*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2005, p. 231.

reflects the high death rate of young mothers. In this substitute role, there was no increase in status for single women as a result and relatives were not generally paid for their work. Like Hannah Kernahan's companion, Dotey, in *The Last of Summer*, spinsters were often dependent on whoever provided a home for them.

O'Brien's first fictional spinster appears in *Without My Cloak*, as a "problem" for the rest of the family. Agnes Considine cries incessantly after the death of her father, as she had been his companion and housekeeper since the death of her mother. Agnes' distress is mercilessly described by the omniscient narrator: "Poor Agnes, poor flattened, broken, emptied Agnes ... whose eyes were cushioned in tender swollen, weary flesh, whose distended throat made speech impossible, poor lonely Agnes, whose occupation was gone." (O'Brien, *Cloak*, 92) Agnes' dependence is sharply highlighted when despite the fact that she's a grown woman the family decide that "there would have to be a family conference about Agnes ... some of them would have to offer her a home. [...] They were all eyeing the problem. It would have to be discussed." (92) There is no sense of Agnes deciding where and how to live, and her brother, Anthony, assumes the mantle of patriarch of the Considine family by deciding, against his wife's wishes, to have Agnes live with them. Molly does not want "to have her old maid sister-in-law come to live" (98). The rest of the family are relieved at Anthony's decision, which is done out of duty, as Anthony knows it is what his father would want: "Pity raged in him, too, to see one of his own blood left so bleakly unwanted." (98) Despite Agnes's significant dowry, there have been no suitable suitors:

Her virgin state irritated Anthony at times, as it irritated other members of the family. It did not suit Considine pride that any bearer of that name should appear to the world as flouted and unimportant, and Anthony could not help admitting that old maids were unimportant. (11)

Because Agnes is an "unwanted" woman in the marital sense, she is also deemed to be unimportant, as her "virgin state" means that she is not reproducing. The implication here is that a female body that is not reproducing is considered worthless. As such Agnes is of no value to the family as she is not contributing to the Considine dynasty. Moreover, she is a source of shame to the family's standing in the community. Thus, Agnes has neither private nor public status. At the same time, the text indicates that Agnes dresses well (71) and is a good hostess, thereby signalling her awareness of her

role as bourgeois woman. The frequent visits of her nephew's teacher, a Jesuit scholastic named Martin Devoy, who "was a complete success with Aunt Agnes ... and she invited him frequently to River Hill" (131), suggests that Agnes is good company when with someone who takes an interest in her. Her unmarried state, however, undermines any attributes she may possess. In Anthony's house, she is generally depicted in tears, or is irritable and argumentative with her nephew, Denis (133-4, 232). Thus, Agnes is given no significant role in the family and is disapproved of by the others, despite the fact that after Molly's death, Agnes assumes the running of Anthony's house and looks after his eight children. The aging Agnes is cruelly and ironically described by the omniscient narrator:

The years were not sweetening Agnes Considine. Life had given her nothing but money, a poor gift, and she was slipping into the ways of an ineffectual scold. [...] No one paid much attention to her. Anthony never seemed to hear a word she said; even Father Dargle, her confessor for twenty years, sometimes asked her lately to cut it short for God's sake and stop wasting his time about nothing; her nieces and nephews were leaving behind them the 'googly baby' ways that appeal so pitifully to the empty-hearted and were putting on personalities as much too strong for her as those of her brothers and sisters had always been (132-3).

Agnes, despite the size of her extended family, is very much alone, and moreover, is overlooked and overshadowed by her own generation as well as the next. The portrait of Agnes Considine foreshadows the fate of her similarly named niece, Agnes Mulqueen, in *The Ante-Room*. There is little familial attempt to understand or empathise with Agnes Considine. Rather she is treated as a typical occurrence in a large family. The deeply ironic narratorial tone used to describe Agnes suggests a critique of the cruelty of both the family and society that render Agnes negligible solely on account of her single status.

Jo Kernahan: “Nun”

Jo Kernahan, in *The Last of Summer*, is the antithesis of her mother, Hannah Kernahan, who was discussed in Chapter Two. Jo’s relationship with her mother is marked by anxiety and watchfulness, and her uneasiness about her mother is symbolic of O’Brien’s growing uneasiness with her motherland. This is dramatised by Jo’s reluctance to confront the truth of her mother’s character, and her decision to leave her homeland is dramatised by their relationship in Hannah’s representation as symbol of the Irish cultural ethos. In this way, Jo foreshadows Fanny Morrow in *The Flower of May* whose attachment to the mother/land prevents her from following her dream. Like Fanny, Jo leaves home, but in Jo’s case, it is a deliberate choice rather than circumstantial, and thus, she becomes the first of O’Brien’s single Irish females to choose a life outside the familial and the cultural bond. However, it is a choice based on rejection, a rejection of personal attachment of any kind. In a similar vein to Fanny, Jo has not had any life-changing experience of love. Instead, Jo’s emotional experience occurs within her family, and it is the negative effects of Hannah’s “smother” mothering of Tom that leads Jo to choose a life of “detachment” and “no personal passion” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 175). Thus, in contrast to Fanny, Jo is not leaving herself open to the experience of “attachment”, or indeed, to chance. She seeks the security of an alternative community, one in which no emotional demands are required.

Jo is educated, intelligent and has an M.A. She had undertaken university life in order to be of better service to God, “and she still saw no other service worth her soul’s attention” (175). As a result of her certainty about a vocation, Jo, at the opening of *The Last of Summer*, does not know what to do about the offer to continue her studies for another two years, “but she was certain that she must ultimately be a nun” (174). Jo has enjoyed the freedom of her studies, and the temptation to continue is strong:

Yet – just because she *was* so tempted, she saw how real was the persistent claim upon her life – and she appreciated its rightness, the persistent purity and detachment of its exaction in a world of increasing savagery and vulgarity and personal passion. And she had visited *Sainte Fontaine* – and knew that the best part of her soul was waiting for her there, had gone ahead of her to that out-of-date, cold, mediaeval centre of

discipline and rigidity and elimination. No vulgarity within those cold, high, echoing walls; no personal passion. (175)

As abstractions and adjectives describing coldness, detachment and the absence of human warmth, there is a turning away from human contact and emotion, which as Eibhear Walshe notes is typical of nuns in O'Brien's symbolic system: "The nuns represented emotional distance. Kate valued this and saw it as the one precious necessity for the creative life." (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 19) Similarly, Jo deems detachment as a necessary element of being a good nun, and as a result must leave the family in order to fulfil "the persistent claim upon her life (O'Brien, *Summer*, 175). In the text, Jo's choice is approved of, as by contemplating *Sainte Fontaine*, she is rejecting "freedom and indecision" and the chance to continue "to study and read and dream as she chose" (174). She decides that "she would have to be brave... Perhaps she would have to prove her contempt for debate about personal decisions, personal fate" (175). Here, Jo reflects the depiction of Nell Mahoney in *Pray for the Wanderer* who, despite choosing a different path to Jo, similarly lauds the ideal of the common good at the expense of personal selfhood. As Angèle tells Jo: "After all, no life can contain everything you want – you've got to choose" (184).

There is no indecision with regard to Jo's vocation, as she tells Angèle, to whom Jo verbalises her thoughts, "it's what I really want to do. 'It is something to be sure of a desire,' she quoted shyly." (206) The use of the word "desire" appears to contradict the attributes of self-negation and denial deemed necessary for a vocation, but it reflects Jo's perception of the nature of a vocation, in that, for her, it is a "persistent claim" that overrides all other possible paths in life. Jo is also in no doubt about the Order she wishes to join. She is anxious to get to Europe before war breaks out, as she tells Angèle: "I'd hate to be fobbed off with some old *ex tempore* novitiate in Ireland." (206) Here, Jo intimates that even a religious community is marked by the culture that surrounds it, a culture she intimates has no scope for doing worthwhile work. In this way, Jo is placed as a foil to her mother who chooses to ignore the implications for humanity, as well as her children and niece, of a world war. Unlike Hannah, who stresses that the impending war has "nothing whatever to do with us" (193), Jo is determined to be a "useful instrument for God's service" (175). In addition, the rendering of Jo's vocation reflects O'Brien's positioning of the convent as an alternative

world where women could achieve their potential and satisfy both the need for adventure and spiritual fulfilment. Walshe writes:

The nuns of Laurel Hill gave Kate O'Brien the only secure version of adult female authority in her childhood. It was not surprising to find that she carried a veneration of the world of the convent into her adult life and into her fiction. Most of the important adult women in her childhood were nuns (Walshe, *Writing Life*, 13).

The rendering of nuns as well as aesthetic "holy women" in the texts, such as Agatha Conlon in *Mary Lavelle*, Ana de Mendoza in *That Lady*, Eleanor Delahunt in *The Flower of May*, and Clare Halvey in *As Music and Splendour*, reflects O'Brien's familiarity with nuns, as well as the convent providing a useful model for a mode of life conducted outside the family. As Jo's potential for success in the convent is established by her dynamism and her intellect, her ambitious streak will be channelled for good rather than, the text implies, restricted and misrouted as in the case of her mother.

The modelling of Jo on Teresa of Avila is suggested by her portrayal as an unlikely nun, who appears to be compelled, almost in spite of herself, to enter a convent. By all accounts, Teresa, in O'Brien's rendering of her life, was an unlikely nun, which suggests the haunting possibility that her desire to enter the convent may have been unconsciously motivated by an attraction to a space in which female relationships were not only possible, but the structuring force. Her interest in the trivial aspects of life displayed at sixteen years of age when the Royals stayed at Avila so alarmed her father that he sent her to a convent boarding school. To her surprise Teresa was happy there but had to return home after eighteen months due to illness. At this stage, Teresa had no desire to be a nun, but neither did she wish to be married, a life she said she "feared" (O'Brien, *Teresa*, 28). This was probably due to the fact that by the time Teresa was thirteen years old, her mother had died, aged thirty-three, having borne many children (18). In O'Brien's account of Teresa, she is adventurous, sociable and unconventional. In *Farewell Spain*, in which O'Brien devoted a chapter to Teresa, she wrote: "For always, to the end of her days, she enjoyed society, and was rapaciously interested in people." (O'Brien, *Spain*, 105). Similarly, Jo's sociability and unconventionality is also noteworthy, and she scandalises the barmaid in the local hostelry by her presence there. The barmaid, Maggie May, "looked at Jo with concern",

as it is known in the community that Jo has a vocation, and says: ““Good-evening, Miss Kernahan. This is an unusual sight, you in the snug – but I’m hoping it’s only the way your hand was forced.”” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 28) The “snug” is the small space in the bar, which is usually occupied by a solitary man, or a small group of men who are staving off a private space for themselves, so for Jo to occupy this space is a claiming of public and masculine space, and of the masculine means of bonding with others. Hannah, in terms of the importance of appearances when in public, is equally scandalised when she hears about it later: ““I don’t really know what ‘the snug’ is, Angèle – but I do know that is was *not* a place to take *you* to, and I can only apologize for Martin – *and* indeed for Jo, of whom it astonishes me to hear that she has set foot in the place.”” (49). Jo flushes in reaction to this speech, as Angèle tries to explain that she is used to visiting cafes and bars. Hannah is not appeased: ““Jo, you see, is rather differently placed – and here in Drumaninch, you understand–”” (50) Martin intervenes in a voice “husky with exasperation”, and says: ““Oh God, Mother – it’s 1939, even in Drumaninch!”” (50) Thus, Jo’s movements are carefully monitored by her mother, as well as the society that surrounds her, and her awareness of this had fuelled her decision to study as a lay person. In another scene, during the cousins’ day out in Carahone, an unconcerned Jo, who has just lost money on a bet, tells Angèle: ““But I love betting. A race meeting’s my idea of Heaven.”” (79) Moreover, Jo has an admirer, Hugh Delaney or “Red Hugh”. He is described as “Jo’s faithful hanger-on”, who courts her extravagantly and whose manner of courtship is “complete subservience” (63). Angèle observes that “if any method was to succeed with Jo this was not the one” (63). Jo is clearly not in love with Hugh, and there is little surprise when she later turns down his marriage proposal. (237-8)

Jo’s physical description suggests strength of character, which contrasts with her mother’s “prettiness” that veils Hannah’s determination and ruthlessness. Angèle describes Jo as follows:

She was a heavy-shouldered, large-headed girl of medium height; she moved like an athlete, and seemed ill-suited by the sprigged cotton dress she wore. Her dark wavy hair was bobbed and fell thickly against her neck. As she drew near Angèle saw that she was like her brother Martin in being pale of skin, dark-eyed, and attractive-looking with the attractiveness of intelligence rather than of beauty. (O’Brien, *Summer*, 21)

Jo's physical similarity to her brother, Martin, indicates their similar worldview, and also foreshadows their respective decision to go to Europe at the end of the novel. Angèle also observes Jo's "brown muscularity" as she swims at Carahone (84) and tells Martin that Jo looks "like a head on a coin" (85). Jo, therefore, is striking, robust and physically strong, and reflects the mental dynamism of Saint Teresa, as well as a classical and noble cameo, all of which suggest that Jo has been marked out for public and "higher" office than domestic service as a wife. In *Teresa of Avila*, O'Brien openly admired the fact that Teresa, from 1560 until her death in 1582, "was a public figure, a fighter, a politician, a contender with the visible forces of her time, a soldier, wit and controversialist whose fame spread rapidly over Europe" (35). Likewise, Jo is attributed with the strength and stamina deemed necessary to sustain her for work in a battle zone, while her interest in horseracing and socialising suggests her potential as a "controversialist", a role that may be useful in Jo as a future leader of a community, as the many references to her intelligence suggests. Such terms designate her as performing a "feminine" gender despite a body, in Judith Butler's terms, that "matters" differently for her and which is described in terms both androgynous, and "masculine".⁵ Here, the conflict between Jo's strength, her desire and her beauty as a lesbian object of desire are dramatised in conflict with her sense of duty and the social demands of the minimisation of strength and physical pleasure for women. Jo's physical strength and her pleasure in movement and sport serve as a code for sexual pleasure and expression, which come naturally to her, serving as a contrast to the unnaturalness of the various restraints she must place on her body and being, her movement in space, within the town and country, and outside the country, in order to be enclosed, and encoded as a "woman" at this time.

In contrast to Saint Teresa's passionate "attachments", however, Jo appears to reject passion for herself. She does not place much store in romantic love and this is dramatised by her reaction to Angèle and Tom's engagement. As Jo's voice communicates her wonder at the couple's happiness, her mother enquires:

'But why the tone of wonder, Jo?'

'Because I think happiness is much to be wondered at, Mother,' Jo answered coolly. (168)

⁵ See Judith Butler. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Jo views the engagement as a “mistake”, but was “inclined to think human love a mistake anyhow – and she regarded mistakes as inevitable here below, and as tests of what lay within.” (171) Moreover, Jo

did not on the whole regard what people call mistakes as very significant, or worth avoiding. Most human actions ... could be made, in one light or another, to look like mistakes. It seemed to Jo that almost any major decision in any life was hazardous – and that that fact was of no importance. Importance came from within, and informed events only through the natures of their participants. (170)

Jo’s thoughts on the unimportance of “hazardous” decisions echo a similar test of maturity that Agnes Mulqueen will undergo in *The Ante-Room*, when she falls in love with her sister’s husband. Jo’s test is the attraction of continuing her studies that she denies herself in favour of helping others. Angèle jokingly tells Jo that by avoiding attachment, she’s an “escapist”, to which Jo replies: ““If I make a good job of being a nun, I won’t have been–”” (184) Here, Jo intimates that it is love that is a fantasy in life, whereas she intends to confront, what are in her terms, the realities of life by eschewing “personal passion” (175). This reflects her concept of a vocation as a life of “purity and detachment” (175). This is, of course, a direct rejection of Hannah’s life of attachment that, in Jo’s view, has had a negative impact on the lives of her family.

In Jo’s rejection of the family, a question that can be asked is whether in Jo’s quest for a life without “personal passion”, she is also rejecting her ambiguously suggested sexuality, and all possibility of intimacy, either through escape from heteronormative bonds or into celibacy within an all-female world. And in rejecting sexuality, is there a possibility that Jo’s lack of interest in Hugh indicates that the expression of her sexuality would not “fit” the monogamous, marital model? In Saint Teresa’s story, O’Brien wrote of her “attachments” to other women, as well as her “attraction” to a priest, and that these experiences of passion were Teresa’s most difficult trials in the path to becoming a reformer. Teresa wrote: ““If only I could describe the occasions of sin during these years from which God delivered me... and how He continually saved me from the danger of losing my entire reputation!...”” (O’Brien, *Teresa*, 45). For Teresa, emotional attachment, whatever the gender of the people involved, was a hindrance to the achievement of her aim to reform the Carmelite

Order and, more importantly, to “the exercise of prayer” (48). In addition, Jo is joining a community of women and will have relationships with other women, which in terms of lesbian feminist theory, constitutes a form of resistance to contemporary forms of social relations. Jo’s life, therefore, will consist of a range of woman-identified experiences, a “lesbian continuum”,⁶ as the phrase coined by Adrienne Rich indicates, that includes relationships with other women that are not sexual. Adrienne Rich’s term encompasses networks set up by women within particular professions or institutions such as in a convent, and in the context of O’Brien’s work, the convent can be deemed a site that represents a political act rather than a sexual orientation. In this way, sexuality in O’Brien’s *oeuvre* can be seen as a construction and as subject to change, and in a novel that confronts Irish cultural *mores*, the depiction of Jo’s rejection of family life can be seen as O’Brien’s exploration of the imposition of so called normative expressions of sexuality that are confined to narrow parameters. In the case of Jo, however, it does appear that on account of the environment in which she has grown up, she is aware only of what she does *not* want. Angèle, for instance, is “conscious of the dreamy innocence which underlay Jo’s firm intelligence” (O’Brien, *Summer*, 82).

Thus, Jo’s wish to embrace a life of “elimination” is rendered as a result of her difficult relationship with her mother. Jo is Hannah’s only daughter, and during the summer preceding World War Two, she finally makes her decision to become a nun. Reynolds describes this decision as “an escape” from her mother (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 80). In addition, Dalsimer adds that “[t]he outbreak of violence confirms her decision to become a nun” (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, 83), thereby implying that her decision is, in part, a flight from a threatening, volatile world, which could be read as the unconscious violence of her relationship with a passive aggressive mother, as well as a desire to replicate this relationship in the structures of the convent. The double escape from her mother and an unpredictable uncontrollable world are not necessarily separate, as Jo’s mother produces a high level of anxiety in Jo. Jo’s choices appear to be the opposite of Hannah’s, whose life choices represent excessive devotion to family, as Jo’s vocation to the religious life is a deliberate action that implicitly rejects the family. However, not only does she ultimately end up seeking a family substitute in the convent, but because her vocation is based on fear of and a desire for escape, her

⁶ See Adrienne Rich’s essay “Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence” in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985*. London: Virago, 1987.

choices are as tied up in family bonds as Hannah's. Jo's relationship with her mother is strained, and they spend very little time together. When at home, Jo keeps herself busy and avoids being alone with her mother so that she does not have to confront the implications of her mother's character. Jo is a foil to the manipulative, cruel Hannah in the text, but is also crucially a site for the exploration of the similarities of vocation in convent life and in married life. Hannah, as was argued in Chapter Two, represents the smothering aspect of insular Irish culture, as well as the ramifications of the edicts of the Constitution on the family for women asked to invest their whole selves in others. Jo's struggle against her mother is also a struggle against Ireland, and against the constitutional shape of the family of origin. Thus, Jo's relationship with her mother can be read as an agonistic relationship of identification and separation, individually and culturally, and this has the effect of moving a predominant interpretive paradigm of fathers and sons into the shaping frame of a mother-daughter relationship, and suggesting another means of representing lineages of national self-seeking and identity. As mentioned before, Jo's positioning as an important narratorial observer of her mother's conduct suggests the primacy of the mother-daughter relationship in Jo's story, as well as the need to consider the influence of her mother's character and behaviour on the choice Jo makes about her future role in life. The primacy of mother and daughter, as well as the implication of sister within convent life, (as well as the sisterly bonds between Jo and Angèle) reveals a familial emphasis that provides what feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray calls an "explosive nucleus". In her analysis of western narratives, philosophies and myth built on the patriarchal family, Irigaray suggests that to think identity through a mother-daughter paradigm, on a genealogy of mothers and daughters, displaces the primacy of fathers and sons as the *modus operandi* of western interpretation.⁷ This shift is performed in this text by the structural fore-grounding of Jo's relationship with her mother, and the subsequent "replacement" of the mother, not by a prince, or a suitable marriage partner, not with the heterocentric happy "ending" but with what Irigaray calls the "dereliction" of moving outside the specificities of a patriarchal symbolic order into the mother-centric organisation of the convent, which constitutes the explosive nucleus at the centre of the patriarchal church.

⁷ See Margaret Whitford, Ed. *The Irigaray Reader*. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991.

Jo is aware of her defensiveness with regard to her mother, which is an indication of the desire to bond and separate, as her reflections on her relationship with her mother suggest:

When she caught herself refusing to look closely at her mother's character, she explained this as a symptom of jealousy in herself against Hannah – because the latter was so pretty, because the boys adored her so much, because she had such social grace, so much tact and ease and such a fine austerity. But she knew it wasn't as easy as that. She knew that if she pressed home on certain aspects of her mother's character, she might come to a dangerous, unhappy judgement. She had no wish to judge her mother – she had indeed an unsatisfied desire simply to love her, as Tom did, but she knew she never could. (161)

Throughout the text, as Reynolds wrote, Jo “regards her mother with anxious detachment, making half-excuses to Angèle for her behaviour.” (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 81) Angèle notices “the anxious stress” in Jo's voice when she attempts to minimize Hannah's unkind reaction to Angèle's sudden appearance (O'Brien, *Summer*, 26). She says to Angèle: “[D]evotion can make people seem cold-hearted, perhaps. Mother has always been very devoted to us. Well, mostly to Tom, I suppose.” (26) Angèle appears to understand Jo's difficult position, and at the same time, Jo, as antithesis of her mother, is signalled when Angèle thinks: “[T]here was a gentle quality in Jo's face which made her seem not at all her mother's daughter, and which made all the more touching this anxiety to keep the screens in position, and to dismiss an offensiveness which must not be admitted to exist.” (26) In addition, Jo's feelings about her brothers are deliberately positioned in contrast to Hannah's “smother” mothering of Tom. When speaking about her brothers' future, Jo says to Angèle:

‘I know there's no sense at all in being protective.’
‘Are you protective?’
‘I think protectively. That's as far as I have the nerve to go – and it's too far. But I don't want dullness for either of them, and yet Heaven knows I don't want trouble!’ (82)

Jo, in contrast to her mother's actions with Tom, does not agree with interfering in the lives or decisions of her brothers, despite her love and concern for them. Moreover, her remark about “dullness” and “trouble” foreshadows the fate of both men, as Tom retreats into Jo's idea of “dullness”, by remaining at home, while Martin, in a similar

vein to Jo, opts for “trouble” by joining the war effort. Jo does not have the authority to confront her mother, and moreover, as a Catholic, she is obligated to honour one’s parents, as one of the Ten Commandments believed to have been given to Moses on Mount Sinai, directs her to do. Jo is described as “dutiful” (161), and as a result, she does not directly challenge her mother but instead seeks to escape her.

It is during the unfolding of the news of Angèle and Tom’s engagement, and its aftermath, that Jo’s difficulty with her mother’s character is particularly dramatised. When her mother first conveys her insincere good wishes to Angèle, Jo’s reaction is telling: “Jo could hardly believe her ears, but through her astonishment it occurred to her, in spite of her practice of dutifulness, that her mother was giving a truly marvellous performance.” (162) Jo’s role as focaliser is stressed: “*No-one* could see falseness in Hannah ... Jo decided – yet for half a split second ... she thought she perceived it herself” (162). To Jo’s keen eyes, therefore, there is no subtlety in Hannah’s behaviour and as events unfold, Jo is increasingly unable to quell her usual detachment. Up to this incident, it appears that Jo has been able to quell her misgivings about her mother’s character. Now she is faced with her mother’s blatant manipulation of Tom’s wishes, which alter the course of his life and denies him a future with the woman he loves. In this way, Jo’s indecision about her future, that is resolved at the end of the novel, is paralleled with her increasing awareness of her mother’s manipulative behaviour that results in the expulsion of Angèle from Tom’s life and from Waterpark. As Jo listens to her mother speak in happy tones, she “caught herself actually wondering what her mother’s real game was. She crushed the inadmissible, crude surmise with customary self-reproach.” (170) Jo’s reaction indicates that the bond between her and Hannah is motivated on Jo’s part by duty rather than love. As Jo conveys her sincere good wishes, she makes a remark that catches Hannah’s attention: “‘You’re a rash pair,’ she said, and her eyes were kind and grave. Hannah looked at her attentively. She did not often listen to Jo’s unassertive comments on events.” (165) The fact that Hannah “did not often listen” to Jo indicates the lack of emotional involvement she displays throughout the text towards her daughter. Moreover, her attention is caught by Jo’s words only because Jo is alluding to her own concerns.

As the events of the novel unfold however, Jo can no longer ignore the implications of her mother’s behaviour. She “marvelled at the imperturbable

gentleness” of Hannah’s voice in the scene where Hannah brings Angèle to tears about her future with Tom (196). Jo’s growing inner acknowledgement of her mother’s behaviour is signalled: “Jo looked on with kind eyes, and in anxiety. She could read no more into the scene just over than that it had stirred up anger, and sown confusion. Was there a plan just in that?” (200) As the “confusion” in Angèle mounts, Jo as her confidante, receives confirmation of the success of her mother’s “plan”. She is still reluctant to voice her misgivings, however, and continues to try and defend her mother’s actions. For instance, she “laughingly” tells Angèle that Tom travelling to Europe at such a time will be ““over Mother’s dead body, I warn you. She’s quite capable of giving him a small dose of poison or something, enough to make him unfit to travel–”” (208) Although Jo’s “laughing” tone is used to deflect the impact of her words, it is her strongest condemnation of her mother in the text, and it comes just after she has made her decision to discontinue her studies and join the convent. The break with her mother is indicated by the usual neutral tone that Jo adopts towards her mother being dropped. As Hannah dismisses Germany’s invasion of Poland, “Jo snapped sarcastically. ‘It’s only just a point in human history, Mother. The most desperate ever – that’s all.’” (218) Jo’s growing “anxiety” about her mother’s questionable behaviour climaxes in her ultimate decision to escape, and is dramatised by the change in Jo’s attitude towards her mother. Moreover, in the context of the portrayal of Hannah as symbol of Ireland, Jo also distances herself from a country that refuses to participate in “a point in human history”. Jo, by entering a convent in Europe, not only rejects the mother and the motherland, the family and the cultural ethos, but achieves her conception of autonomy in a profession that commands respect, and offers her personal fulfilment, ironically in a mother-led community. This, however, suggests some ambiguity in the text, as Jo is joining a community that resembles a family with a leader who is given the title of Mother Superior, and to whom she will pledge obedience.

Thus, despite Jo’s enjoyment of worldly pleasures, she finds that the more “she dawdled in the world, the more its vanity and, for her, its pointlessness, impressed her.” (174) As Jo explains the procedure of entering the convent to Angèle, Angèle says:

‘I see. I hate it, Jo.’

‘So do the boys. But honestly – I can’t help it.’ (207)

Jo's brothers, as Jo is aware, "hated the idea of her religious calling" (175). Angèle feels the same: "In a few days she had grown very fond of Jo, and she hated this idea of her religious vocation, hated it as she noticed both Tom and Martin did. She was sorry that Red Hugh was not a more formidable suitor." (64) It is Martin who indicates the reason for the distress he and Tom feel about Jo joining a convent. As he and Angèle both talk about their decision to go to France, Angèle says:

'Jo has made up her mind,' Angèle said.

'Ah, she might as well now,' said Martin. 'We're all grown-up anyway now. It's over here. She might as well do something totally different.'

'You're sad now.'

'You can always be sad when you think of family life, and the warm illusion it is, and the way it has to split up and leave its units to cool off as they can.' (216)

Martin's words indicate both the break up of the family, as well as Ireland's breaking away from the rest of Europe. Moreover, Jo is doing something "totally different" by joining an alternative community instead of establishing a family of her own. The family and the homeland are subtly critiqued by the reference to family life as a "warm illusion". The "split" in this family has been brutally rendered by Hannah, as her allegiance to Tom can no longer be excused. As a result, Jo will "cool off" by embracing "detachment" (175). What is implicit, therefore, is Jo's rejection of any form of emotional attachment, as her experience of this has been coloured by the manifestation of excess emotional investment in a favourite child. At the same time, Jo does not condemn her mother outright, as she attempts to understand that her mother's experience of rejection by the man she loved, followed by an unhappy marriage and the loss of children, as well as negotiating her early widowhood in dire financial straits, has fuelled Hannah's zealous attachment and dependence on Tom. This is dramatised by her attempts throughout the text to explain her mother's behaviour, despite her own misgivings, in the face of Angèle's condemnation. In this way, O'Brien suggests that familial attachment, whether negative or positive, is the first point of negotiation in the path of self-determination. The only certainty attributed to Jo's future in the text is her conviction about her vocation. However, as motherhood was a similarly described life path for women at that time, Jo's aspiration to an autonomous detachment in a convent is ambiguous, as it can be argued that she is swapping her family of origin for an alternative family. Moreover, on the one hand the convent is a community that will demand self-abnegation, in a similar vein to the family unit that demands that its

members “fit” the heterosexual norm, and on the other hand, it is a community that can accommodate “attachments” with other women in a “detached” environment. Thus, Jo’s future suggests some lingering “fallout” from that “explosive nucleus”, as her choice is shadowed by her experience of familial attachment.

Nell Mahoney: “Married”

Nell Mahoney is Una Costello’s sister and is independent, self-sufficient and intelligent. Reynolds described the portrayal of Nell as “ironic” as she was everything all O’Brien’s other protagonists were not, a woman who “does not seem to need the protection of either marriage or the convent” (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 77). During his first encounter with Nell, Matt studies her and attempts to categorise her, as he has previously done with her sister, but finds her “difficult to assess” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 12). Nell, he decided, “withheld, was in the sheath, and perhaps in fact would only condescend to flower for a very violent and especial sun” (11). The erotic implication here is that not only is Nell an enigma, but also that she presents phallic power, hidden in its sheath, and flaccid until confronted with an “especial sun”. Nell’s self-restraint and shoring up of State-sanctioned nationalism represent her becoming the phallus Lacan suggests is woman’s compensation for not having one. Equally Nell is described in terms of her hardness throughout, and the only hint of softness in Nell is her hair, which is “heavy and soft” and which “curled up softly at the tips” (12). Matt compares her to the month of June, but “a little colder, not so flowery” (110-11). Also, she handles conversation with Matt “coolly” (18). As dinner continues, Matt finds her “sarcasm” beginning to bore him (24), and tells her,

‘You talk with such curious detachment,’ he said, ‘that it’s impossible not to suspect you of leg-pulling.’

[...]

‘I don’t leg-pull,’ she said. ‘I’m not at all humorous.’ (25)

Characteristics of “detachment” are usually attributed to creative and artistic characters in O’Brien’s texts, such as Anna Murphy in *The Land of Spices* and Fanny Morrow in *The Flower of May*, as well as representations of aesthetic “holy women” such as Ana de Mendoza in *That Lady* and Claire Halvey in *As Music and Splendour*. It can be argued that Nell’s artistic potential renders her appealing to Matt, while her austerity is a challenge. Matt surmises that she “was neither gauche nor nervous, but had a tranquillity which differed from Una’s in that it was non-voluptuous and probably rose from a habit of reflexion. She might indeed be something of a wit” (12). Additionally, Matt, on account of her “queer, thin face”, cannot decide whether she is beautiful or not.

As a result of Nell's complexity, Matt swerves between positive and negative impressions of her during their initial encounters. Eventually, he decides: "She was unquestionably very beautiful by captious, not by common standards" (110). In his long study of Nell, Matt compares her to "Madame du Deffand", "Saint Catherine of Siena" and "Sappho" (12).⁸ The comparisons of Nell to an intelligent society hostess, a passionate mystic and a composer of sensual poetry, suggest someone accomplished, intelligent, spiritual and sensuous, as well as complex. The link to O'Brien's interpretation of Teresa of Avila is also evoked here with O'Brien's recounting of Teresa's sociable nature, her mysticism, her admirable writing skills and her many passionate attachments. In this way, O'Brien suggests that a woman such as Nell has many possibilities open to her. It is the culture that surrounds her that "confines" her to thinking of herself as "an old maid" (106) if a suitable suitor does not materialise.

Thus, Nell is introduced as the antithesis of her sister, as Joan Ryan notes in "Women in the Novels of Kate O'Brien: The Mellick Novels" that Nell "smokes, drives her own car and has the freedom to express views on politics, unlike her married sister." (Ryan in Kosok, 325) But, such independence is seen as an impediment to her happiness, as Tom Mahoney, Nell's cousin and former fiancé, remarks to her: "If you'd only decide to be as stupid as your sister – and that is not idiot-standard – you might be as happy as she is." (O'Brien, *Pray*, 35) This comment reflects negative perceptions about women with intellectual capabilities, who are often positioned outside of the family as difficult and as problems, as does the comment by Anna Murphy's grandmother in *The Land of Spices*, who says: "I can't help wishing that the brains hadn't skipped poor Tom, and descended to Anna. After all, they're wasted on a girl." (O'Brien, *Spices*, 196) Moreover, Tom's remark implies that Una, in contrast to Nell, is a "natural" woman, fulfilling her "natural" role, a view he expresses to Matt Costello:

⁸ Marie de Vichy-Chamrond, marquise du Deffand (1697-1780) was a French society hostess and patron of the arts. She was a friend of Voltaire's, a prolific letter writer, intelligent and liberal for her time. (See <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/155767/Marie-de-Vichy-Chamrond-marquise-du-Deffand>, accessed 24 October 2009). Saint Catherine of Siena was a fourteenth-century mystic. She was declared a Doctor of the Church in the early 1970s and one of the patrons of Europe in the 1990s. Tina Beattie writes that for Catherine, "God was a 'mad lover' who pursued her through all the struggles of her often tormented spirituality" (Beattie, 9, 79). See Tina Beattie. *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. Sappho was a highly regarded sixth-century BC lyric poetess from the Greek island of Lesbos. Because of the often risqué nature of lyric poetry, the Church, which largely undertook the copying and re-copying of ancient texts, ignored the genre. As a result, only one complete poem survives out of some nine books of verse. See *The World of Athens: An Introduction to Classical Athenian Culture*. Joint Association of Classical Teachers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 278.

“Teaching is the very worst thing for Nell. What she needs is someone to shout her down, and knock hell out of her. Marriage in fact.” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 53) Tom’s remark suggests that he is uneasy with Nell’s independence and it also foreshadows his traditionalism in matters of gender. It also points to O’Brien’s view of marriage as a spirit breaker for independent women. Nell’s sister, Una, shares a similar view: “‘Rubbish, this teaching,’ said Una. ‘Look how thin the creature is! Quite unnecessary too!’” (19) Moreover, Una’s concern for her sister reflects her worldview of marriage as the “natural” aim for a woman: “She disliked the austere loneliness of her sister’s life and its long, desiccated-seeming future. [...] Una ... desired for her such happiness as she herself had found.” (76) Una tells Matt that she thinks Nell “‘ought to have married and had children of her own.’” (75) Here the prevailing viewpoint of the woman’s “natural” role as wife and mother is expounded by Una and Tom, and neither appears comfortable with a woman who does not “fit” this mould.

However, it is not simply a narrowly legalistic marriage that is portrayed as destroying the spirit of women, but also a narrowly-defined faith, whether in a nation or a god that rigidly adheres to doctrinaire religious or nationalist practice. Nell is an ardent nationalist, and her job as teacher of world history through the Irish language reflects the contemporary nationalist position with regard to the recovery of the Irish language through the educational system, as on her return to Ireland from Italy, to where she had fled after her broken engagement, Nell undertakes the perfecting of the Irish language and spends summers in the *Gaeltacht* (54).⁹ In addition, in a scene where Matt and Tom reminisce about their university days, they talk about the martyr perspective of the revolutionary mood of the time, to which Nell responds: “‘Well, it was an effective mood,’ said Nell severely. ‘It accomplished a lot.’” (37) Nell’s ardent nationalism parallels her religious zeal, and she is also a staunch supporter of Éamon de Valera. The intertwining ethos of Church and State are similarly blended in Nell’s worldview, as Matt tells her

‘You believe in all the mysteries of the Catholic Church and in its absolute moral authority. You also believe in a whole tissue of minor taboos and

⁹ The most significant feature of post-Independence education was its emphasis on Irish, a programme introduced in 1922. The new State co-opted the Irish language as a vehicle of political nationalism, but the excessive burden placed upon the educational system aroused public resentment. Moreover, the social aspects of educational provision received scant attention as a result.

obligations and prohibitions which derive from your central belief, and also from being a citizen of Dev's Free State' (155).

Matt sees Nell's faith as one of "discipline, censorship and obedience" (73). Moreover, as he gets to know her, Matt sees Nell, on account of her total acceptance of the rules of the Church, as "Puritanical" (57) and "intolerant" (73, 155). Her terms of practice are, in his view, "ruthless and dictatorial" (73). This is because Matt surmises that, in Nell's view, people fall into one of two categories, "believers, or materialists" (74). In addition, Nell, reflecting the growing visibility of Catholic organisations in society, is active in societies that preserve Catholic values, and is a member of the Legion of Mary. Tom and Nell have frequently crossed swords "about her activities in relation to religious charities in the town" (166-7). Tom objects to the "amateurish impudence" (51) of the better off interfering in the lives of others. He tells Matt: "It's a matter of municipal policy now wearing this little button and that little badge, holding a banner here and running to make a retreat there'" (47). But, Tom adds cynically, it is political advancement that is involved in these endeavours, not matters of principle. Tom is strong in his condemnation of lay religious groups, saying, "But the thing is wrong philosophically – this amateurish impudence is not a sane way to redeem the world! It causes an immediate discomfort in the brain – you know it does.'" (51)¹⁰ Tom continues:

¹⁰ Certain Solidarities and Confraternities, which were especially popular in the 1930s and 1940s, such as the Legion of Mary, Catholic Action and the Knights of Saint Joseph, had as their aim the practice of doing "good work". The organisations depended on the co-operation between the middle-class and Church personnel. Confraternities were run by lay people, with chaplains appointed by members. They were formed as a reaction to a perceived falling standard in public morality in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. They were hierarchical organisations and segregated by divisions such as status, gender and trade. Each confraternity had its own rules, patron saint, iconography, dress codes and other various distinctions. Crucial to the original work of confraternities was the teaching of Christian Doctrine to children for an hour after Sunday mass. Despite plenty of clergy being available, classes were taught by well-educated, middle-class Catholics, which also served to strengthen the relationship between the wealthy and the clergy. Teachers eventually took on this role of teaching the catechism to children after mass, most of whom belonged to the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. The main aim of confraternities was the salvation of souls and the reform of sinners as well as providing assistance for the poor and the ill. Moreover, clerical support played a strong factor in the success of an organisation in a locality. However, in a similar vein to the work of nuns and clergy, lay organisations alleviated many cases of distress, but did nothing to alter the system that made such problems widespread. Originally based on the principles of medieval guilds, which were staffed by lay people involved in education, care of the sick and care of the poor, religious confraternities, which originated in the mission fields, were, in contrast to medieval guilds, cross-class, notably hierarchical and clerical, the Jesuits, in particular, fostering racially separate confraternities. As lay people eventually became involved, they played a crucial part in making Christianity indigenous in missionary areas. From a paper entitled, "Confraternities, Social Capital and Civil Society: Comparisons, Contexts and Questions", delivered by Professor Nicholas Terpstra (University of Toronto) at "Honouring God and Community: Confraternities and Sodalities in Modern Ireland", Conference, NUI Maynooth, 7-8th September 2007.

‘Oh, I know it’s customary to wave a tolerant hand and say they do good work in certain ways. Maybe they do. Maybe there are creatures so beaten and dispirited that they like to have a lot of smiling, immaculate ladies poking round in their private lives, and telling them to go here, and stay away from there and wipe off that lipstick.’ (O’Brien, *Pray*, 50-1)

The tone used here suggests, it could be argued, authorial disapproval for these organisations and Tom is scathing about his former fiancée’s involvement in such charitable endeavours: “‘Nell should have more wit than to risk making a prim, interfering fool of herself!’” (51) Tom is utilised here to comment on the “interfering” role of the Church in daily society, as evidenced in the Hierarchy’s wielding of control in matters deemed central to their interests, such as in education, and the Mother and Child Scheme. Therefore, the portrayal of Nell appears to reflect the aspect of Irish society that widely accepted and promulgated the tenets of Catholicism. For instance, in a scene where Una, Will, Matt and Nell talk about freedom and personal liberty, Matt says that soon there will be no personal liberty. Nell replies: “‘On the face of it that sounds like good news’” (20). Thus, there appears to be little difference between Nell’s religious views and her political views, as she represents the State ethos inherent in the perpetuation of the idealism of the “common good”.

In terms of ostensible personal freedom and a satisfying career, Nell Mahoney appears to “have it all”. Yet, although she is independent, self-supporting, and epitomises the modern 1930s woman, Nell is far from personally free as she is in thrall to self-regulating and destructive discourses. As the symbol of Ireland for Matt, she functions as the new State, seemingly modern, but still invested in traditional conservatisms. However, Nell’s musings on the possibility of marriage reflects the growing trend of women returning to the home as her choice of marriage partner is framed as a choice between the traditional or the modern male figure of the 1930s, thereby suggesting that women’s choices, despite the work of feminist movements, were still limited. The rendering of the independent, working, single Nell, as the embodiment of the culmination of first wave feminist aims, is juxtaposed with the self-determining exercise of the writing of a new Irish Constitution as a declaration of Independence that defines women’s role in very specific terms that are underwritten by Catholic ideology. To Nell, “the family seemed the most natural social unit, and

lovemaking that dodged the obligations of family was anti-social selfishness” (109).

Before falling in love with Tom, Nell

had constantly reeled back from the unsoundable undertaking of marriage, which she beheld her contemporaries snatching at as gaily as if it were a Christmas present or a summer outing. [...] To live as one flesh with another. To her this had seemed a mere flat statement of the impossible. (163)

Falling in love with Tom had changed that, and because of her love for him, Nell “had known that the thing could be attempted” (163). As a result, Nell had been appalled when she discovered that her intended fiancé had fathered an illegitimate child with a local shop girl. As an “innocent” twenty-two year old, Nell “had been most foolishly shocked and hurt” (109). After this experience, marriage and children were still desirable to Nell, but “on terms” (106). These terms are her high expectations of love: “She was a woman who once, twelve years ago, had loved with innocent, foolish, frenzy and had counted herself most perilously happy.” (109) As a result, this experience

had taught her her own exacting power to love, and she had not forgotten what a storm of the heart could be. In the years since then, as she realized that it was not going to be easy for her to fall in love again, she did not hoodwink herself. She knew that in missing love she was missing the thing she needed most (109-110).

Despite her doctrinaire adherence to religious and nationalist discourses, unlike Hannah Kernahan in *The Last of Summer* and Caroline Lanigan in *Without My Cloak*, Nell premises personal fulfilment within marriage before social and cultural expectations, in that she will not contemplate marriage without love. Reynolds noted that although Nell is intelligent, she is “affected by her environment” (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 76). This is reflected by the fact that Nell “did not think it necessary to seek one’s own sensations at the cost of social confusion” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 109). Here, Nell’s thoughts reflect both the Church and the Constitutional ethos of the family “as the necessary basis of social order” (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.1.2). Her cousin, Tom, attests to this, telling Matt that Nell believes strongly in “the greatest good of the greatest number, and the end justifying the means. She despises individualism.” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 51) He explains: “She’s for the law, for order and decency and obedience, and the great White Chief in Leinster House.” (51) He elaborates further. Nell he tells Matt, believes, “that we should all behave alike and only say what everyone wants to

hear, that there are no privileges for anyone, that social duty demands certain taboos of speech and action, and that is that!” (58) This stance is personified in Nell whose “cool and ranging mind”, despite her external independence and self-sufficiency, “accepts” and “understands” the rules of Church and State (109). Nell, therefore, believes in the “common good”, as expressed in papal encyclicals and the 1937 Constitution. In addition, because of her belief in the ideal of the “common good”, Nell accepts the “general rightness” of Catholic imperatives (109), and remains an unsympathetic character.

In the intervening years, as a suitable suitor has not presented himself, Nell “had decided, without enthusiasm, to be an old maid” (106). However, her early experience of love has marked her and the effect on Nell is presented through Matt’s eyes. In her interaction with Una’s children, Matt glimpses what she was probably like “before she was unnerved” (67). Matt wonders at the effect of “one wound” on a person and asks: “Could Tom conceivably be held to blame for a condition of unfruitful formidableness which now both alarmed and saddened in this woman?” (68) The words “conceivably” and “unfruitful” point to the association of women’s value as producers of children, a use value Nell fails to achieve. Ironically, Tom has produced a child, but as similarly rendered with regard to Christina Roche in *Without My Cloak*, discussed in Chapter One, the lower class status of the child’s mother renders the child value-less in Tom’s middle-class eyes. The effect of their broken engagement on Tom is dramatised by his repeated diatribes about Nell’s piety, and in contrast to what appear to be modern views expressed by Tom on the Irish cultural and religious ethos under the authoritarian Church as well as de Valera, he displays a traditional view when it comes to women. Nell, he tells Matt acerbically, is “really is a very religious woman” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 47). Tom’s view appears to be on account of his personal experience of her religiosity in relation to their broken engagement, rather than an objective observation. In contrast to Nell’s horror at Tom’s deceit, his callousness and his nerve in proposing marriage to her when he has a child with another woman, Tom views it as “one decently conducted moral lapse” (172). Here, there is a suggestion of irony in that he views Nell’s “interfering” with the poor as “impudence”, while his own dismissal of a shop girl he has impregnated, by paying her off, is deemed a matter-of-fact transaction. As he tells Matt: “She’d had a kid, and I supported the two of them, and everything was fine. No bones broken.” (55) His emotional detachment from the situation is conveyed by his

choice of words, “*she’d had a kid*” (emphasis mine). Tom displays no understanding of Nell’s shock and her youth at the time. Matt attempts to point this out to Tom, who replies: ““No one should be so young as to set up as God Almighty!”” (55)

Tom’s double standards reflect the hypocrisy of the educated, urbane upper middle classes in Ireland at the time, as well as the differences between the limits of family for women and for men, within the same system. He speaks acerbically, throughout the text, on Irish contemporary religious and cultural standards, and yet is a staunch maintainer of such standards, as they shore up his privileged position in society. As a lawyer, Tom represents the legislative authority derived from the Constitution and so his extra-marital family highlights how the family advocated by the State does not represent the same self-abnegating prison for him as it does for women. Tom’s freely expressed dissidence and his non-practicing religious habits, do not affect his status, as it would for a woman, for, as he tells Matt, he lives with ““a couple of the female pillars of Mellick”” (47). Here, the position of the Catholic woman as moral guardian is indicated, as Tom, by association with his pious mother and the equally pious Nell, is deemed acceptable as well as respectable in middle-class society. Tom’s friend, Father Malachi approves highly of Nell, and thinks that she would be good for Tom in terms of her suitability as a moral guardian to his dissidence. In a similar vein, women’s role in this regard is explicitly expressed by Tom who tells Matt that his notoriety as a banned author would be overlooked, and his past reputation minimised, as a result of marriage to “a nice young wife”:

‘Ah – a lot of that could be glossed over. You’re rich and famous, and you come of well-respected people. Weren’t you born and bred here – God help you, child – and all your people before you? And what’s all that you get on with but a lot of foolishness? You’d soon grow out of it. Not at all, Mr. Costello – no obstacle at all. A nice young wife now is the very thing for you.’ (46)

In *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*, Tom Inglis writes: “It is through the civility and morality of her children and husband that [the woman] maintained her cultural capital within the community.” (Inglis, 73) As Nell already has cultural capital in the community, both Matt and Tom would benefit from marriage to her, and the choice between them suggests a choice between approving of or escaping from, the new State. Tom’s character contrasts strongly with

Matt, who also makes his living with words, but unlike Tom, who interprets language systems, Matt creates language systems, which appear so threatening that his work has been banned by the law. In this way, the differences between the two men are set. Tom adheres to the letter of the law, a means of repression that premises the greater good, while Matt creates ideas that encourage freedom and individualism. These are the underlying choices in Nell's story as in the text, both men propose to her.

Nell, having inadvertently spent a day in the company of Matt and her nephew Liam, becomes "aware" of Matt. She tells herself: "It was an unsuitable and silly feeling, hardly a feeling indeed, rather awareness of some cold and still sleeping anxiety in the breast, but its threat was enough to irritate her." (O'Brien, *Pray*, 107) She narrows this "awareness" down to "appeal", which, she decides "was the novelettish, inaccurate word" for it (107). Matt is equally attracted, but realises that "he must not tell her she was lovely, as in this curiously awkward moment he not only saw, but felt, her to be." (112) Nell's austerity is emphasised in Matt's thoughts: "It struck him that probably with any other woman in the world he would be able to switch away this deadly and disarming moment with immediate flattery or with a kiss." (112) Nell catches his look and in response to his stated desire to kiss her, is amused at her own reaction of vanity: "'How commonplace I am,' she thought, 'not to say common.' But there was more relief than embarrassment in the self-criticism." (114) As well as repeating the use of "commonplace" in relation to erotic emotion in O'Brien's texts, the word is also used much as George Eliot uses it in the novel, *Middlemarch* (1872), another novel focusing on women's education, choices, transitions and duties during the rise of the middle classes. In that novel, the intelligent, well bred, medical man, Tertius Lydgate, has, the narrator points out, "spots of commonness", which "lay in the complexion of his prejudices" (Eliot, 125). One of Lydgate's "spots of commonness" or blind spot is in relation to women, in that he takes it for granted that he "knows" them from his reading of books. Of course, he is badly mistaken as his encounter with an actress, and his eventual unhappy marriage to Rosamund displays. In contrast, Nell's intelligence allows her to overcome her "blind spot" with regard to Matt, as she is initially amazed and then tempted by Matt's unexpected proposal of marriage:

He suggested a force which, once yielded to, would carry her far and deep in feeling. She would have been glad of that. She was tired of her own aloofness.

She had never wanted the detachment which circumstances forced on her and which her proud temperament exaggerated in acceptance. (O'Brien, *Pray*, 162)

However, Nell is aware that Matt is still in love with another, and in her terms for the undertaking of marriage, Matt's divided attention is not acceptable.

Nell is aware that Matt wants her as a salve to the pain of losing his lover Louise, as Matt's use of "soul" in his proposal implies: "I want with all my soul to marry you!" (150) Matt's words, as he explains himself to Nell, continue to convey the theme of redemption: "I'd like to save myself. And I see a way, and I'm taking a fling at it, my God!" (153) There is no mention of love in his promise to give Nell "all my trust, and faith and gratitude" (156). In addition, as an "unbeliever", Matt tells Nell that by marrying him, she would "be doing an extraordinary thing" (155). This is because Matt does not share Nell's belief "in all the mysteries of the Catholic Church and in its absolute moral authority" (155). Matt's proposal of marriage is positioned as a challenge: "You'd be marrying a writer who came to you without faith or morals – would that frighten you?" (154) To her "astonishment", Nell replies: "I cannot marry you" (157). Nell is "astonished" because she realises that she would love to marry Matt, but she is not prepared to be second best: "If I married you, I'd fall in love, I'd love you. But I'm not taking on any mad competition with *her*." (159) Nell's terms for marriage reflect the developing contemporary terms of marriage, unlike those undertaken on economic and status grounds by Caroline Lanigan in *Without My Cloak* and Lilian Morrow in *The Flower of May*, as she explains: "[I]f I loved you, I'd have to have all your love. It's the usual bargain – in these parts." (160) A wife, Nell continues, is a "sacred ... undertaking" (158). The use of "sacred" underlines the sacramental aspect of marriage, with its lifelong commitment. In addition, it indicates Nell's serious contemplation of the act of marriage, as has been reflected throughout the text in her thoughts on the subject. The link between Nell and the cultural ethos is stressed by her parting words: "Go back to your own world, Matt – you'll find some solution there. There isn't any in Ireland." (160) After leaving Matt, Nell cries copiously for the "wastefulness of feeling, the maddening vagueness of desires" (177).

Nell returns home from her encounter with Matt, to find Tom standing on the doorstep looking "powerful and censorious" (163). It is a strong patriarchal image,

which is reiterated throughout the ensuing scene. It appears that Tom, thanks to the hints of his friend Father Malachi who greatly admires Nell, has become aware that Matt is a serious rival for Nell's affections (170). Tom demands to speak to Nell immediately, despite her obvious distress: "You might as well stop arguing Nell. I've things to say, and I'll say them – if I have to accompany you to your bedroom." (164) Tom's authority is positioned in forceful terms with Nell's question:

'Well then – *why* are you looking so much the family lawyer?'
'I suppose because I *am* the family lawyer, damn it!' (165)

Thus, Tom is presented here as a representation of the patriarchal, legalistic and Constitutional model of male authority, and "[h]e moved about the room with exaggerated lordliness" (165). Tom displays his cultural orthodoxy when he takes the liberty of speaking to Nell about her being "talked about in the town" in his capacity as "head of the family, the male head" (168). Although Tom is aware that he is being "irrational", he is still capable of employing the touchstones of patriarchal authority when it suits the situation, and he uses his oratorical skills as a lawyer to identify a concise list of Matt's faults. He rails at Nell about being seen out and about with someone such as Matt, who has a reputation of being a "Don Juan" (167). He tells Nell: "He is a womaniser and a pagan, and he's at present deep in some illicit affair in London about which – when you are out of earshot, naturally! – he is singularly ponderous and sentimental." (171) Tom's attack on Nell's socialising with Matt reflects middle-class society's concern with public appearances, and is very much centred on what others might think: "[B]ut still, gadding into movies and up the mountain-sides with an immoral, loose-living writer whose works we are all prohibited to read! How is that going to appear to the chaste eyes of the Knights of Saint Joseph, will you tell me?" (169) Despite his air of cynicism, Tom is rendered as conservative, especially with regard to the behaviour he deems appropriate for a middle-class woman. Tom, therefore, is utilised here to represent not only the literal interpretation of roles in Irish society, but also the model male stance of the authoritarian head of the family, as rendered in Pius XI's encyclical on marriage, *Casti Connubii*, where he wrote that "the husband is the head of the wife, and Christ is the head of the Church." (Section 26 in Carlen, Vol. 3, 395)

Nell and Tom are blood relatives, and Nell's sister, Una, had not approved of their initial engagement: "First cousins, and obviously made to be at loggerheads!" (O'Brien, *Pray*, 76) Nell too believes that there is, "in Tom a consanguineous strain of resemblance to her, in this as in other things, that made her glad enough they had not married" (166). The similarity between them is echoed in Nell's own patriarchal tendencies and access to phallic power, as her independence is belittled and pathologised as profligate in Tom's diatribe against her:

'Eleven years ago, standing in this room you called me cad and hypocrite and low-down heartless cheat. O.K. Since that time your sanctity, your cold-blooded, spinsterish morality and your general, all-round untouchableness have been accepted by your intimidated and edified entourage, until, hey presto! a real profligate comes along... [...] It turns out now that the shortest cut to your heart would have been through the brothels and bedrooms of Europe!' (174)

Here, the chasm between standards of behaviour in terms of gender is widened. At no point in the text does Tom see any need to apologise to Nell for withholding the fact of the existence of his child, a child to which he has no attachment. The unimportance of this child is juxtaposed with the words he uses in his declaration of undying love for Nell: "I have never been able to displace the absolute love I once gave to you... So I shall die a bachelor, leaving no Mahoneys behind me to do filial reverence, because of you, fair cousin." (177) On the one hand, Tom's addressing of Nell as "cousin" highlights their blood relationship, while on the other hand, Tom disregards the blood relationship between father and son. Although Tom is not a practicing Catholic he fails to see that his cultural standards are akin to Church standards in matters of gender and sexuality. As a result, his arguments about the growing religiosity in society are negated by the gendered targeting of his comments on Nell's activities, which suggest his absorption of the cultural ethos, underpinned by Church teaching on gender roles. This is emphasised in the text by Nell and Tom's opposing views of the past and the reasons for their broken engagement.

As Nell attempts to leave the room, Tom bullies her by standing "directly in her path, seeming, to her, suddenly very tall and overbearing" (174), and Nell is forced to tell Tom that Matt has asked her to marry him. Tom is outraged at Matt's "nerve" in proposing to Nell, and rages at her that she has never betrayed "by as much as the bat of an eyelid, that you even dimly remember you once loved me" (175). He dares her to

deny that she once loved him, to which Nell replies, “Tom, I could never deny it. I loved you with all my heart.” (175) His own complicity of silence in this regard is ignored, and he sees no irony in the fact that he has never given Nell any indication of his continued love for her. She asks him: “Why? [...] You had only to speak.” (177) Tom’s answer is revealing:

‘I’d have you know that I’m none of your modern novelists, biliously certain that it is impossible to do without what can’t be had. I’m a civilized man. I can get on reasonably without the unattainable.’
‘Ah Tom! The conceit, the coldness. You’re a real Irishman’.
‘Are we conceited? Anyhow, it’s our womenfolk who’re cold. Ask any divorce lawyer or gynaecologist.’ (177)

The irony is that Tom sees no link between the imposition of civilized behaviour as espoused by the Church, juxtaposed with the consequent effect on the expression of sexuality and the “coldness” of Irish women. Moreover, he reflects the notion of civilized behaviour as dependent on the ability to regulate one’s sexuality, thereby demonstrating the contemporary emphasis on sexuality as the most important aspect of morality. The scene ends with Tom’s proposal to Nell:

‘I love you now, and I will love you on my deathbed. [...] I’m asking you for the one unmitigated desire of my life. You are the one glory I have always coveted; you are all that I mean by beauty. I’m prepared to match the plain truth of that against all comers, Nell, and I beg you, I beg you to marry me.’ (178-9)

Tom “covets” Nell as a “glory”, which evokes James Lanigan’s view of his wife Caroline as a material possession in *Without My Cloak*, where he thinks of her as “the glory and decoration of his life” (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 86). Nell’s reaction to Tom’s proposal is significant: “He was the same. Rich and formal in feeling, very traditional, every inch a man.” (O’Brien, *Pray*, 179) The word “traditional” points to Tom’s orthodoxy in matters of gender, as does “every inch a man”, which suggests the notion of the patriarchal hero of romantic fiction. Although Nell’s reply to Tom’s proposal is not voiced in the novel, the indication in the text is that Nell chooses Tom and all he represents, so despite her apparent modernity, Nell rejects the creative, modern world of Matt Costello, and chooses the traditional, legalistic, conservative and hypocritical world of Tom Mahoney. The text intimates that Tom will expect Nell to cease her job,

which he sees as “‘more of her nonsense’” (54).¹¹ Likewise, Nell’s acceptance of Catholic values suggests that the transition to “ideal” homemaker would be made if she married Tom. In the event, the question of their marriage is left open-ended by the author, as in reaction to Tom’s proposal, Nell “looked up wonderingly into his lighted face” (179).

The final thoughts in the novel are attributed to Matt, as he prepares to leave Mellick, and they are about Nell. At his final dinner with the Costello family, that Nell has not attended, Matt “looked at her empty chair and thought of her grave, strange face. Nell knew the touch of the sword and was a little mad.” (185) When Una asks him what he is smiling about, he tells her that he is thinking of *Don Quixote*. The reference is enigmatic, as in that text, Don Quixote retreated from the vulgarity of modern life, and was, consequently, out of step with the world. While Nell’s independence may mark her as modern in the sense of reflecting new opportunities for women, her views on the “rightness” of the acquiescence required to embark on marriage is in step with Irish cultural and religious *mores*. Consequently, Nell is a symbol of her time and place, as she has also, by rejecting Matt, retreated from the vulgarity of modern life. A further speculation is that the reference to *Don Quixote* suggests that in other circumstances, Nell could fulfil the potential that her intellectualism promises, without submitting part of her identity to another. That she cannot do so in her home environment suggests that being “married”, for a woman in 1930s Ireland, still meant severe limitations on her life regardless of anything she had previously achieved. Moreover, by choosing to marry her cousin, Nell chooses the family and the insularity of Ireland over new blood and the possibilities of life elsewhere.

Thus, Nell chooses the literal Catholic marriage. Other possibilities are offered as well as hinted at but in keeping with the critique of the novel in relation to women’s position in de Valera’s Ireland, Nell undertakes the role perpetuated by her Church and State rather than embrace the unknown. At the end of the novel, she “looked up wonderingly into [Tom’s] lighted face” (179), a phrase that suggests a romantic, and consequently, a happy ending. But here it is ironic as the differences between them

¹¹ Nell could continue to teach, as a woman who qualified as a teacher before the Marriage Bar came into effect, on 1 January 1933, would not have had to give up her job on the occasion of her marriage. The Marriage Bar was not revoked until 1958.

have been recorded and O'Brien does not depict lasting relationships in her fiction, other than in this novel with the rendering of Una and Will's marriage that is lasting because of a series of lucky coincidences. In her portrayal of Nell, O'Brien suggests that while Una is a perfect model for the ideal wife and mother, Nell is not. Yet, the prevailing ideology is so persuasive that she, despite indications of personal difficulties, is willing to suppress her enjoyment of, and even forgo, her independence, her satisfying job, her freedom and her "nunnish" aesthetic personality to embrace marriage with a clearly traditional and patriarchal man. The suggestion here is that the woman must "fit" the ideological mould. Luckily, Una does, but Nell, in order to stay and be accepted in the culture and ethos that surrounds, must also "fit", somehow or other.

Agnes Mulqueen: “Old Maid”

In contrast to her aunt, Agnes Considine, who appeared in *Without My Cloak*, Agnes Mulqueen, even though her fate as Old Maid seems probable at the end of the novel, is involved in a highly self-aware struggle between the demands of godly and human love. It can be argued that Agnes’ struggle is modelled on O’Brien’s interpretation of the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila, as discussed in the Introduction, which centred on what she considered a noble and crucial struggle in humanity, the conflict between spiritual and human love. O’Brien, as mentioned earlier, wrote of Teresa’s attraction to a priest whom she met while staying with her uncle. It was a “dangerous situation”, as Teresa wrote that she “liked him very much” (O’Brien, *Teresa*, 37). However, Teresa overcame the “danger” and retreated from the situation. In a similar vein, Agnes is strongly attracted to her sister’s husband. Although she comes close to following her heart’s desire, she too, as did Teresa, retreats from Vincent, out of her sense of duty to her sister. Moreover, she articulates to him his duty to her sister just as Teresa pointed out the “vows and priestly obligations” (37) to which her priestly friend was bound. Of Teresa, O’Brien wrote: “It was love, human love and her idea of it, which was the chief enemy between her and her love of God” (O’Brien, *Teresa*, 44). This is the same conflict that is central to Agnes’ journey into womanhood, and it is dramatised by O’Brien’s exploration in *The Ante-Room* of the way in which religious expectations, rules and regulations are embedded in her mind, and how they influence her subsequent behaviour. Although Agnes renounces the love of her brother-in-law for familial reasons at the end of the novel, she works through a religious medium in order to reach her decision. Human love is also represented through the self-conscious intertextual referencing to romance fiction, the genre often dismissively associated with O’Brien’s writing, as a derogatory quote from the acclaimed novelist Brian Moore indicates. Moore was interviewed by Julia Carlson for her book, *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer*, and said:

There was something wrong with you if you were a ‘darling’ writer. In my childhood I knew that the most popular sort of Irish writers, like Maurice Walsh¹² and Kate O’Brien, were all trashmongers – third rate. I knew that people

¹² Maurice Walsh (1879-1964) was a writer of fiction and a native of Co. Kerry. He joined Customs and Excise in 1901 and was based in the Scottish Highlands, which provided the setting for many of his stories. He was transferred back to Dublin in 1922. His novels and stories are mostly romantic adventures,

liked them because they were safe, so I wanted to do something different. (Moore quoted in Carlson, 117-8)

Apart from being wildly inaccurate about Kate O'Brien's *oeuvre*, Moore is reflecting the perception of O'Brien as a popular writer of romantic fiction,¹³ an assumption that O'Brien subtly displaces with her over-emphatic framing of Agnes Mulqueen as a romance heroine, in much the same way Jane Austen self-consciously narrates and critiques attacks on women reading the gothic novel and on travelling libraries in *Northanger Abbey*.¹⁴

In *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, the literary critic Janice Radway's investigation into the popularity of romantic fiction in the United States of America, Radway considers the actual act of reading, as well as the reasons given by readers for reading romance fiction. In this way, Radway's study takes into account the huge number of readers who derive pleasure and satisfaction from reading romantic novels. Radway records that one of the main reasons for reading romance novels given by readers of romantic fiction is to "escape" temporarily from their real life demands and responsibilities. Consequently, reading romantic fiction, readers explain to Radway, provides them with "emotional gratification" (Radway, 96). The act of reading allows women to rebel because they are focusing solely on a private, indulgent experience that temporarily blocks out demands on their attention from others. At the same time, the typical romantic ending of the heroine's marriage to the perfect man, provides room for the fantasy whereby women can temporarily shelve their roles as nurturers and carers to others, with "happy endings" reassuring women about the value of marriage and their role in that marriage, as the only institution they know within a patriarchal system. On the other hand, critics of romance see the heroine's passive surrender to the strong male as an approval of patriarchy. The feminist critic Tania Modleski, in *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*, suggests that this is because "many critics tend to take at face value the novelists' endorsement of the domestic ideal and ignore the actual, not very flattering portraits of

sometimes with a historical setting, and they deal with country life, its tensions, disputes and decencies. The 1952 film, *The Quiet Man*, was based on a story from his 1935 book, *Green Rushes*.

¹³ For instance, in the review of the re-issued 1985 copy of *That Lady*, Patricia Craig premised the romantic fiction element of the novel, writing that it was "written in Kate O'Brien's usual romantic manner" (*Times Literary Supplement*, 05/07/85).

¹⁴ See Jane Austen. *Northanger Abbey*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1993.

domesticity which emerge from their works” (Modleski, 22). This posits the argument that the genre derives from a failure in patriarchal societies, as Radway argues, “all popular romantic fiction originates in the failure of patriarchal culture to satisfy its female members” (Radway, 151). Modleski shares a similar view arguing that romances act as wish-fulfillments that “inoculate” women against the problems and dangers they experience in patriarchal societies (Modleski, 43). In situations where women play the roles of nurturer and carer, women themselves are very often under-nurtured and supported. In the demand for the selfless dedication, on the part of women, to the service of others in the home and in society made implicit in Article 41.2.1 of the 1937 Constitution, a claim for a similar demand can be seen in the depiction of Agnes. This self-sacrificing role is evident in the rendering of Agnes as she denies herself the future she desires in order to avoid causing pain to her sister. From the viewpoint of romantic fiction, this is an unjust ending, as one of the points of romantic fiction is to reward sacrifice, selflessness, restraint and lack of self-interest, thereby reinvesting an ideology of selflessness among women.

In the romance genre, the heroine must be beautiful, but like Agnes, very often undergoes a transformation from ugly duckling to swan. Agnes, when she first appears in *Without My Cloak*, is a “self-conscious” fifteen-year-old, who feels “large” and “plain” (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 213). Unhappiness with her looks stems from an incident at school where a fellow schoolgirl tells the ten-year-old Agnes that she has been voted “the plainest girl in the school” (O’Brien, *A-R*, 6). Agnes’ sister, Marie-Rose, exacts revenge on her behalf for this remark, thereby engendering Agnes’ life-long loyalty. However, the incident stays with Agnes and the “idea stayed that she was ugly and awkward” (265). As a result, she became “priggish and shy and insolent, a gusty awkward creature” (6). As a marketable commodity in the marriage stakes in nineteenth-century society, Agnes sees “beauty” as being important, “for she observed ... that beauty carried the surest weapons. And she conceded the naturalness of this.” (6) When she is finished her schooling, Marie-Rose again comes to the rescue by encouraging Agnes to dress well and to develop her social skills by attending parties and picnics. Thereafter, Agnes “had discovered cautiously, had at last been unable longer to deny to the long mirror, that she was, after all her doubtings, beautiful” (7). At the same time, she is not conventionally beautiful, which brings to mind the physical description of Nell Mahoney, whose beauty is not immediate, but rather requires

contemplation. Dr. Curran, her mother's doctor, tells Agnes that she is like her mother, and as he speaks, he "caught a flash of surprised exasperation in her eye – for had not her mother always been considered plain?" (59) Her mother's nurse, Nurse Cunningham also refers to Agnes's controversial looks, conceding that she is "good-looking", and that "some people would call her a beauty. I wouldn't though. Too severe – and lanky." (38) Moreover, the nurse's observation of Agnes foreshadows the pyrrhic victory of the coldness of rationality over the heat of love as the nurse decides that Agnes is "[t]oo white in the face, too. Anaemia. The cold-blooded kind." (38) Thus, Agnes is described in similar terms of coolness and austerity to Nell Mahoney. As a beauty herself, it is Marie-Rose's opinion that counts and her sister confirms her beauty: "You've turned out a tremendous beauty... In the poetic style, you know – like those – those legendary sorts of women—" (239) The word "legendary" conveys remoteness, an image that is repeated by Dr. Curran, her mother's attending doctor, who sees Agnes's appearance as suggesting, "offhandedly that beauty can hold aloof as well as challenge." (97) It is Marie-Rose who serves as the fulcrum for Agnes' sense of confidence and beauty. As a crucial facet of the bourgeois woman's marital prospects, Marie-Rose's role in Agnes' psychological development, cements the familial bond between them that ultimately steers the course of Agnes' future.

There is a similar "legendary" quality attached to the description of Vincent, the object of Agnes' desire, in a scene where Dr. Curran decides to "take a look at the profile and long limbs of the sulky god in marble" (99). A "god in marble" evokes images of the statues of young naked male athletes of Classical Greek art. This suggestion is later supported in the text: "[Vincent] did not exactly visualise himself as one of Pericles' young men when the Parthenon was rising" (101). When Agnes sees him in her mind's eye, she imagines his "furrowed shapely brow over which the brown hair still fell silkily, in the powerful shoulders, the smouldering grey-blue eyes, the strong and fidgety hands" (33). There is an element of romance evoked here with the reference to "smouldering", and moreover, it is Agnes who is the viewer, which reflects O'Brien's manipulation of gender norms. In addition, with the similarly applied mythical descriptions, Agnes and Vincent are positioned as a suitably matched couple for the romance element of the novel. Although Agnes' blossoming from ugly duckling to swan promises fulfilment and happiness in romantic terms, this is frustrated by the

misfortune of falling in love with her future brother-in-law. Thus, Agnes' potential in the marriage stakes appears to have been seriously compromised.

Lorna Reynolds, in "Kate O'Brien and her 'Dear Native Place'", wrote: "In her second novel, Kate O'Brien created her first *typical* heroine, a girl caught in the conflict between the attractions of love and the restraints of religious prohibitions." (Reynolds, 'Dear Native Place', 34. Emphasis mine) Agnes may be a typical heroine in the sense that she is the main focus of the novel, but she is not the typical heroine of romantic fiction, when bearing Radway and Modleski's theories in mind. Her physical attractions are not immediate because the male protagonist, Vincent, despite having met Agnes and her sister at the same time, marries the shallow, vivacious, pretty Marie-Rose. Equally, the novel does not follow the conventions of romance fiction as the hero marries the wrong girl, the more obviously attractive but shallow foil over whom the plainer heroine triumphs when she wins the hero. In *The Ante-Room*, it is all too late, and instead of happy ever after, the novel tells the story of what happens when the plot does not conform to romance convention and the hero and heroine have no way out of the heterosexual bourgeois convention supported by the romance genre to legitimise or place their excessive and potentially disruptive desires and feelings. Vincent confirms that he did not see Agnes' qualities at first, as he recalls, "when I first met her – oh, what a stern young judge!" (O'Brien, A-R, 131) Further attention is drawn to Agnes as an untypical romantic heroine by the reference in the text to Henry James's novel *Washington Square*.¹⁵ James' heroine, Catherine Sloper, is not a typical heroine either. She is neither brilliant nor beautiful and the object of her affections courts her solely for her money. Indeed, Agnes even compares herself to Catherine in the conversation about the novel at the dinner table. Agnes and Catherine both refuse to comply with the norms of society, but not in the usual heroic manner, as they rebel without making any claim to being radical. In *Washington Square*, Catherine Sloper refuses to marry Morris Townsend because she realises that he does not love her. Agnes will not marry her available admirer, Dr. Curran, as she does not love him. Although she suggests otherwise to Vincent at one point in the text when she asks him to stay away from her (252-3), she realises later, after kissing Vincent, that she will be unable to marry a man she does not love (273, 274).

¹⁵ See Henry James. *Washington Square* in *The Bodley Head Henry James*. Vol. I. London: Bodley Head, 1967, pp. 195-392.

The working through of the romance element in *The Ante-Room* is carried out in a bleak environment that juxtaposes the cold atmosphere of death with the emotional heat of desire. At the opening of the novel, Agnes is aged twenty-five, and is in charge of Roseholm due to her mother's terminal illness. The description of Agnes' life is bleak:

It was too quiet a house for Agnes, on whose courage and direction it had come to depend entirely now. And as it had no room for gaiety, neither had it place for the irrelevant griefs of the young and strong. There was no space in it where a heart might scold against a private wound, and so, though Agnes had been mortally hurt on the day when she and Marie-Rose met Vincent, in three years she had learnt to fix her eyes upon the griefs of others and, for her sanity's sake, ignore her own. (9)

The passage describes the processes of Agnes' denial of her grief, which entails a further denial of her youth, her gaiety, her emotion, and her potential, in order to avoid the pain of loss. Every morning on awakening, Agnes' "spirit went through the same dull exercise of pulling itself together for the foreseen." (10) The word "foreseen" indicates how Agnes avoids insight, which happens in the often-painful context of being in the present, by being arrested in the already "seen" of the past, and the fore-wards of predictability. By stopping herself from being present to herself, she is trapped in a past she cannot unlock, and has only dull routine in her future. This is damning in the context of a woman that theoretically has her whole life ahead of her, with the possibility of adventure, experience and the unknown. For Agnes, every day is predictable. Dr. Curran tells her: "This life you lead is unnatural." (70) As the only unmarried daughter of the family, Agnes has little choice in the matter, and her reply to Dr. Curran reflects this: "What could be more natural than keeping house?" (70)

Dr. Curran also fulfils the role of second suitor in the triad of romantic fiction, as he has fallen in love with Agnes, and is initially unaware of her feelings for Vincent. As a man of science, he is not prepared for what he perceives as irrational feelings, and as a result, he declares his newly discovered love for Agnes in angry perplexity. His despair at this irrational dimension of himself is expressed in terms of a plot gone wrong, a literary convention out of place, as he exclaims that, "it was no part of my plan to fall in love with a *femme fatale!*" (72) In his story, he misrecognises Agnes as a

femme fatale, putting her in the place of the secondary female character in the romance genre, and not recognising her as the heroine. Agnes registers the misrecognition when he watches her “staring at her own reflection in the mirror over the mantelpiece” (72). The mirror motif here indicates Agnes’ insistence on her being the heroine of her own life and her refusal to play the part Dr. Curran wants her to play, in his version of her future. As Agnes ponders on Dr. Curran’s declaration of love, she is struck by his being “fool enough to make a *femme fatale* of her” (122), a comment not only on how such an intelligent medical man could be so mistaken, but also at how poor his story-weaving skills are. At the doctor’s avowal that he is not asking her for anything in return for his declaration of love, Agnes tells him in relief that she is unable to reciprocate his feelings, but only by a “fluke” that she describes as merely “a maggot in my brain” (75). It is a striking image in that, on the one hand, a larva is an insect in an early stage of life; while on the other hand, maggots are associated with dead bodies in a grave. It suggests that Agnes’ love for Vincent while still in its infancy is at the same time, doomed. Her face, as she speaks, watched by Dr. Curran, is described as “deathly white. He noticed, with detached precision, the young and delicate perfection of the skin, the baby-fine eyebrows, the sanity of the grey eyes.” (75) Throughout the text, Dr. Curran’s physical assessments of Agnes include terms evoking infantilism (56, 66, 98, 188), and the textual insistence on his title suggests a caricature of the infantilisation of women by authority figures in patriarchal societies, as Dr. Curran is, in his medical capacity, a figure of authority in the local community.

Agnes is also subject to the authority of the Church, which offers her a consolatory place and practice from her own desires in the midst of emotional turmoil. Agnes’ religious faith is her anchor and she begins each day with the Morning Offering prayer. Agnes’ attachment to prayer is signalled by her experience, aged eight, when on first hearing at Church, the “tremendous-sounding form of prayer, she had burst into sobbing for which she could offer no explanation to her exasperated mother” (76). The formula of prayer “both saddened and consoled her – and this double effect was, she often thought, one of the menaces of prayer, which made its ideal of purity almost unattainable. Prayer that should humble gave relief by self-inflation.” (10) Here, the contradictory notion of the unimportance of the individual is juxtaposed with the “self-inflation” involved in interceding with the divine, as humility involves thinking of oneself as unimportant. At the same time, having confidence in God’s love and

attention requires the belief and trust that God values each individual. Agnes battles, throughout the text, with the ambiguity of the value of prayer: “No point in guessing at its value, its immediacy – only pray, if that seemed the true thing to do.” (50) The reason for Agnes’s heartfelt prayers is explained when the news at the breakfast table of her sister Marie-Rose’s arrival, brings “a light of excitement in her eyes” (27). Although Marie-Rose plans to arrive alone, Agnes knows that she will be accompanied by Vincent. As Agnes imagines him sitting beside her at the dining table, she unthinkingly puts out her hand to him. “Chilled” and “frightened” by this “impulse”, “[h]er mind took covert in prayer” (33). With this reaction, the battle between Agnes’s uncompromising faith and her illicit, but intense, love for Vincent, is set. Moreover, the juxtaposition of “chilled” and “prayer” contrasts with what the text indicates is the “coldness” of her faith, with the inner Agnes in which the “heat” of her passion for Vincent resides.

The mind/body dichotomy is dramatised most explicitly in the scenes leading up to and during Agnes’ attendance at the Sacrament of Penance, otherwise known as confession. The Sacrament of Penance is the means by which the sins of believers are forgiven by the power of God through the priests of the Church. Thinking about Vincent has, for some time now, “withheld her, for she was honest, from those practices of the Church which are the routine of a good Catholic” (34). At this point in the novel, Agnes had not been to confession for ten weeks, nor had she received Holy Communion. However, her uncle’s suggestion of a special mass for his dying sister obliges Agnes to return to the sacraments for the sake of her mother. With the decision made, Agnes’s anticipation of help from the sacrament is simple and she is buoyed up by the sense of relief she believes it will bring: “How easy! To ring the sacristy bell when Benediction¹⁶ was over and in a few minutes to destroy the unclean and sentimental selfishness of these three months.” (51) Agnes examines her conscience ruthlessly and in detail, as besides praying for the grace to receive the sacrament, *A Catechism of Catholic Doctrine* instructs, the conscience should be examined, “by calling to mind the commandments of God, and of the church, and the duties of our state in life, to find out in what things and how often we have sinned by thought, word, deed

¹⁶ Benediction is the literal Latin translation for blessing. In this context, the congregation receive a blessing in what the faithful believe is the presence of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, indicated by the Host (communion bread) which is placed in a vessel called the monstrance that is displayed on the altar.

or omission” (*Catechism of Catholic Doctrine*, 90). Agnes finds that against God, “there were ten weeks of hypocritical tepidity” (O’Brien, *A-R*, 79). Agnes’ “hypocritical tepidity” is ironically downplayed by the remark that “[d]esires of the flesh ... were not only as unimportant and transient as gnat-bites in summer, but quite as common, so that a confessor must be sick to death of little dreary tales of them – and hardly able to listen to another.” (83) Imagining these “cheap and commonplace” (87) experiences as unique, Agnes thinks, is “nothing short of idiotic” (83). As she reflects on her situation, Agnes decides: “Our absurdity must be more of a wound to the Eternal, Agnes thought, than our guilt. To have sinned was only too nauseatingly ordinary; not to see that and to make a self-inflating drama of sin was not so ordinary, but more despicable.” (83-4) Here O’Brien highlights the absurdity of the Church’s anxiety about sexuality by trivialising its importance in a cultural context that premised “company keeping” as the worst of all sins. For instance, this sense of “anxiety” played a major part in the Church’s dogged pursuit of the enacting of censorship by the State on material that dealt with sexuality that was not compatible with the Catholic ethos of the expression of sexuality only in marital, monogamous and procreative relationships.

Agnes’s Act of Confession is relayed in repeated variants of coldness. As Agnes receives the blessing at Benediction, she takes from it the following message: “Faith a cold thing, a fact – that was what she must use to destroy fantasy.” (84) In the short time between her waiting between the blessing and her appointment with the confessor she has requested to see, the variants of cold appear seven times. Agnes is “resolutely cold and still”, and feels that she needs to be “cold” in the execution of her plan to “kill with coldness”, her desire for Vincent (84). As she joins in with the final prayer, Agnes’s voice is “coolly triumphant” (85). Later, the bell she rings to request a confessor jangles “coldly”, and as she waits, Agnes keeps herself “cold and quiet” (85). She anticipates the feeling of being free from sin as “cool and invigorating” (86). The unfolding of the scene of Agnes’ confession is framed in the context of the deliberate and cold extinguishing of Agnes’ desire by a practitioner of the faith. As Agnes receives forgiveness for her sins through the medium of the priest’s prayer of absolution, she is aware of “coolness in herself” and she feels a “cold comfort” (90). As a result, she is “cold all through, and coldness, she was now aware, was the perfect state.” (91) The subjection of her passion is conveyed as she declares: “[G]ood-bye to heat” (91). Thus, Agnes’ battle between faith and passion is framed by Agnes’ “cold”

faith that relates to her mind, and her love for Vincent manifested in images of “heat” that are connected to her body.

Agnes’ movement away from the “sins” of this passion is relayed in the language of death and killing. As the priest questions her about whether she has prayed against her illicit thoughts, he asks: ““You were afraid of the power of prayer – that it might kill this thing?”” (88) As she agrees, Agnes tells him that she wants “help” and “courage” to face Vincent later that evening (88). The priest confidently assures her that God will “grant you both, my child” (88). If her intention to keep her imagination in check is firm, her love for Vincent, ““with prayer, real prayer, you stick to it – have no fear. It will die.”” (89) Agnes’s voice, as she agrees, is described as “desolate” (89). The priest continues to expound on the nature of love: ““That is in any case the fate of earthly love, my child. Whereas in the search for God, in the idea of God, there is matter for eternity.”” (89) In the Christian context, eternity is perfect everlasting life, that is, unending union with God. Thus, the span of earthly existence is short, rendering Agnes’ suffering as fleeting. At the same time, the priest’s avowal of the fate of the death of earthly love is ambiguous in the context of God’s message of love for others. Here, the priest implies that there is no place for the unimportant bodily or romantic love in Agnes’ life, which reflects his life path of celibacy, but offers little potential for romantic love in Agnes’ life, as the priest again assures her: “I repeat that with prayer and courage you can kill this thing.” (89) Agnes is bolstered by the courage she receives in the sacrament to bear her imminent meeting with Vincent. Reynolds explained that Irish society at that time would have assumed that all good Catholics would have “firmly and successfully subjugated mere human affections to the dictates of their religion” (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 118). Here, the subjugation involves an attempted murder of her inner life and the heat of her spirit.

Having been fortified and “cooled by the antiseptic of confession” (O’Brien, *A-R*, 106), Agnes is enabled by the sacrament, to hide her feelings from her sister and enjoy her company on her return to Roseholm. The application of an “antiseptic” implies that she is clean and free from the germ, or sin, of illicit desire for her sister’s husband. However, the barrier administered with the antiseptic is temporary. Despite her confidence in the Sacrament of Penance, neither her courage nor her confidence lasts when she is actually in Vincent’s presence, and she realises that the “courage and

coldness which Confession had seemed to bestow were growing less” (137). Vincent is uncharacteristically light-hearted and talkative at that evening’s dinner, and as she watches him, Agnes thinks, “that Heaven, doubting perhaps her denial of love, her resolve on coldness, had sent this theatrical test to try her out” (121). Vincent’s gaiety, a mood that has not been evident for some time, evokes youth and excitement, and Agnes finds that “the spirit might or might not be willing, but it got no assistance whatever from the wily flesh” (240). As Agnes realises that the cool rationality of the mind is not as strong as her bodily desire for Vincent, she attempts to reassert the confidence she received at Confession by retreating to her room to pray. As a result, and “feeling the positive force of prayer, she was comforted” (138). As she leaves her room to return to her guests, however, she encounters Vincent in the corridor outside her bedroom door. The intensity of her reaction is described, as Agnes is stopped in her tracks, “unable at once to ignore the beauty and significance of him” (139). One light touch from Vincent’s hand on Agnes’ shoulder is enough to shatter her resolution and confidence. To Agnes’ “vast surprise” considering the iniquity of his gesture, she finds “peace” in his touch (139). She attempts to reconcile this in her mind as she wonders, “how could she have known that his hand had such a power in it?” (139) Vincent tells her in a “low” “tone” that he loves her and knows that he is loved in return (139). As Agnes feels “the stormy life of his breast” (139), the coldness of faith is suddenly interjected into the scene by the sound of the nursing sister’s “little cough” from her mother’s room. Sister Emmanuel’s “cough” takes on an admonitory significance for Agnes, who hears it as,

A sound almost holy in its repression. It brought back the idea of holiness, the idea of pain. It brought back prayer and duty and the memory of her own confession. Dazedly her spirit moved from its moment of rightness under his loved hand to its outer, older knowledge of another rectitude. (140)

As the notion of “prayer” and “duty” is reasserted, Agnes frees herself from Vincent’s touch, vowing never to allow a situation like this to happen again. Vincent’s voice in reply conveys “desolation” (140), echoing Agnes’ tone earlier at confession when she was reassured that her love for Vincent would die.

Later that night, Agnes, realising that her love for Vincent will not die if she is constantly in his company, decides to follow him into the garden to ask him to stay

away from Roseholm. On the threshold, Agnes hesitates, as “[t]he freezing air had danger in it” (242). Her hesitation on the threshold points to the struggle to come. On the one hand, the “freezing air” surrounding Agnes conveys the coldness of her mind’s rationality; on the other hand, her body is engaged in the act of going out to meet Vincent even though she knows the danger of their being alone. In this instance, bodily desire overrides the doubts in her mind, and fully aware of the “danger” in the air, Agnes goes out to Vincent. The context of faith and sin frames the scene as Agnes recites a prayer for strength, as she goes out into the night (242). Seeing her approach, Vincent “thought that if ever the stage was set for the barn-stormer’s play, it was now” (245). Vincent sees Agnes, as described in an earlier scene,

reflected in greenish mirror light, a remove which assisted him cloudily to see her, not as his wife did, admirable, dear and comforting; not as William Curran did, a glorious creature, half myth, half Caesar’s wife; but simply as his love, his heart’s unsought and absolute delight. (133)

However, his “cloudy” view of her “reflected” in the mirror suggests impediment and displacement, in which Agnes is herself missing from the account of her given by others. Much as she refuses insight into her own centre, her core self is not reflected in the eyes of all those that love, desire and admire her. The repeated references to Vincent’s “dreaminess” (101, 259, 260, 262, 285) throughout the text suggest that she represents a form of fantasy to him, in which her needs are not seen. Moreover, in contrast to the stormy relationship that he has with his wife, Vincent appears to be attracted to Agnes as a source of comfort, security and reassurance, as one who will meet his needs, rather than as a source of romantic love, whose needs he wishes to meet. He sees her more as mother than lover, for on one occasion he tells her, when speaking about his dead mother, “[w]hen I’m tired the two of you get mixed in my head” (255).

The dichotomies of cold and heat, and mind and body, are introduced during Agnes and Vincent’s first exchange in the garden:

‘It’s cold,’ he said.
‘I’m burning.’
She laid a hand on his to prove it, and her fire was not to be endured.
‘Warm me,’ he cried. (245)

They move into each other's arms and, "[l]ine for line, bone for bone, they seemed to fit together as if by heaven grooved to take each other, as if the platonic split was mended here, and a completed creature stood united to itself as last" (245). This description brings to mind the Classical notion of *Eros* through the allusion to Plato's *The Symposium*.¹⁷ Moreover, the reference evokes *Eros*, the god of love, which indicates the physical appropriateness of Agnes and Vincent's embrace. *Eros*, in the classical context, understands love as an external force, with the humans involved completely in its thrall. This perspective of love reflects Agnes' experience, as while in Vincent's embrace,

One plane of her mind was certainly thinking: He and I are Catholics, and he is married and his wife is my sister – but against the fantastic proclamation of his mouth on her hair, on her neck, such prose was ... thin [...] For what was happening was impossible, and yet it was impossible to deny it. (O'Brien, *A-R*, 246)

On the one hand, Agnes is aware that it is unethical to love her sister's husband, while on the other hand, she finds that her body physically craves his embrace. As Vincent holds her again, for a second time, she finds herself powerless in preventing his embrace, and as she holds him, the contrast between cold/mind and heat/body is raised again:

To her cool mind it had sometimes seemed that the initial expression of tenderness to someone who was – however adored – a stranger, would be difficult to the point of impossibility. It had never occurred to her that the danger of passion might lie not in its novelty but in its naturalness. And now it was the latter which paralysed her. (249)

The "naturalness" of the embrace is in strong contrast to Dr. Curran's embrace earlier that day, as he comforted her after she had witnessed her father's distress in the sickroom. In the doctor's embrace, she had not "felt natural" (249). In contrast, here in Vincent's embrace, was "no anaesthetic, but only a wound unalleviated. There was no

¹⁷ In *The Symposium*, the guests at Agathon's dinner party decide to make a speech in praise of Love. Aristophanes recounts the tale that there were once three human genders, male, female and androgynous, the latter being a combination of male and female. These human beings were round and circular with four hands, four feet, two sets of genitals and two faces. They were strong and vigorous, and having attacked the gods, Zeus retaliated by cutting them in two. Aristophanes continues: "Since their original nature had been cut in two, each one longed for its own other half", and on finding the correct half, they wove themselves together and formed "a single living thing" (Plato, 191a). See Plato. *The Symposium*. Trans. Christopher Gill. London: Penguin Books, 1999, 189c–193d.

hope for this septic wound.” (250) In this moment, Agnes realises that her love for Vincent will not die and furthermore, that the Sacrament of Penance did not operate as an anaesthetic after all. In addition, a “septic wound” is harmful, which suggests that Agnes’ unfulfilled love for Vincent will have a detrimental impact on her life. In spite of this knowledge, Agnes repeats her request to Vincent to stay away from her, and this time her argument is conducted in terms of sin and faith, and in relation to her “duty to God” (250). In *The Ante-Room* Catholicism is inseparable from nationalist discourse of family, as Agnes’ “duty to God” is manifested as a duty to her sister, Marie-Rose. As she suddenly recalls what she came into the garden to do, Agnes asks Vincent to stay away from her on Marie-Rose’s account. For her sister’s sake, she refuses to undertake a future with him. Throughout their encounter in the garden, the consequences on Marie-Rose of any action they might undertake is the focus of their conversation, as well as their mutual awareness of Marie-Rose’s marital unhappiness (O’Brien, *A-R*, 247-9, 262, 263-8, 270, 273). Agnes’ “faith” in duty to others, as well as religious faith, is the key element in her decision not to pursue a relationship with Vincent. Although Agnes’ renunciation of love for Vincent at the end of the novel, as Dalsimer points out, “accords fully with her Catholic training” (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, 21), it is, in fact, her strong sense of duty and obligation to her sister, Marie-Rose, that is the primary factor in her decision not to pursue a love affair with Vincent. Here, conventions of Romance novels in which the heroine chooses the hero over her relationship with the foil female are displaced, for Agnes chooses her relationship with her love rival over a romantic connection with the hero. In the garden, it is the image of the “ghost” of Marie-Rose passing “before her eyes” (O’Brien, *A-R*, 262) that reactivates Agnes’ sense of duty. She cannot leave Marie-Rose aside, especially since Vincent now no longer loves his wife: “I think that now I’m the only living soul she feels safe with” (264). She continues: “Her eyes – they’d be bewildered! Oh they’d haunt me, Vincent!” (266) As she continues to speak, Vincent eventually realises that he can never “retrace, unplait, unravel the long slow weaving of childhood” (267-8). This is confirmed by Agnes who says in relation to Marie-Rose’s exacting of revenge during their schooldays on her behalf: “Probably the whole affair was settled that night in Junior Recreation.” (267)¹⁸ As a result, Agnes’ “astonished lips” tell Vincent that they can never be together (262). Here, body and mind are united through the image of Marie-Rose, as

¹⁸ This refers to the incident where Agnes was judged as being “the plainest girl in the school” (O’Brien, *A-R*, 6).

Agnes declares her decision. As Vincent attempts to question her decision, Agnes can barely reply as she has “no energy” (263). The lack of energy suggests that the “heat” of her passion for Vincent has, with the verbalisation of her decision, left her body. Her “cold” mind is, at this point, predominant. Agnes’ decisive words sound, to both Agnes and Vincent, like the “ripple of pistol-shots” (262). This image foreshadows their respective futures, as Vincent chooses to kill himself by shotgun, while Agnes will endure a living death, as her imaginary speech to Vincent at the end of the novel conveys: ““They are all alive, even Mother. But I’m dying. Vincent, if I could only die – oh, Vincent, darling—” (301)

Thus, Agnes’ emotional conflict between eternal, physical and sisterly love is depicted within Catholic confines, and as Dalsimer wrote, “Catholicism in *The Anteroom* is both an internal article of belief and a social reality, a psychological as well as a communal catalyst.” (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, 24) As a result, Agnes renounces her love for Vincent. Although she works through a religious medium to reach that decision, it is love for her sister that resolves the conflict rather than love for God. In this way, the family is prioritised over the individual and the expression of desire limited by religious and cultural edicts. What is explored here is the path of the individual whose desire does not “fit” the model dictated by the society that surrounds her. Familial duty and Catholic tradition are an inescapable part of Agnes’s life, but so too is love, and Agnes secretly and privately experiences passionate love and “does the right thing” by giving precedence to the notion of the “common good”. This tenet is indicated in the text when Agnes reflects that “the saving of others was the thing that had had to be done” (50). In addition, as she pleads with Vincent to stay away from Mellick, she says: ““Vincent, Vincent – can’t you see? Because of one silly mistake the feelings of four people must be lacerated!” (253) Here Agnes is enacting the selflessness of the woman who gives her life to others by placing her own needs second. The underlying religious aspect of the “common good” is addressed when Agnes asks herself, “Was all her struggle falsity, and she content to lose her spirit’s virginity while saving her ridiculous, mortal body?” (259) Here, Agnes seeks to negotiate the certainty of the bodily suffering involved if she neglects what her soul longs for, that is, to be with Vincent. She also questions whether preventing her body from being physically united with Vincent, as she has already crossed the line of propriety in her mind, is worthy of further struggle. Thus Agnes is confronted with the dichotomy between love

and duty as she weighs up the “vast barricade” between love, which is her own affair, and the affairs of God, that of sin and her “immortal soul” (260). As she watches Vincent, the argument plays out in Agnes’s mind:

But God could surely take some fraction of responsibility for the needs He planted in His helpless creatures? He gave you grace and the moral law and the True Church. And put *Him* in my path, she retorted softly and gladly, thrust Him down into my life and gave me eyes to see Him! (260)

The Church’s public moral teaching tells that there is no rightness to her love for Vincent, but her private spirit feels a religious rightness to her passion for Vincent, who she secretly associates with godliness. The meshing of romantic love and the divine role in the creation of the loved one is suggested by the capitalisation of “Him” in relation to God, as is conventional, and in this passage, on three occasions, to Vincent.

On the day after her final encounter with Vincent, Agnes is “amazed to the point of weariness by the irresponsibility, in human terms, of a God who claimed human sensibilities and had, in fact, become man” (276-7). She finds it difficult to assimilate the amount of suffering around her with a God associated with mercy and compassion. On the one hand, while her experience of love has caused her to question her faith, on the other hand, Agnes’ overriding belief in the overall “rightness” of the Church, which she believes will be understood after death, facilitates the continuation of the practice of her religion. In spite of the denial of an “anaesthetic” in the Sacrament of Penance, Agnes’ faith is not compromised as she believes, as she tells Vincent, that, ““in the end the Church is right, only we can’t see it except in our own terms – we can’t see it, well, transfigured. And I think we will, when we’re dead.”” (251) Thus, while there is some questioning of the faith, belief is not rejected, as she had ““always suspected that there are no real reasons for belief.”” (251) When she accompanies Marie-Rose to mass on All Soul’s Day, and asks for forgiveness for her sins, she finds that she is too tired to pray. In a manner that recalls the examination of her conscience before her confident expectation of the balm of the Sacrament of Penance, Agnes “held a cold, slow colloquy with her conscience” (277). Ironically, faith, which promises eternal life through the spirit, kills her spirit, as at the end of the novel, Agnes’ inner life is suffused with coldness. She tells Dr. Curran that she feels ““as if I had some kind of poison in me – as

if I were dying here this minute – half dead.” (299) The poison is from the septic wound of the spirit.

The Ante-Room does not end with Agnes being united with the man she loves. In addition, Agnes’ renunciation of a future with Vincent also precludes the consideration of a future role as wife and mother with Dr. Curran. Thus, Agnes’ desire, as Anne Fogarty writes in “The Business of Attachment: Romance and Desire in the Novels of Kate O’Brien”, “defiantly resists the demands of the family romance which stipulates that love must end in marriage” (Fogarty in *OPD*, 110), a happy marriage, of course, being an essential ending in the romantic fiction genre. Here, the ending is undecided and unhappy. Consequently, the novel does not fulfil the terms of a work of romantic fiction. Agnes’ options, at the end of the novel, are limited; should she stay in an uncomfortable situation at home, as her role in the household is soon to be usurped by Nurse Cunningham, make a home with the newly widowed Marie-Rose or make her way alone in a foreign land? We are not given any answers and Agnes’ dilemma and her response to it says much about the inadequacies of the cultural and religious ethos of the time. In the afterword to *The Ante-Room*, the novelist and critic Deirdre Madden writes: “The tragedy of *The Ante-Room* is ... the way in which a young woman – a good, kind, virtuous and intelligent woman – is made unhappy and slowly crushed by those around her, and by the cruel restraints of the society in which she lives.” (Madden, Afterword, *A-R*) The implication is that Agnes regresses into the role occupied by her “unimportant” (O’Brien, *Cloak*, 257) Old Maid aunt, the similarly named Agnes, because of her devotion to the public good in terms of the stultifying and murderous demands of her faith. In giving Vincent up, she has passed the test of observing duty towards one’s family. Agnes’ fate suggests a condemnation of the limits to including women in the newly liberated Free State, which took the family as its primary unit. O’Brien does not offer a radical alternative for Agnes, because no other space existed for women, given that their needs were subsumed within the family. At the same time, the denial of the heteronormative ending for Agnes explicitly subjects the family unit, dependent on marriage and motherhood, to scrutiny.

In addition, Agnes’ story parallels that of her mother, Teresa. In both characters the progression is from the warmth of life to the coldness of death. Both mother and daughter have not had the opportunity to love and be loved within acceptable societal

confines. As a young woman, Teresa, for instance, is aware of her plainness, and as recounted in *Without My Cloak*, marries the first suitor that presents himself as a result. The only love she “had known was the maternal” (372). Agnes falls in love, but the object of her desire marries her sister. It is only later that Vincent notices Agnes, but that notice comes too late. While she is loved by Dr. Curran, Agnes does not return that love. In a similar vein, Teresa is loved by her husband, but her love is focused on her son Reggie, as Danny’s outburst at Teresa’s bedside indicates: “‘Oh, Tessie!’ he sobbed. ‘Oh, Tessie, speak to me!’” (O’Brien, *A-R*, 227) Thus, the question explored by O’Brien in this text is what happens when the experience of love does not “fit” within the narrow frame set by Church and State. The answer is ambiguous, as the achievement of the greater good, while laudable in itself, can lead to much individual unhappiness.

Conclusion

Reynolds noted that in *Without My Cloak* and *The Ante-Room*, “the manifestations of love are strictly controlled, as they are in all patriarchal societies, by Church and State, and by the modesty, considered natural, and certainly assiduously inculcated by their training, of women” (Reynolds, *Literary Portrait*, 53). Each text shows in different ways, that regardless of educational improvements for women, so long as they internalised the discourse of Church and State and self-regulated their passions in the name of modesty, then no real changes could happen to improve women’s lives. Each of the characters under discussion had opportunities available to them and yet each, in her own way, was too powerfully inculcated with modesty and duty to be fully autonomous in her choice. Agnes Mulqueen in *The Ante-Room* is a victim of such circumstances, as she falls in love with an unavailable man. Ireland, therefore, is still the “sanctuary of the old ideal feminine” and does not suffer “new types” (O’Brien, *A-R.*, 206). Any expression of love that does not “fit” the rigid religious and cultural code cannot be tolerated. Moreover, to be important as a woman in Irish society, one must be married, and for Agnes, whose scruples will not allow her to marry a man she does not love, a life as an unimportant spinster is the only honest life, in her terms, left open to her. *Pray for the Wanderer*, set over fifty years later, shows little difference from this model, as O’Brien did not present an alternative path for Nell Mahoney other than that of marriage, despite her self-sufficiency and the implications of Nell and Tom’s unsuitability as marriage partners. For women, therefore, the implication from *The Ante-Room* and *Pray for the Wanderer* is that the great hopes and dreams of Independence were not lived up to. Moreover, O’Brien’s “unhappy” or unresolved endings for her single women, take on new meanings as such endings question women’s homogenised acceptance of societal and Church roles in the family unit. At the same time, no alternative is presented, as the prevailing religious and cultural codes appear too dominant and widely accepted for negotiation. Agnes seems destined for spinsterhood, a role deemed worthless by society as reflected in the texts, while Nell can either continue with the single life with which she is not entirely happy, or embark on a potentially difficult marriage. As Anthony Roche remarks in “*The Ante-Room* as Drama”: “What the novel most often suggests in its comparisons between Ireland in the 1880s and the 1930s is that for all of the fifty-year gap and for all

the political and revolutionary activity it witnessed, very little has changed.” (Roche in *OPD*, 87) For Agnes and Nell, this is particularly suggestive, as both women remain within the family circle. In addition, the discussions on the Irish cultural ethos in *Pray for the Wanderer* point to the concern with preserving traditional values by the Mellick inhabitants in contrast to the progressive views expressed by Matt Costello. Thus, the story of early Independent Ireland is one of looking to the past in order to forge an Irish identity apart from that imposed by previous oppressors.

Jo Kernahan’s decision, in cultural terms, with the novel set only two years after *Pray for the Wanderer*, but written five years later, contrasts somewhat to those of Agnes and Nell, as she leaves Ireland and her family at the end of the novel. It can be argued that this development reflects O’Brien’s growing antipathy towards a country that she deemed took an immoral stance with its neutrality policy. However, she refigures this “leaving” by providing Jo with a mirror community, a society shaped on a mother-daughter potentially explosive “nucleus”, which promises to provide a (limited) empowerment for Jo, as the diminished passive aggressive over-compensatory mother within the patriarchal family is replaced with the (idealised) possibility of one who speaks and relates from a position of empowerment, and who can create a community of sisters and not set them against each other. As a microcosm of the State, and as its primary building block, therefore, the patriarchal family too must be rejected, and the reader is left with the tantalising possibility of a mother-centred community to replace it as a radical space in which identity, history and desire can be refigured. In *The Last of Summer*, Dalsimer argued: “Antipathy replaces the ambivalence that ... had marked her treatment of both family life and Irish tenets.” (Dalsimer, *Critical Study*, 73) In this context, Jo firmly rejects mother and motherland by leaving Ireland for Europe, and makes a deliberate choice towards a new future, one that does not rely in any way on the past, but which is haunted by her need for family, as she does not seek individual freedom, but another form of familial bond through institutional life. In this regard, the portrayal of Jo Kernahan set the precedent in O’Brien’s fiction for the increasingly autonomous heroines that followed in *The Flower of May* and *As Music and Splendour*. In O’Brien’s view, family dynamics, and the demands made on women by familial duties, remained largely unchanged from the 1880s to the 1930s, despite increased educational opportunities for women. Autonomy, therefore, in O’Brien’s worldview, cannot be achieved within the family unit. Neither can it be achieved by establishing

one's own family, nor by substituting a patriarchal family for one modelled on a matriarchal hierarchy, although the option comes closest to providing some modicum of freedom. To be truly autonomous in O'Brien's fiction, one must be independent, for as Dalsimer wrote: "Kate O'Brien insists that leaving Mellick is inevitable and necessary if her heroines are to define themselves" (xiv). For the women discussed in this Chapter, however, attempts at autonomy are not successful, as all three accommodate the "primary ... unit group of Society" by suppressing aspects of themselves or their desires in the realisation of their choices.

CONCLUSION

Autonomy, freedom and choice are represented in O'Brien's fiction by the outsider, the European, the wanderer, the non-conformist to family and national demands. In *Pray for the Wanderer*, a male protagonist rejects the family and returns to London, while a French woman escapes home in *The Last of Summer*, as Angèle, accompanied by two of her cousins, returns to a Europe at war at the end of the novel. However, this thesis has examined how the instances "to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society" (Gilbert and Gubar, xi-xii), are manifested in characters, many of whom are not key players in the plot, and who remain tied to or within the nation and family.

Chapter One set the historical and ideological context in which the "struggles" of the characters analysed took place. To this end, key areas of influence on women's lives in marriage and in motherhood by the Catholic Church in Irish society, as well as the Irish State were considered, in order to contextualise women's roles as depicted in O'Brien's fiction. Chapter Two looked at instances of struggle in O'Brien's work for some mother characters, who exemplified State and Church discourses of ideal womanhood, by focusing on the politico-cultural representations of the Irish Mother in the context of the 1937 Irish Constitution through the portrayal of Una Costello in *Pray for the Wanderer*, while the writing of State boundaries and policies on women's bodies and psyches was explored through Hannah Kernahan as representation of Ireland's neutrality policy in *The Last of Summer*. In both novels, the notion of woman/mother, as rendered in the Constitution, and mother, as representation of Irish culture or Mother Ireland, were shown to be a site of tension. This is on account of O'Brien's representation of the mother as the family member who develops the most extreme self-policing skills, which are then applied to the rest of the family. Thus, the Family, as well as being a support to its members and a source of love, is presented in the texts as a unit always living in the shadow of its own dissolution, and the State understanding of "the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society" (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.1.1), is seriously interrogated. Chapter Three explored the instances of protest in the lives of ideologically bound wives, by exploring women's negotiation of the limits of heterosexual marriage in the representations of Caroline Lanigan and Molly Considine in *Without My Cloak*, as well as the newly married Lilian Morrow in *The Flower of May*. The wives discussed in this chapter all serve to different extents as a site in which the human dimension of the physical and emotional

demands of living with another human being is juxtaposed with Magisterium decrees of life-long fidelity, affection and happiness, as promised by the administration of divine grace at the Sacrament of Matrimony. Even though the struggles are resolved in favour of the “common good” and not of the woman herself, none of the choices made produce appealing lives, thereby challenging critical perceptions of O’Brien’s seeming approval of conventional submission to Catholic duty in heterosexual marriage. Chapter Four focused on the struggles of single characters who are textually precariously positioned with regard to the family, reflecting the “problem” of women not in service to the nation through procreation in the State, and on the cusp of choosing their futures, in struggles and moments of protest against prevailing ideologies, and who ended up as either “nuns, married women or old maids”. The Chapter examined how the constitutional family cannot accommodate single women in a way that is dignified and honorific, framed by the question of the development of women’s position in the Irish cultural ethos between pre- and post-Independence. The period of the 1880s is represented by Agnes Mulqueen in *The Ante-Room*, while Nell Mahoney in *Pray for the Wanderer* and Jo Kernahan in *The Last of Summer* symbolise the 1930s single woman. In O’Brien’s view, family dynamics, and the demands made on women by familial duties, remained largely unchanged from the 1880s to the 1930s, despite increased educational opportunities for women. This chapter argued that finally, in O’Brien’s texts, autonomy, variously defined, cannot be achieved within the family unit, and thus, the fundamental dislocation between the rights of the individual woman and the “common good” of the “primary ... unit” of Irish society is highlighted.

Thus, Una Costello is a woman that “fits” the model rendered by the Catholic Church and the Irish State. She is utterly fulfilled by her selfless role as wife and mother and loves her husband and her children. However, throughout the novel, O’Brien stressed the rarity of women such as Una, and provided examples in a variety of female characters of those who *do not* “fit” neatly into gendered roles. All of the other characters discussed must suppress some part of their identity or desires, or indeed, overcompensate in other aspects of their lives, in order to mould themselves into the role of wife, mother, nun, or spinster. Hannah Kernahan focuses all her love and attention on one child to the detriment of her relationship with her other children. She also destroys her son’s future for her own ends, as she needs his full attention for her sense of self-definition. Caroline Lanigan cannot express her sensuality within the

marriage bond as she does not love her husband. As a result, in order to live out her obligation to a lifelong commitment, she must suppress her need for physical pleasure and her vitality in order to honour the vows she made before God and her family. Similarly, Lilian Morrow does not appear to love her husband. However, she takes a lover and depends on the commitment made by her spouse to maintain the outer appearance of a perfect union, as the text indicates that Michael will not leave her. Lilian compensates her lack of fulfilment by taking a lover and by conducting a lavish lifestyle. Despite Caroline and Lilian's different approaches to their similar marital situations, neither live lives that are honest or true to their needs and desires. In contrast to Caroline and Lilian, Molly Considine loves and desires her husband, but the expression of desire is hampered by the demands of unimpeded procreation that puts Molly's life at risk. Molly chooses to take that risk and loses, thereby dramatising, with the depiction of the wives in O'Brien's fiction, that there is little in the private aspects of marriage that is without an imposed authority from outside that serves to constrict women's self-expression. The imposition of a Catholic Church defined sexuality that can only be expressed in a marital, monogamous relationship, with a member of the opposite sex, and with no restriction on procreation, is one that carries a high degree of risk when undertaken in a lifelong commitment. Mistakes cannot be accommodated and as a result, the choice of the single woman's future role in life is daunting, especially when, as O'Brien's female characters undoubtedly are, they are intelligent and fully aware of the consequences of lifelong commitments. O'Brien does not offer alternative roles for those who remain either in the family or in an alternative family-model, such as the convent. It appears that for O'Brien, alternative roles, such as those offered in *As Music and Splendour* can only be accommodated outside the family and outside of Ireland. It was not until her final novel that this exploration and accommodation of fulfilled alternative roles for women was realised, and in *As Music and Splendour*, both heroines conduct love affairs outside of Catholic edicts and moreover, live fulfilled lives outside the Irish cultural context and away from their families or origin.

As the struggles experienced by O'Brien's characters exemplify the cultural discourses circulating contemporaneously, my particular research trajectory read O'Brien in the light of the parameters of Catholicism and the family, by locating close textual analysis in a socio-political historical framework, focusing especially on the role

of the Church in structuring gender role expectations and practices in Irish middle-class women. To this end, I employed a close reading of the chosen texts in the manner pioneered by Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, as well as using Simone de Beauvoir's text, *The Second Sex* for its interrogation of marriage and motherhood. In this way, the thesis considered how O'Brien applied a political critique to her explorations of the contribution of the Irish Catholic Church to the construction of modes of femininity and gender roles in the context of women in the family structure, and to young, single women on the cusp of choosing a future role in life. The thesis examined previously under-read texts, such as *Pray for the Wanderer*, *The Last of Summer*, and *The Flower of May*, and focused on the religious content of O'Brien's work in the context of Irish political and legislative life, thereby asserting the case for reconsideration of O'Brien as an intentionally and consistently political writer.

Although O'Brien pitted portrayals of moral struggle against the constraints of Catholicism as a religious practice alongside experiences of support and comfort from the same Church, this thesis has argued that the instances of struggle themselves indicate less an approval of endemic Catholicism, and more an interrogation of the psychological price demanded from those faithful to its edicts. O'Brien's challenging of narrow patriarchal familial roles for women confronts the difficulties of Church, State and middle-class *mores* that positioned women in situations of selflessness and submissiveness. There are always those who push the boundaries of the world in which they live, and while Una Costello, Hannah Kernahan, Caroline Lanigan, Lilian Morrow, Molly Considine, Jo Kernahan, Nell Mahoney and Agnes Mulqueen, live out their lives by conforming to the rules, there are instances of the "impulse to struggle free" (Gilbert and Gubar, xi-xii), which serve to question and challenge the parameters within which these women live their lives. Jo Kernahan breaks the familial bond and leaves the motherland in order to live an autonomous life. This thesis argued that O'Brien's subtle and persistent questioning of the psychic health and humanity of the roles that women were expected to take up after the 1937 Constitution, issued a challenge to the pervasive authority of the patriarchal pillars of Church and the bourgeois State in O'Brien's lifetime, that continues to be relevant to scholars and literary historians today.

O'Brien's interest in her own class was a subversive one and her intellectual engagement with Catholicism was shaped by the religious perspective provided by her

European schooling. O'Brien's stance towards the bourgeoisie is political, as the constancy and conformity demanded by social and religious codes of belief and practice are constantly threatened by the experiences of desire for self-determination or forbidden loves that resist such codes. This thesis argued that by reading O'Brien's novels, through the lens of family dynamics and within the framework of the cultural, social and religious context of her day, that a continued case can be made for O'Brien as a powerfully subversive writer. This supports the work already done by critics such as Eibhear Walshe, Tina O'Toole, Pat Coughlan, Emma Donoghue and Mary Breen, in demonstrating that O'Brien's conservatism has been greatly exaggerated by reading her "merely" as a romance novelist, and that she was in fact much more emphatically politically engaged than those who would sideline her in the canon believe. O'Brien politicised the private sphere and, moreover, subjected the roles allocated to women to a politicised scrutiny by positioning her middle-class female characters in juxtaposition with the tenets of the Catholic Church and the 1937 Constitution. By offering a sustained analysis of a selection of characters that did not "get away" from the family, this thesis hopes to add to the critical body that asserts that Kate O'Brien was a writer of public and civic importance. She politicised the "family" by focusing on the individual psychological struggle for self-regarding bourgeois characters, whose lives had little import outside their genteel parlours, by pitting instances of the "impulse to struggle free" (Gilbert and Gubar, xii) in the context of religious and State public discourses that regulated women's private lives and roles. Moreover, the repression of such struggles that incurred a heavy private toll, she suggested, at the same time, conversely contributed to the stability of the State and public life.

My reading of O'Brien's work through the frame of public/private centred on the figure of the woman within the family makes a number of contributions to Irish studies and writing. It provides a way of reading O'Brien that makes explicit the political potential of her explorations of inner and outer life at the point of the "struggle", and it contributes to widening the terms of what constitutes significant Irish writing. It brings female figures into the interpretative frame as more than ciphers or symbols and considers them, like Gloria Anzaldúa's "borderlands"¹ (wherein Anzaldúa discusses the experience of being caught between two cultures), as the point of

¹ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

intersection between a number of difference discourses, and explores the personal cost, and public gain that results from their careful negotiation of these discourses in the name of community and family. By situating O'Brien's writing in the frame of the family and on the public/private divide, I am not making a case for any inherent or intentional radicalism on O'Brien's part, but rather showing how her ambivalence and positing of the female figure as inscribed through the lines of others' thoughts, is as much a political position as any other. Although her focus was not primarily on those outsiders whose life choices were radical in the context of the times, by exploring contradictions and clashes of desire and duty, O'Brien resisted any simplistic ideological oppositioning of options for women *within* a family and community. However, she did counter the oppositioning of unspoken or implied possibility *outside* the family; unspoken because such things were not to be spoken of, but excluded from the State based around the heterosexual family. In O'Brien's work, it is the family that is the locus of her unravelling of discursive intersections. Thus, when considering O'Brien's depiction of Catholic women in the context of Church edicts and practice and the 1937 Irish Constitution, her work, seemingly about romance, can be read as subversively political.

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