

**THE UNHEARD VOICES OF IRISH WOMEN
IN THE NOVELS OF EDNA O'BRIEN**

by

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Chapter One

Introduction

In his article “Edna O’Brien: Reveling in Heartbreak,” Richard Woodward states, “Edna O’Brien began a new chapter in Irish literature in the 1960s by granting a voice to women who had never spoken so frankly from the pages of books” (2). With the first publication of *The Country Girls*, Edna O’Brien established herself as the only Irish writer to create an authentic female voice representative of the Irish condition. She saw that from the pages of such literary greats as William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge, James Joyce, Patrick Kavanagh, Samuel Beckett, and John McGahern, a true woman’s voice similar to her own experience was absent. Since 1960, she has worked to make her perspective seen and heard in short stories, novels, and now, two trilogies. Her first trilogy, *The Country Girls Trilogy* is comprised of *The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girl* (1962), and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964). Thirty years and many novels and short stories later, O’Brien published her second trilogy comprising *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), *Down By the River* (1996), and *Wild Decembers* (1998).

It is important to understand two elements that forced the emergence of the female voice in the 1960s: the place of women writers in Ireland until this time and the historical and political state of women in Ireland. In an introduction to *Stories by Contemporary Irish Women* (1990), the editors, Casey and Casey, point out that until this time, publishing books in Ireland was a man’s “preserve” (9). Edna O’Brien was at the vanguard of this movement into a male-dominated literary genre known as “Irish fiction.” Preceding O’Brien, there was a small handful of women writers, such as Somerville and Ross, who found it necessary to hide their female identity to achieve a serious and fair

treatment, and Elizabeth Bowen, who wrote from a primarily Protestant viewpoint. At present, most of the Irish anthologies, such as *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* that include female writers, do so because women have been severely overlooked. This is seen in an introduction to the *Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers* in which O'Connor states, "the goal of this collection is to address the absence of females in the Irish literary tradition" (2).

The historical and political state of women in Ireland needs to be at least briefly mentioned as the persona of O'Brien's female character roots itself in the rural and political isolation of Ireland. These aspects contributed to O'Brien's childhood in Ireland and are reflected in the characters within her two trilogies, *Kate*, *Baba*, *Josie*, *Mary*, and *Breege*. The Irish have a long history of death, war, destruction, poverty and depression. The country has known invasion and war from the first Vikings at the end of the eighth century up to the struggles of today. In addition to these political problems, the Irish have suffered natural disasters as well. In 1845, blight ruined the potato crop, causing the most devastating and tragic disaster in the history of Ireland. About "one million Irish died from starvation or disease [. . .] and another million left the country, most going to North America" (Rodgers 30). Even after the famine, people continued to flee Ireland seeking better economic opportunities. The people who remained lived to tell the stories of poverty, hunger, and abandonment. Many of the Irish blamed their very powerful neighbor England for letting them starve, and this in turn created a deeper and fiercer nationalism. At the time, the Irish considered themselves part of Britain. However, when Ireland needed the English most, the "doors of England were shut in their faces" (Uris 24). The Irish felt themselves further isolated and victimized.

Another factor influencing the state of Irish women is the entire country's adherence to Catholicism. In his book, *Inventing Ireland* (1995), Declan Kiberd discusses the effect of the loss of Irish language on the people. He claims that in about 1790 the people of Ireland were willing to learn English only if that meant they could hold on to their religion. What followed was the Irish being wracked with guilt and therefore throwing themselves even deeper into their religion. As a result, Catholicism saturated the lives of the Irish from the moment they were born until days after their death (Kiberd 650). Catholicism was and still is taken most seriously by the Irish, especially in matters of sex, which, due to biology, has affected women far greater than men. The Irish used no birth control, and today, although legalized in 1983, it remains difficult to find outside of Dublin (Levi 1). Abortion was and is against the law, and, according to the Church, sex was to produce children and not to be enjoyed. Even today Catholics comprise 93% of the inhabitants in Ireland. To many, religion is more important than being Irish. Irish women have endured and still endure many hardships so Ireland can be a Catholic country.

Ireland also has been and remains today a patriarchal country with a high percentage of domestic violence. Even now with Ireland's second female president, 11% of Parliament is made up of women while women comprise 52% of the population. Only in 1991 did Ireland criminalize marital rape. In 1995 divorce was finally legalized although "it remains difficult for most women to access and, consequently, does not provide adequate protection for women in immediate physical danger" (Levi 3). In 1996 and 1997 laws were passed to protect women from stalking and assault from a partner but the implementation of these laws has been limited (Levi 3). The Irish government still

has not compiled official statistics on violence against women. In 1995, however, Women's Aid surveyed the women of Ireland and found that 18 percent of women had been subjected to violence and 51 percent of women knew a woman who was facing domestic violence. They also found that only 20 percent of women who faced violence reported it to the police. This deplorable situation epitomizes the mute condition of women in Irish society.

At the time O'Brien began to write, few advances had been made. The 1960's marked an important time for women in fiction, due to the fact that female authors finally began depicting women in honest situations. By voicing the realistic position of women in Ireland rather than empowering them or idealizing them, Edna O'Brien protests merely by finally exposing the victimization. She will no longer be a co-dependent bystander to her country's social and political problems by letting them recur and recur with no acknowledgment of the fact that these conditions are authentic. In order to do this O'Brien creates the Irish woman who is consistently repressed and victimized not only by Ireland, but also by herself.

In giving the women of Ireland an overdue presence, O'Brien creates female characters who, through their victimization, deal repeatedly with the same theme of isolation, loneliness, and loss. O'Brien sends many of her characters on a quest for love and security, often unsuccessfully searching for answers outside of themselves. The outcome is almost always disillusionment and powerlessness. O'Brien herself states, "I have depicted women in lonely, desperate, and often humiliated situations, very often the butt of men and almost always searching for an emotional catharsis that does not come. This is my territory and one that I know from hard-earned experience" (Roth 6).

The Country Girls Trilogy is an insular story of two young girls, Caitheleen and Baba, and their coming of age in Ireland. Although her first trilogy confines itself to the personal lives of these two women, the second encompasses Ireland's political and social concerns: the IRA in *House of Splendid Isolation*, abortion in *Down By the River*, and land rights in *Wild Decembers*. She remains focused, however, on the characters' inward struggles within these political arenas rather than the political struggles themselves. In both collections, O'Brien still remains faithful to her theme of love, loneliness, and loss amongst her heroines. O'Brien explains:

A writer's journey is a graph. I started with the things I knew – convent girls, family, etcetera—but as I became a little more confident I apply myself to venturing into the outer world and, I hope, integrating it with a corresponding inner world [. . .] the imaginative thrust has to come from inside oneself and this is as much a mystery to me as it might be to someone else. (Bolick 6)

Later, in an interview with Richard Woodward in 1989, she announces her intention to take on a different theme, “I have said all I wanted to say about love and loss and loneliness and being a victim and all that. I have finished with that territory. And I have not yet embraced another one” (8). In the same interview she expressed her impatience with books that have induced political themes (8). O'Brien later contradicted herself because after this interview she continued to deal with these subjects, although in different and, ironically, political surroundings. Although she embraced another subject, there is nothing too radically changed in Mary from *Down By the River* when compared to Caitheleen from her first trilogy. Throughout her career, although each heroine's name

changes, the basic core of the character does not. Her heroines reflect their land, their Ireland, their deep and infallible roots. O'Brien has always claimed to write what she knows; she has done that and she need not apologize for it or proclaim herself finished with it.

As with many writers, O'Brien draws largely on personal experience. She was born December 15, 1932, to Michael and Lena Cleary O'Brien in Taumgraney, County Clare, where she was one of four children. The town was small, consisting of about 200 people, rural, and very Catholic. Books were scarce. She remembers the women passing around pages of books to escape the monotony of everyday life. She attended a local national school until she was twelve when she attended the Convent of Mercy at Loughrea in County Galway. In 1946, she escaped to Dublin where she attended Pharmaceutical College. At this time, she developed an interest in books and writing. She once said:

I one day bought a book for four pennies called "Introducing James Joyce," by T. S. Eliot, and I opened it to a section from "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," the Christmas dinner scene, with the blue flame over the Christmas pudding. Up to then, I had been writing rather fancifully, with a lot of adjectives. When I read that, I realized one thing: that I need go no further than my own interior, my own experience, for whatever I wanted to write. It was truly, without sounding like St. Paul, an utter revelation to me. ("Lit Chat with Edna O'Brien" 2)

This experience deeply influenced her writing which is now considered to be autobiographical and sometimes confessional. This is particularly true with O'Brien's

first work, *The Country Girls*. In *Mother Ireland*, O'Brien tells the story of growing up and the experiences of her youth. In *The Country Girls Trilogy*, O'Brien does the same except she does not use herself; the character is called Caithleen. Although the latter is a work of fiction, it is easy to draw strong parallels between the writer and the character. Both girls had violent fathers who drank and spent too much and mothers who suffered and sacrificed too much. They both went to convent school and then to Dublin where they both met men with the initials E. G. whom they married and later divorced. Those, of course, are the facts that are similar. But many of the feelings of emptiness, loss, and loneliness were also felt by Edna O'Brien and then revealed through Caithleen.

Caithleen then becomes the prototype for all the other characters. Even though O'Brien's second trilogy achieves a larger more political comment on Irish life, she remains true to her prototype. In a review of *Wild Decembers*, Paul Perry stated, "The new trilogy is not a personal rite of passage. Rather, it tackles more the protean character of Ireland itself" (1). Both of the trilogies deal with rites of passage in the heroines, and both certainly comment on the country's character. The tragedy lies not only in what happens to them and the country's reaction to their plight, but in their own inability to help themselves. The search for love and acceptance is not a lighthearted quest but rather a necessary and desperate one.

O'Brien is an honest and truthful writer often accused of not being able to write outside of herself; she admits that she holds "to James Joyce's precept that all fiction is fantasized autobiography." She continues to say she "could not write a novel that was not located both physically and psychically in territory I know inside and out" (*An Edna O'Brien Reader* ix). Joyce is O'Brien's first and foremost influence and, indeed, her

writing is often filled with “the dense Joycean language” (Birch 10). Faulkner is her other love. It is their language that stirs her the most. She once said, “There are writers and there are writers. But there is Joyce and Faulkner, for me” (“Lit Chat with Edna O’Brien” 2). From the very beginning we are astonished at O’Brien’s, like Joyce’s, “ability to reconstruct with passionate exactness an Irish world” (Peggy O’Brien 476). The country’s physical and psychic pulse comes alive as O’Brien reconstructs her own life within her books.

By writing from her own Irish experience Edna O’Brien reveals that which is different, unprecedented, and entirely necessary. She is the first Irish woman to bring fearlessness to women’s literature. Philip Roth, in an interview with O’Brien, mentions the foreword that he wrote for her book, *A Fanatic Heart*. Here he refers to a quote by Frank Tuohy in which he pointed out a unique difference between Joyce and O’Brien: “While Joyce in *Dubliners* and *Portrait of the Artist*, was the first Irish Catholic to make his experience and surroundings recognizable, ‘the world of Nora Barnacle’ had to wait for the fiction of Edna O’Brien.” Tuohy and Roth both realize the importance of the female voice, particularly as accurate a voice as Edna O’Brien’s.

Who is this “Nora Barnacle?” She was the maid turned wife of James Joyce who has become an icon for the character that was never properly represented in any of Joyce’s literature. Figuratively, she “remains symbolic of countless women in post-independent rural Ireland whose fate was obscurity and powerlessness at the hands of a society which endorsed their continued oppression for reasons of political expediency” (Pelán 51). Although some critics express discontent with the unhappy, oppressed, and

bleak portrait of the female character that O'Brien paints, many others point out that however bleak the picture is, it is true and real. And it needs to be painted.

When Philip Roth interviewed O'Brien he added, "You write about women without a taint of ideology, or, as far as I can see, any concern with taking a direct position." O'Brien honestly responded to Roth: "The correct position is to write the truth, to write what one feels regardless of any public consideration or any clique" (38). Thomas Cahill, in the *LA Times Book Review*, writes: "O'Brien is a storyteller, an Irish storyteller of an ancient tradition of storytellers, people who tell the truth" (11).

In contrast, other critics see no point in representing the depressed, lonely, and isolated woman unable to attain love. When reviewing *The Country Girls Trilogy*, Anatole Broyard asks a question regarding all of her work, "Why is her women's luck so bad? After all the ironies and sexual politics have been acknowledged; the fact remains that other women manage to get along—or at least to amuse themselves—with men without murdering them, as the heroine does in "I Hardly Knew You." The women in the later books are attractive, intelligent, witty—surely they could do better if the author let them" (12). What Broyard fails to realize is that O'Brien is not concerned with having each heroine walk off into the proverbial sunset.

O'Brien's focus in all of her work is to give voice to the Nora Barnacles of the land. Grace Eckley states, "In a sense Miss O'Brien's work may be viewed as a process of change from romance to realism—from the innocent view that an alignment with a male means happiness ever after to the stark realization that such is not possible" (41). And this is not to put the blame on men at all. Rebecca Pelan writes, "O'Brien has consistently taken as her theme the disillusionment of women in society—not necessarily

as victims of men's cruelty, but more often as victims of their own general social powerlessness" (53). It is important to note that although their isolation, loss, and loneliness stem from elements surrounding them, with the exception of Mary in *Down By the River*, the women are victims of themselves.

It is interesting to note that although these books were an honest representation of women in Ireland, all three of her first novels were subsequently banned in Ireland due to their "inappropriate" sexual content. This banning managed to both upset and excite much of the public. In a biographical review of O'Brien, Haberstroh wrote, "How a nice Irish Catholic convent girl could write so explicitly about sex and so often about despair and disappointment intrigued many critics and readers" (573). While it did help to popularize her, the negative reactions from her countrymen made O'Brien feel ashamed and quite rejected. In a recent interview with Tina Srebotnjak, O'Brien discusses the banned trilogy: "I was made to feel ashamed of a book that was at the time a kind of little song to my own country and to that part of my own country" (O'Brien). Even her mother had gone through some of the books and inked out offending words ("Lit Chat with Edna O'Brien" 1). This rejection simultaneously forced O'Brien to live outside the country where she continued to write fearlessly about the land she knows so well. This distance enabled O'Brien to give truth to the women of Ireland: the Nora Barnacles finally had a voice and occasionally it was a scream.

Limiting the discussion of this thesis to O'Brien's two trilogies is justified by two contributing factors. First of all, *The Country Girls* Trilogy was her first work of fiction establishing her as an Irish writer who depicted the lonely, isolated, and sacrificial heroine known today as the typically tragic O'Brien female. In her later books, the same

heroine was present time and time again. In both her short stories and her novels, at no point did she stray from her theme. Therefore, the first trilogy is not only a fair representation of most of her work, it also marks the source from which they stem. The second factor rationalizing the limitation of this thesis to O'Brien's trilogies is that the 1990's trilogy marks her initial attempt to change her subject. Her acknowledgment of an outer political world is a drastic difference from her previous novels and short stories. However, just as her heroines are not able to escape their situations, she has not been able to free herself from her own tragic Irish female persona.

It is on the female characters within these two trilogies, Caithleen, Baba, Josie, Mary, and Breege, that this thesis will focus. While O'Brien attempts to change her theme from a personal story in the first trilogy to a political story in the latter, her female characters have remained basically the same. This study is divided into the two trilogies and the developmental stages through which O'Brien's protagonists move. The first stage acknowledges the origins and the presence of the feelings of isolation and loneliness within Caithleen, Baba, Josie, Mary, and Breege. Many of the political and social elements of Ireland work to isolate these women, and with each new book, O'Brien magnifies their isolated position through the discourse of each novel. The second stage is their search for love and acceptance. In both of O'Brien's trilogies, all of her heroines represent not only a desire to escape from a situation but also a need to fill their void with love from an external source. Caithleen, Baba, Josie, Mary, and Breege all in some way, believe that a man can provide the solution. They have already acknowledged that there is a lack; they now attempt to satisfy that need by means other than their own. The third and final stage is each character's return to the lonely self.

By examining these novels closely it becomes apparent that the second trilogy transcends all three of the stages, yet not so neatly: With age, O'Brien has become more driven, fierce, and daring. Yet, whether O'Brien's subject is a personal narrative or a narrative based on political and social turmoil within Ireland, she continues to represent the victimized protagonist and her quest for love, only to realize she has nothing left but herself.

Chapter Two

The First Trilogy

Edna O'Brien's first book, *The Country Girls* (1960), was soon followed by *The Lonely Girl* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964). These three novels tell the story of two young girls, Caithleen and Baba, as they find their way in the world with little help from outside resources. With Caithleen, O'Brien establishes the prototype for the rest of the women in both of her trilogies. Caithleen, like the other protagonists, goes through three developmental stages; first she is isolated and lonely, second she searches for love, and finally, there is a return to the lonely self.

O'Brien develops feelings of physical and emotional isolation and loneliness by intermingling different elements of the Irish condition into the lives of the characters. A rural setting, the patriarchal society, the domineering Catholic church, and the lack of any positive female influence not only help to establish the background from which Caithleen stems, but also establish the world in which she must continue to live.

The opening of *The Country Girls* creates the remote and isolated upbringing from which Caithleen has been raised. The physical and emotional coldness within the structure of Caithleen's world places her within the first stage of her journey. This is tremendously important to O'Brien because throughout the narrative, she emphasizes the importance of the women's early years. From the very beginning of *The Country Girls*, loneliness and sadness pervade the text. Caithleen is very scared, young, and painfully naïve about the bigger world around her. The first words create uneasiness and discomfort:

I wakened quickly and sat up in bed abruptly. It is only when I am anxious that I waken easily and for a minute I did not know why my heart was beating faster than usual. Then I remembered. The old reason. He had not come home. (3)

Perhaps it is her unconscious awareness of fear that is most disturbing. Her body knows and reacts before her mind can even acknowledge what has happened. The body knows what it has known so many times before. The intimate use of the first person along with the repetition of simple, short sentences adds to the disturbing rhythm of the passage. The anxiety of her beating heart is heard within the last three staccato sentences.

Through stark and desperate images, O'Brien establishes a sad reality and a vast Irish landscape of emotions as well as land. Early in the book Caitheleen expresses her feelings of detachment and loneliness toward both her family and her environment. As Caitheleen gets out of bed, her feet cold on the bare floor, she notices the mist rolling off the fields, the darkness of the morning, and the wetness from the dew. These physical images of darkness and dampness initiate the constant references to a bleak world. The sheepdog, who had not slept in his usual place, affirms the fact that her father has not come home. She opens the blind which accidentally shoots up. Caitheleen states, "It was lucky that Mama had gone downstairs, as she was always lecturing me on how to let up blinds properly, gently" (3). As she moves through her house, the landing is dark, the bathroom is cold, broken and useless (5). "In our house things were either broken or not used at all." It is the type of writing that O'Brien is known for. It is honest and true and too real not to be believed. This is a house and a childhood devoid of warmth, acceptance, and love.

Attached to the lack of small gratifications in life, there continues to be an underlying fear and sadness that is inescapable for Caithleen. She herself admits this when she leaves the house for a moment to gather lilacs for her teacher. The countryside offers her temporary relief and the tone of the chapter changes briefly:

I felt, as I always did, that rush of freedom and pleasure when I looked at all the various trees and the outer stone buildings set far away from the house, and at the fields very green and very peaceful. Outside the paling wire was a walnut tree, and under its shade there were bluebells, tall and intensely blue, a grotto of heaven-blue flowers among the limestone boulders. And my swing was swaying in the wind, and all the leaves on all the treetops were stirring lightly. (7)

The temporary relief that the beauty offers is soon forgotten when Caithleen goes back into the house. She is witness yet again to her mother's sorrow and later reveals that she had a fear of her mother dying every time she left for school. O'Brien creates the anguish of a loveless alcoholic marriage which Caithleen has to observe and endure. For O'Brien, the Irish mother is a tragic figure stuck in many unhappy marriages without money or love; she is consumed with sorrow. O'Brien allows Caithleen to see her true mother in a brief passage where she translates all that she knows went wrong:

She straightened the cap on my head and kissed me three or four times. She stood on the flag to look after me. She was waving. In her brown dress she looked sad: the farther I went, the sadder she looked. Like a sparrow in the snow, brown and anxious and lonesome. It was hard to think that she got married one sunny morning in a lace dress and a floppy

buttercup hat, and her eyes were moist with pleasure when now they were watery with tears. (9)

O'Brien's message is clear for these women: love is a disappointment. This theme is reinforced when her mother drowns while seeking the companionship of a male friend. The tragic Irish mother is extinguished, as she will be in all of the novels in both of the trilogies, and Caithleen is left alone and afraid. This element works to enable her isolation further. In the fifth chapter when this happens, Caithleen admits, "It was the last day of childhood" (45). O'Brien does make it clear that although we feel sorry for the mother, she too has been a repressive force within Caithleen's life. The mother denies her daughter a positive role model but also denies her life's simple pleasures. O'Brien makes Caithleen's mother a problem not only in her existence, but also in her absence.

Working to isolate Caithleen further, Dada's absence and negative influence on the family is also established within the first chapter of *The Country Girls*. He has not come home, a usual occurrence, which we find out is most likely due to alcohol. As the character of Caithleen's father develops, it becomes clear that he is an angry and physically abusive man. The family does not have a lot of money, which furthers their victimization by him. From the beginning of the novel, the reader, like Caithleen, has a built-up resentment towards him. She deserves more than an abusive, absent, and inebriated father and a mother who in the next several passages goes to her "watery grave." At this point in the novel, O'Brien makes Caithleen as good as parentless. This establishes the basis for Caithleen's rejection of the past.

This present isolated situation makes Caithleen susceptible to the beginning of an affair of sorts with a man interestingly known as Mr. Gentleman. Mr. Gentleman preys on our lonely fourteen-year-old Caithleen as he takes her to town one day for lunch where she is given wine even though she would much prefer lemonade. She is given special treats that are also accompanied by inappropriate handholding and suggestions of future dates. Mr. Gentleman and his sophisticated trips into town serve as a temporary solution to her loneliness. However, at this point she is far too young for this to be a conscious decision on Caithleen's part. Although the trips make her feel special, the situation works to isolate her from more appropriate relationships.

Another element O'Brien uses to further Caithleen's fear and abandonment is Catholicism. "O'Brien doesn't hold back when it comes to her wrath at the Catholic Church, and at the small-minded Irish who slavishly follow it at the expense of their own humanity" (Zacharek 2). Within the first chapter of *The Country Girls*, she admits: "I got out of bed six or seven times every night as an act of penance. I was afraid of hell" (4). When she discusses Hickey, the hired man, on the same page she states, "I loved him. To prove it, I said so aloud to the Blessed Virgin, who was looking at me icily from a gilt frame." So we see that O'Brien first relays to us not a kind God, but a strict, fearful, and overbearing God. This is reinforced when, after Caithleen's mother dies, she attends a convent school where the nuns control her every move, even the way she undresses for bed (68). Although the convent was dark and repressive, it also added a degree of safety to Caithleen's already turbulent life. This not only reveals the integral part that religion plays on the control of the Irish persona, but it also compounds the emotional isolation within the characters.

In this first book of her first trilogy, O'Brien creates two female main characters. She explains in "Why Irish Heroines Don't Have to be Good Anymore" that she wanted to have "one who would conform to both my own and my country's view of what an Irish woman should be and one who would undermine every piece of protocol and religion and hypocrisy there was" (13).

Interestingly, I find that there are many women in all of the novels who contribute to the further isolation of their fellow women. The first and most obvious of these characters is Baba, Caithleen's best friend. Baba's favorite name for Caithleen is a "right looking eejit." When she enters the novel, she steals lilacs Caithleen cut for her teacher so that she can give them to her. Caithleen even admits, "coy, pretty, malicious Baba was my friend and the person I feared most after my father" (14). Why on earth is Caithleen friends with such a character? While Caithleen is meek, Baba is bold and brazen; Caithleen wants to be accepted, Baba wants to deny; Caithleen comes from a complete lack in her life, and Baba wants to broaden that lack. Both girls are comfortable within these roles. When Baba devises a plan to get them expelled from convent school, Caithleen is unable to stand up to Baba as she is more comfortable as the victim than the aggressor. Even Baba's own father says, "Poor Caithleen, you've always been Baba's tool" (109). Caithleen knows that she is being used by Baba; however, it is the price she pays because Baba is "fun" and "doesn't mean any harm" (109). The relationship also supplies another need of Caithleen's. Baba's father, Dr. Brennan, is the only male who provides a positive parental figure in her life. Her relationship with Baba ensures the continuance of this support.

Edna O'Brien was once asked if there was an original character of Baba. Ms. O'Brien responded:

I think I did have school friends who were the opposite of myself, and they were extroverts and mischievous. I was drawn towards them as I always am towards opposites. But now I think it was partly my other person, my alter-ego. I had a sort of streak of submerged rebellion in me always, which I never let out, unfortunately; I was really too frightened, too meek. (Eckley 67)

Caithleen is attracted to Baba as someone who is different, goes against the rules by creating her own to live by and then enforcing on others. This, however, does not free Baba from experiencing the same three stages that Caithleen must go through. While the emphasis of the trilogy is clearly on Caithleen, Baba is important as she is both an intrinsic opposite of Caithleen while also being an extension of her.

It is at this point in *The Country Girls* that O'Brien's female characters begin the second stage of their development: the search for love. Both girls, feeling lost and lonely, escape to Dublin searching for the love and security that they were unable to find at home. Because neither Caithleen nor Baba has experienced a true loving relationship as a child, their quest becomes problematic and frustrating. As they have no foundation, there is little hope.

There is no greater place to start the second stage of their journey than a big city. Caithleen states upon arrival, "I suppose it was then we began that stage of our lives as the giddy country girls brazening the big city" (121). Dublin represents hope, change, and promise for Caithleen and Baba, while also offering the opportunity to meet new

people, especially men. Not knowing what to expect, they are happily met by the vibrant city. Caithleen refers to it as a “neon fairyland” and admits, “I loved it more than I had ever loved a summer’s day in a hayfield. Lights, faces, traffic, the enormous vitality of people hurrying to somewhere” (131).

The girls are armed very differently as they begin their lives in Dublin, the second stage of their journey. The contrast of their personalities is essential in the unraveling of their story and the development of their characters. Caithleen spends her first few days in Dublin with only the awareness of what she does not want to be. She clings to what she knows and can think of nothing more exciting to do on a Saturday night than to go to confession. Baba, on the other hand, has a thirst to try it all as she finally feels free after being, “cooped up in jail for three thousand years” (129). She is consistently creating as much excitement as she can for the two country girls. They soon spend their evenings at dance clubs or bars searching for companionship, men, and love. Juxtaposed to Caithleen’s wish to attend confession, Baba desires to “blow up this town” (133).

Their different desires are made quite clear when Baba states:

We’re eighteen and we’re bored to death [. . .] We want to live. Drink gin. Squeeze into the front of big cars and drive up outside big hotels. We want to go places. Not to sit in this damp dump [. . .] We’re here at night, killing moths for Joanna, puffing DDT into crevices, listening to that lunatic next door playing the fiddle. (145)

Caithleen responds:

“But we want young men. Romance. Love and things,” I said despondently. I thought of standing under a streetlight in the rain with my

hair falling crazily about, my lips poised for the miracle of a kiss. A kiss. Nothing more. My imagination did not go beyond that. It was afraid to. Mama has protested too agonizingly all through the windy years. But kisses were beautiful. His kisses. On the mouth, and on the eyelids, and on the neck where he lifted up the mane of hair. (145)

The two separate wishes Baba and Caithleen have for their lives are quite obvious. It is true that both are seeking a man, but each has her own vision of who that will be. Baba holds no romantic vision of her childhood or her present day life. She is searching for more, bigger and better, older and richer men. Caithleen wants love, but not just any kind of love; she wants romantic love. She clearly saw her mother unhappy and disappointed in romantic love, but she knows that it was what her mother most desired. The “he” in Caithleen’s statement above could be Mr. Gentleman, but more importantly, it is *a gentleman*. It could be any one. Caithleen will accept anyone who will have her. What remains problematic for her is that she does not have any particular criteria, nor does she have any idea of who she is or what she wants to be. She cannot, dares not, even see beyond the “miracle of a kiss.” She continues to be essentially parentless and, therefore, extremely impressionable and malleable. Her only role models have been a meek mother, an alcoholic father, and a domineering and frightening God who will cast shame and guilt whenever necessary.

Ironically, Caithleen’s major romantic interest in this first book of *The Country Girls Trilogy* is Mr. Gentleman, who reappears in her life while living in Dublin. Now, however, their relationship is more romantic and Caithleen is older and more comfortable being the object of his desire. She never questions this position, nor has she really hoped

for it. He is not at all close to the Prince Charming she had envisioned nor does she ever consider her own wants. She is completely undiscerning as to who chooses to love her. This affair offers Caithleen an opportunity to discover her own sexuality, and explore a male body for the first time. At one point Caithleen is promised a trip to Vienna by Mr. Gentleman where they will consummate their relationship. Through their discussions, it becomes quite obvious that they relate to each other as father and daughter much more than as lovers. Caithleen is constantly told what to do and where to do it. Sadly, this is comfortable for her.

Even though the affair allows Caithleen an exploration of love, it undermines her religious beliefs as well as her own previous standards. O'Brien illustrates this in a scene where Mr. Gentleman keeps Caithleen out so late she had to miss mass the next morning, leaving Caithleen faced with conflicting interests. Symbolically not attending mass shows her disregard for the Catholic Church. This marks the beginning of Caithleen's disengagement with the Catholic Church and, therefore, her own family values. This loss is troublesome for Caithleen because she finds herself leading more and more of a contradictory life. Mr. Gentleman tells her that she is a "bad girl." Her reply is, "I like being a bad girl" (165). Being a bad girl equals love, and love is exactly what she wants. On the other hand, being a good Catholic girl equals being subservient, modest, unloved, and inexperienced. This is what Caithleen was, this is what her mother was, and this is what she is rejecting. It is more important to fill the void than live up to the constraining moral standards imposed on her earlier in life.

At the end of the book, the affair abruptly dies when both Mr. Gentleman's wife and Caithleen's father discover the relationship. She is left all alone. "The message is

clear: a gentleman is a failed promise” (Broyard 2). Caithleen, like her mother, has victimized herself by assuming an unassertive, submissive stance. She, also like her mother, finds herself having sleepless nights over a failed attempt at love. She again feels a tremendous loss and must once again start over.

At the close of *The Country Girls Trilogy*, feeling completely alienated, Caithleen has no one on whom she can rely. O’Brien symbolically illustrates this isolation in the description of a conversation Caithleen attempts to have with a fellow tenant in her boarding house. The non-English speaking tenant does not understand what Caithleen is saying, nor does she understand him. She literally has no one with whom to communicate. Even her relationship with Baba has been thwarted. Due to a six-month stay at a tuberculosis sanatorium, Baba cannot offer any solace. She is left with no one. Caithleen is now being forced to rely on herself.

The second book of the trilogy, *The Lonely Girl*, opens two years later with Caithleen still in the midst of the second stage of her development. Our heroine is working in the same shop, living in the same boarding house, searching for the same thing: love and acceptance to fill her loss and loneliness. Baba, having returned from the sanatorium, and Caithleen are desperately trying to fill the void in their lives. Their motivations are rooted in trying to be anything they are not. Caithleen explains: “We didn’t like the taste of gin and tonic so much, but we loved the look of it: we loved its cool blue complexion as we sprawled on our hard beds, drinking and pretending to be fast” (180).

In a review of *The Lonely Girl*, Rollene Saal takes issue with O’Brien’s title and states, “It would be hard to call their loveless existence lonely. They think nothing of

forging their own party invitations, crashing parties, clutching merrily at straws” (Saal 30). I must disagree with this statement for many know that being in a crowd does not unmake a lonely person. Furthermore, this emphasizes O’Brien’s point that indeed they are lonely. Why else would they do this? Though the two have each other they are in a constant search for other people to fill their void. Ironically, they have one friend who is nicknamed “The Body,” for that really is his only purpose. There is no significant relationship, sexual or otherwise, between him and the girls. If either one of them needs a date or they have nothing to do, they can always rely on The Body, who serves as little more.

It is in this book that Caithleen meets Eugene Gaillard, a married Protestant Englishman, who becomes the next source of love in her life. Older, worldlier, and smarter, he is simultaneously turned on and appalled by the young, Catholic, Irish, and naïve Caithleen. Caithleen is still searching for someone, anyone to fill the void in her life left by her dead mother and her absent father. She has no particular criteria that the individual must fulfill which make it quite easy for whoever cares to love her. Unfortunately, Caithleen needs little more than love to please her. In contrast, by choosing Caithleen to love, Eugene not only has an immediate relationship, but also has the opportunity to mold her into the woman he desires. However, these changes are soon too great and too difficult. Caithleen remains almost completely immutable. This is not to say she does not want to change for him. She does, for that would ensure her being loved. She simply cannot.

Eugene, like Mr. Gentleman, is a father figure for her. She looks to him for guidance, comfort, decisions, and care. Caithleen rarely states any needs of her own; she

forgoes them for what he thinks is right. He educates her, helps her, scolds her, and punishes her. He withholds love when she is bad, and he rewards when she has been good. From the moment they meet, he enjoys her naïveté and plays with her simplicity.

O'Brien illustrates this when the two meet at a function where she is wearing rubber boots because she left her shoes on the bus. As they meet, he makes fun of her rubber boots, tells her she can start a trend, and asks, "Have you heard of the men who can only make love to girls in their plastic macs?" (85). She responds that she hasn't and then feels ashamed that she knows so little. Her ignorance and seriousness at this point is nothing less than pathetic. However, her innocence only attracts him, and a few weeks later the two unite. He sees a woman he will easily be able to manipulate, and she sees someone who will give her attention.

Caithleen attempts to change to secure this new relationship. This change is problematic because the pretense is that she changes for him and not for herself. Now O'Brien has added a retelling of Cinderella and Pygmalion as Caithleen offers herself up in exchange for love. However, the ending is different now, and O'Brien will not allow Caithleen to successfully change for the sole purpose of a man's love.

As pointed out earlier, Grace Eckley states, "In a sense, Miss O'Brien's work may be viewed as a process of change from romance to realism—from the innocent view that an alignment with a male means happiness ever after to the stark realization that such is not possible" (Eckley 41). The fact that all of the men are thought to be "Prince Charmings" when in fact, they are not reiterates this point clearly. Eugene is Caithleen's second, last, and final "Prince" in the trilogy.

The critics have had a varied reaction to the character of Eugene. Some critics, such as Anatole Broyard, see him as a generous man who is giving an education to Caithleen who is simply unable to neither see nor appreciate this (12). Other critics see Eugene as an “appalling” (Maddocks 15) character or another rewrite of the infamous Heathcliff (Bell 44). Eugene digresses in the novel from a potentially charming prince to an irritating, self-centered, and rather cold man. At first he is an exciting escape into another world. He takes her out of the city, buys her clothes, and educates her on sex and the world outside of Ireland. He is Caithleen’s most extreme attempt at a search for love and security as she slowly sacrifices herself to achieve fulfillment.

O’Brien has created the Eugene/Caithleen relationship as a representation of a patriarchal society in which women are the pawns of men. Through this dilemma, O’Brien reveals that women perpetuate the situation by enforcing the fairy tale as much as men. It is from this Caithleen must learn to break free. The fault is not necessarily Eugene’s. Certainly it would be rewarding if Eugene were a prince, but that is not O’Brien’s message. Her message is that Caithleen has put herself into this relationship, and she needs to figure out what to do about it.

O’Brien creates more of a dilemma in which Caithleen must choose between the love of her family and the love of a man. Eugene is not interested in marriage; in fact, in the beginning he is not *yet* divorced, but he is interested in having sex and a relationship with her. Caithleen desperately wants to be loved. Sex is not only frightening for her, but she would prefer to stay in the good graces of her family and her religion. Interestingly, when family and friends from her village discover her relationship, she not

only loses her family's approval, she also loses Dr. Brennan's approval. Losing this is more painful for her since she has little respect for her own father.

As Caithleen must find love, she is determined throughout almost the entire novel to make her relationship with Eugene work. In order to do that, she not only is subject to his wishes, but she consistently and unsuccessfully attempts to become what she thinks he wants. Early in their relationship, Caithleen announces, "He called me Kate, as he said that Caithleen was too 'Kiltartan' for his liking—whatever that means" (202). She doesn't even understand it, and yet she still allows for her name to be changed. He is not the only one to call her Kate. From here on, O'Brien makes Caithleen known as Kate. After so many years of searching to feel alive, what does it matter if he changes her name, if he makes fun of her, if he tells her that her bottom is getting fat, if he doesn't even marry her? Caithleen is totally devoted to Eugene and does not even think to question his needs or his insults.

Anatole Broyard states that Kate "is given a chance to change when she meets Eugene [. . .] Eugene is her devoted lover and teacher: he's almost masochistically patient with Kate, encouraging her without bullying or condescension. But in a reversal of the traditional male and female clichés, she loves him only in bed and refuses to interest herself in books, music or people. She'd rather go to the movies with Baba" (2). Broyard fails to see that O'Brien has created a man who only will love her fully if she does change. Broyard is trying to prove that Eugene was the solution to all of her problems and that Kate brought on her own misery by not taking the opportunity to change. Broyard, like Eugene, is limiting his argument by assuming that books and

music and people will bring her happiness. If Eugene Gaillard were a real person he would most certainly agree with Broyard:

“I gave you everything--food, clothes--” He pointed to my clothes hanging in the wardrobe. Sometimes the wardrobe door opened quite suddenly as if there were a ghost in it. It had opened just then. “I try to educate you, teach you how to speak, how to deal with people, build up your own confidence, but that is not enough. You now want to own me.”
(358)

With this, O'Brien makes a very important point. She draws a parallel between the Kate/Eugene relationship and Pygmalion and his statue. I do not understand how this point is lost on Broyard.

Caithleen certainly does have the opportunity to change. It is merely that she is incapable of change. Eugene unfortunately has not picked the most apt pupil, as she is far too Irish and emotional. Caithleen is a woman who has come to him with a history, a history that Eugene, whenever possible, insults and mocks. O'Brien has allowed Kate to remain Caithleen which, though not nearly as romantic or pleasing, is quite realistic. Caithleen herself is so desperate for love that she pleads for him to stay with her. When Eugene starts telling her about her inadequacies, of which she is quite aware, she protests: “But you like teaching me,” I protested. “You said you did. Some girls wouldn't take it, but I don't mind you telling me about the Ice Age and evolution and auto-suggestion and profit motive” (359).

As Caithleen is still amidst her search for love, she consistently tries to please Eugene, O'Brien just does not allow this to be successful. There is one scene that shows

how Kate is trying and how Eugene is blind to that, concerned only with what he wants and what he would like her to be. She had bought red earrings on Christmas Eve specifically to look glamorous for him. When he sees that they have turned her ears black, that they were made in Hong Kong, he throws them into the fire. She tries unsuccessfully to retrieve them from the fire. O'Brien writes:

“If I didn't care about you I wouldn't worry about your ears,” he said. I laughed at that. His compliments were so odd. “You soft, daft, wanton thing, you've got one mad eye,” he said looking into my eyes, which he had decided were green. (228)

Unfortunately she does not realize that with these words, he is calling her fat, stupid, and unmanageable with a hint of craziness. Even if Caithleen does hear this insult, O'Brien does not allow her to fully realize the meaning of it. He masks it with sweetness as if these traits are desirable. Because she is receiving some love and attention from this relationship, she is not able or willing to see exactly what is going on. Desperate, she doesn't understand the situation because she doesn't have the tools. Kate is so engrossed in her search for love to fill her loss that she is unable to realize that she is being victimized.

The only place Kate allows herself to be changed is when Eugene finally manages to coax her into having sex with him. Kate does eventually enjoy their intimate time together. However, Kate does not understand why their experience in bed is different from the rest of their life. She states: “It was such a shock to me to know that he could love me at night and yet seem to become a stranger in daytime and say to me, ‘Do you take sugar in your tea?’”(336). Part of the comfort level she feels in bed is due to the

fact that there she feels she can be herself when other times, she is trying to be the girlfriend Eugene wants her to be and still be happy.

In the end, her religious upbringing continues to isolate her from both her family and Eugene. Eugene is quite judgmental of not only her Irish Catholicism, but also of her simple, rural, and religious family. Eugene confronts her outside church one day, further alienating Caithleen as he articulates much of her inner dilemma about herself and their relationship. He states:

“So, when you’re in there, you become a convent girl again [. . .] How can you live two lives? In there”—he nodded toward the concrete church—“you’re deep in it with crucifixions and hell and bloody thorns. And here I am sitting on a wall, reading about atom bombs, and you say, ‘Who am I?’ For that matter”—he tapped my chin with his index finger—“who are you and what are you doing in my life?” He was laughing all the time, but I still did not like what he said. (328-29)

Caithleen is indeed leading a double life; she has never been told or shown that being a good Catholic and being in love can go together. Catholicism has taught her that sex for pleasure is bad and dirty. O’Brien addresses this issue in the 1984 interview with Philip Roth where she states, “I think love replaced religion for me in my sense of fervor. When I began to look at earthly love (i.e., sex) I felt that I was cutting myself off from God . . . My daily life and my sexual life are not of a whole—they are separated. Part of my Irish heritage!” (40). Catholicism does not allow any sexual autonomy. In *The Country Girls Trilogy*, O’Brien conveys well the notion that sexuality is often problematic not only for Caithleen, but also for Irish women.

Earlier in the novel, Caithleen struggles to understand the doubleness of what her religion will allow and what it will condemn. She is forced by her father and aunt to have a chat with a priest about her relationship with Eugene. He is quite frank with her, telling her she is “walking in the path of moral damnation” (269). When she asks why, he simply states, “This man is dangerous company. He has no faith, no moral standards. He married a woman and then divorced her—whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder” (269). Caithleen’s aunt states that “divorce is worse than murder” (260). When she equates her father’s drinking to Eugene’s divorced status, the priest excuses him saying, “Every man takes a drink. It’s the climate” (271).

This not only furthers Caithleen’s dislike of her religion, but it gives her more reason to reject it and attempt a deeper relationship with what she sees as the opposite side of it, Eugene. It serves as another catalyst for her returning to Eugene. After the priest leaves, Caithleen admits, “The funny thing was that I was more determined than ever to get away” (272). This need to run away is a theme we see time and time again in O’Brien’s characters. In an article on O’Brien, Richard Woodward states, “Her characters share an urge to flee, and a fear of being mired in one place. At her best, O’Brien does what Joyce did in “Dubliners”: she looks back at a country that nurtured her and from which it was imperative to escape” (5).

Caithleen, a desperate woman, returns to Eugene having rejected her family and her religion for him. She demands more reassurances, often crying and becoming overly emotional. This drives Eugene farther and farther away. Eugene spouts horrible insults to Kate at the end of *The Lonely Girl* saying such things as, “Look at yourself in the glass—you’re like a red swollen washerwoman (360)”, and “You are incapable of

thinking. Why don't you get up and wash your face and put some powder on? *Do something. Sink your inadequacy into washing walls or mending my socks or conquering your briary nature*" (359). After several hysterical scenes, she finally leaves him, hoping that he will come after her.

Kate's escape from him finally allows her to be alone and there is a glimpse of hope at the end of this novel as she sets out for England. We actually think she has realized that one cannot find love and happiness through someone other than yourself. The novel ends when Caithleen boldly announces: "What Baba doesn't know is that I'm finding my feet, and when I'm able to talk I imagine that I won't be so alone. But maybe that is too improbable a dream" (377).

O'Brien continues Kate's and Baba's search for love in the ironically titled *Girls in Their Married Bliss*. As if she cursed herself, Caithleen returns to Eugene with a dramatic change. Kate is no longer speaking in *Girls in Their Married Bliss* and never will again. Baba narrates chapters 1, 6, 7, and 10 in the first person while Kate, who narrated the first two books, can no longer tell her own story. A third-person omniscient narrator speaks for her; even in the Epilogue she cannot find a voice again. She is not "able to talk." This inability for Kate to speak for herself makes, and has made, her a very good target for others to manipulate. Through this technique, O'Brien indicates that Kate has lost her identity and Baba, Kate's alter-ego, must continue her message.

Although *Girls in Their Married Bliss* focuses on Baba, the story of Kate is still developed in a limited degree. Eugene impregnates Kate and is finally forced to marry her. He acquiesces to being married in a Catholic church; however, he shows his resentment when he leaves a very inappropriate amount of money for the priest. From

the very beginning, the marriage is loveless and doomed. It ends in a failed attempt at an affair on Kate's part and Eugene suing her for divorce. In the end, of course, Kate is alone.

The focus of *Girls In their Married Bliss*, emphasizes Baba's story in the second stage of her development. As O'Brien rewards, to an extent, the bold and punishes the timid, Baba's story becomes much more prevalent than before. She reveals her own love exploits and introduces her own husband, Frank, whom she describes as, "Thick. But nice, too" (383). After an awkward love-making session, it is clear that Frank is impotent. Obviously, she did not marry for love or sex. "I liked his money and his slob ways: I didn't mind holding hands at the pictures, but I had no urge to get into bed with him. Quite the opposite" (385). Not knowing what she wants, Baba continues to search for love by having an affair which ends in a pregnancy. Frank is content to have her stay with him as his wife—"in theory of course" (469). Baba responds sarcastically that there is "nothing new about that" (469). Both Baba and Kate have made a poor choice in a husband. As we saw in the beginning of the chapter, Baba thought she wanted wealth, and Kate thought she wanted a husband. In the end, however, both women are unhappy as they have yet to satisfy the ever growing void in their lives.

The focus of *Girls In Their Married Bliss* continues to be on Baba. She, in her own voice, reveals a more accurate account of her childhood. Most of O'Brien's female characters struggle with the fact that their mother dies when they need her most. Early in the trilogy, Baba appears to be an exception to this, but we learn in this chapter that Baba's mother, Martha, was an alcoholic incapable of mothering. As Baba says, "I hardly ever talked to my mother about anything, because when I was four I had scarlet

fever and she sent me away to Gaeltacht to learn Irish. She really sent me away so that she wouldn't have to mind me—the maid was on two weeks' holiday—but she thought up this Gaeltacht stunt so that it sounded wholesome" (385). Baba, along with the other female characters, has an "absent" mother. The addition of this information, coupled with the fact that Baba's father, Dr. Brennan, is a nurturing parent, creates the reversal of the typical O'Brien family. This being explained, we can see more readily, why Baba needed to leave home to search for love.

Although there is a similarity to Caithleen, in *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, Baba is consistently juxtaposed to Caithleen, who is too timid to speak. Baba also represents a woman whom O'Brien wants represented. By depicting these two intrinsic opposites moving through the same stages of loss, loneliness, and a search for love, O'Brien points out that the fault lies not in the meek personality of Kate but rather in the country in which they were reared. While Caithleen can occasionally be pathetic, Baba can be harsh and brash. In *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, Baba discusses her husband who was a virgin groom and other Irish men:

An Irishman: good at battles, sieges, and massacres. Bad in bed. But I expected that. It made him a hell of a sight nicer than most of the sharks I went out with, who expected you to pay for the pictures, raped you in the back seat, came home, ate your beans, and then wanted some new, experimental sex and no worries from you about might you have a baby, because they liked it natural, without gear. (384)

Such an account from Caithleen is unthinkable.

One critic, Peggy O'Brien, explores the Kate/Baba relationship in "The Silly and the Serious." She states:

The Kate/Baba division is fundamentally one between the sides of the author's character dictated by mother and by father. All the morbid Kates yearn for romantic fulfillment and transcendent, sublime experience; the Babas are hard realists—sensual, opportunistic but decent . . . It is crucial that the personality traits of Baba's fictional parents reverse those of Kate's: Mr. Brennan is the sober, nurturing parent, while Martha is the alcoholic extrovert. (484)

The message is that we need both, just within one body and not two. But, of course, that is not the case here, and the two intrinsic opposites must learn to fend for themselves.

As *Girls in Their Married Bliss* continues to weave the stories of both Kate and Baba, O'Brien, through the use of third-person omniscient, completes the second stage of Kate's journey. Shy and timid Kate continuously attempts to satisfy her basic need for love and acceptance but remains unfulfilled. In a significant scene in *Girls In Their Married Bliss*, Kate returns to Eugene's home, after their separation, to return a glove that her son Cash left while with her. She comes up to the house as the new family is eating dinner. Eugene's new love interest is in her place at the table, and Kate feels she has been replaced. Cash later affirms her feelings when she overhears him discussing his two mothers. This destroys Kate as she feels replaceable and unneeded not only as a lover and wife, but also as a mother. She is left more and more empty.

Feeling totally abandoned, Kate desperately continues her search for love. Tears and heartbreak lead her to a party one evening where, dressed like a nun, she finds a man

who wins her over with the words, “You are rare and beautiful, and I want you” (495). After a frustrating and disillusioning sexual encounter, Kate is disappointed because she sees that sex for sex’s sake is not the answer either. She has not been able to find love through family or her husband and briefly hoped she could find it through sex. “She who had come home with him in heat was dry now and quite systematic! Out of decency she would have to arouse him, and feign delirium when the time came. What a cheat. Especially when one had set out to get something for oneself” (499). This *finally* brings Kate to the realization that she can rely on no one but herself.

It is at this point at the end of the novel *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, that Kate and Baba enter the final stage of their development, a return to the lonely self. It is Kate who first enters this abyss. Not only has Kate been denied the love of a man, but she has also been denied her only son. Eugene has taken him to live in Fiji so that Cash can be his. After an unsuccessful attempt to have her son legally returned to her, she gives up the fight, allowing Cash to remain with Eugene. Feeling totally desolate, and wanting to eliminate the risk of ever making the same mistake twice, she subjects herself to a total hysterectomy. To this Baba responds, “You’ve eliminated something” (508), but she is not referring to what has been surgically removed. Baba, who knows Kate better than anyone, suggests that Kate is now an entirely different person, without “guilt and doubt and sadness” (508). Kate sacrificed too much of herself. She ends the novel voiceless, weak, disillusioned, and numb.

In 1984, Edna O’Brien published all three of the novels as a trilogy which included an epilogue to bring the tale full circle. In the epilogue, Baba continues to narrate the end of Kate’s story. Kate did successfully attempt to get her son back in the

epilogue and it is implied that things went well for a while. Until, of course, she fell in love with another unattainable married man and father. This final unfulfilling relationship breaks her up. In a visit to Baba she “put her hand on her heart and said she’d like to tear it out, stamp on it, squash it to death, her heart being her undoing” (530). For the entire novel she unsuccessfully attempted to find love from another to fill her emptiness. Left with nothing but the lonely self, she commits suicide at Waterloo station, much like Anna Karenina.

Baba, who has grown increasingly sympathetic to Kate, reveals a simplified version of what went wrong: “I don’t blame her, I realize she was out in the fucking wilderness. Born there. Hadn’t the reins to haul herself out. Should have gone to night school, learned a few things, a few mottos such as ‘Put thy trust in no man’” (531).

Unfortunately, Baba’s situation at the end of the novel is not much better. In the darkly humorous epilogue, she describes Frank having had a stroke, his odd sexual needs, her countless sexual exploits as she continues her own search for love, and Frank’s dependency on her which she equates with a dog’s (519). Where Kate was weakened with each failed attempt, Baba has grown much more tough and crass. However, it is also evident that her brash attitude is all a cover for the pain she does not allow herself to voice, much less feel. Baba, like Kate, has been left with the lonely self. Her daughter escaped home years ago and her husband offers no solace. She, like Kate, was never able to escape the loneliness she brought with her from home. She, too, had no night school.

Baba, in *Girls In Their Married Bliss* ends the novel by hoping that Kate’s son will never ask for the truth of what had happened: “I’m praying that her son won’t

interrogate me, because there are some things in this world you cannot ask, and oh, Agnus Dei, there are some things in this world you cannot answer” (532).

Thus ends the story of Kate and Baba, the two women characters that Edna O’Brien created to reveal the true nature of Irish womanhood, a much needed revelation in Irish literature. Their journey can be traced in three developmental stages: isolation and loneliness, a search for love and a return to the lonely self. In her first trilogy, *The Country Girls*, O’Brien has established the prototype for the women we will meet in her later trilogy—a prototype that she knows all too well.

Chapter Three

The Second Trilogy

Edna O'Brien began her second trilogy with *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), continued it with *Down By the River* (1996) and finished it with *Wild Decembers* (1999). The character of Caithleen in *The Country Girls Trilogy* established the prototype of her three heroines seen in these novels: Josie, Mary, and Breege. Like Caithleen, each protagonist moves through the three stages of isolation and loneliness, a search for love, and a return to the lonely self. O'Brien's heroine continues to be unable to escape her Irish condition. However, unlike *The Country Girls Trilogy* in which each book was a continuation of Caithleen's personal development, this trilogy is comprised of the stories of three separate women. All of the elements that were used to isolate Caithleen are still the foundation of this work, but with more development and complexity.

For the first time, O'Brien uses the addition of the political element within each book as yet another lens through which the Irish woman is viewed; with this lens she is again seen as alienated and alone. Originally, this new focus was an attempt by O'Brien to change her subject matter for the first time in over thirty years. However, it has only resulted in incorporating another isolating factor and more situations to which the "Nora Barnacles" must react. Whether O'Brien's subject is a personal narrative or a narrative based on the political and social turmoil within Ireland, she continues to represent the victimized protagonist and her quest for love only to realize she has nothing left but the lonely self.

When O'Brien wrote her first trilogy at the onset of her career in the early 1960's, she was writing from "previously undiscovered territory," writes Martine van Elk in a general review of O'Brien's work. He states that O'Brien conveyed well "what it meant to grow up female Irish and Catholic" (181). From this experience, O'Brien has written many novels and short stories. In the early 90's, with the arrival of *House of Splendid Isolation*, O'Brien introduces herself as a political Irish novelist. Van Elk continues, "With this new subject matter, O'Brien perhaps accedes to those who have accused her of dwelling on love and sexual relationships, though the novel does include some of the typical O'Brien material, such as failed marriage, abusive relationships, and emotional exile" (187). Although she now includes another subject, O'Brien is unable to release her need to represent, "throttled and sacrificial women"; she now effectively manages to intertwine the personal with the political.

As there is approximately a thirty-year difference between her two trilogies, the changes O'Brien has made as a writer become evident. Within the three novels of this last trilogy, O'Brien does not spend time establishing the first stage of isolation and loneliness in the lives of her women; it is unnecessary. For when we begin these three novels it is obviously apparent that we are reading another of Caithleen's stories and, therefore, the first stage of childhood is assumed. At the start of their stories, these women are attempting their search for love and are repeatedly left isolated and lonely.

The first noticeable stylistic change in the second trilogy is O'Brien's lengthy description of the landscape. The land is strongly personified, whereas in her first books it was simply another isolating element. *House of Splendid Isolation*, *Down By the River*, and *Wild Decembers* all open with a beautiful and poetic passage depicting both the

richness and desperateness of the land while also conveying a strong sense of isolation that will be reiterated throughout the narrative. The Ireland O'Brien depicts is a duplicitous one which, while beautiful, is also archaic and dangerous; while rich and deep with history and meaning, which is also shallow and unchanged.

In the first book of the trilogy, *House of Splendid Isolation*, O'Brien opens with a moving passage that depicts the Ireland of her experience:

It's like no place in the world. Wild. Wildness. Things find me. I study them. Chards caked with clay. Dark things. Bright things. Stones. Stones with a density and with a transparency. I hear messages. In the wind and in the passing of the wind. Music, not always rousing, not always sad, sonorous at times. Then it dies down. A silence. [. . .] The earth so old and haunted, so hungry and replete. It talks. Things past and things yet to be. Battles, more battles, bloodshed, soft mornings, the saunter of beasts and their young. What I want is for all the battles to be fought and done with. That's what I pray for when I pray. At times the grass is like a person breathing, a gentle breath, it hushes things. In the evening the light is blue black, a holy light, like a mantle over the fields.

(3)

With this passage, O'Brien establishes the lonely and desperate land as the first isolating factor. This Ireland of O'Brien's speaks, breathes, and lives. It holds memories and truths and life and death. It is where the world begins, both the novels and Irish life. O'Brien conveys that the people are deeply connected with the earth even today; it defines them, whether they mean for it to or not. In *House of Splendid Isolation*, the land

has been fought over for years affecting the entire country. The state of the land, its isolation and its loneliness, is reflected in the character of the heroine.

In *House of Splendid Isolation*, O'Brien deals with the IRA's struggle for independence from Great Britain while also representing the Irish female experience. In this novel, it is through the life of Josie, this novel's Caithleen. The story is set both in the present day when Josie is an older woman, and in Josie's past as she reflects on her life. Using a very sophisticated writing style, O'Brien employs the following techniques: stream of consciousness, third-person limited narration, journal entries, songs, poems, and alteration of point of view and time and place to tell the story. Due to this complicated new style, the three stages Josie goes through are not as delineated as they were in O'Brien's first trilogy where the story moved through the lives of Kate and Baba chronologically. In fact, the first stage is simply assumed. The isolating childhood has taken place and the inherent feeling of loneliness has already been established. At the start of the novel, Josie is already a product of O'Brien's isolated Ireland.

Our first view of Josie does not begin with a painful childhood as it did with Caithleen; she is clearly, however, a product of similar circumstances. Like many O'Brien characters, her parents are nonexistent and their absence acts as another factor working against the heroine. Her father is never mentioned and her own mother has been consistently absent from her life. O'Brien tells us that Josie's mother "had driven her out because of jealousy and [had written to her weekly] reminding her to better herself or else she would be back in a bog cutting turf" (31). Because of the structure of the novel, it is hard to state exactly when Josie began her second stage. Even the youngest Josie that we see in the novel is absorbed in a search for love. Although not completely

explained, Josie spent some time in America working as a servant girl. Here she made her first attempt at love, albeit failed, with a married Jewish man in New York City. In many ways it was quite innocent; a walk, touching, and sexual suggestions, but it aroused her. She, like Kate, chooses men she either cannot or should not have.

Her search for love continues to be evident as she first arrives to the lonely isolated house. When Josie is taken home to live with her new husband, James, and his jealous brother, she sees her husband's house for the first time and states, "Any girl would have given her eyeteeth to marry into it" (30). Unknowingly, her new husband and his house will be two of the greatest isolating factors in her life. Here she is clearly in the second stage of her development, a search for love, and yet is continuously abandoned and isolated. The marriage admits her search for love, yet she is consistently thrown back to her first stage of being alone. Magnifying her isolation, only seventeen pages after Josie comes "home," James proves to be less than Prince Charming:

In the morning he mounts her without a word because she has gotten into the habit of saying no and stop and no. He has taken to holding her lips shut with one hand, clamping the way he might clamp an animal, and he has grown to like it; he likes the power he has over her, making her sing dumb. He calls her muddy, short for mother and mud, and says lewd things while he rises and rears within her, master of her, man-of-war, as he endeavors to prise her apart, go right into her, up through her, and then into her mouth and out as what, a babby maybe. Only in the last slobbery gasps does he release her lips to hear the no and stop and no. (47)

This painful account proves to be a realistic image of what she can expect in her new marriage. Like Kate, Josie, too, has sold herself to the lowest bidder.

Josie married James not because of love, but for the promise of a house and home. The years of being a servant were over. "Those years were a bad dream now [. . .] Yes, mistress of a house and a serving girl whom she could call to wait on her, to iron her clothes, to amuse her if necessary" (34). At this point, she was quite unaware of the problems it held for her. While the house emancipates her from a socially subservient role, she continues to be locked in a demeaning and dangerous situation cut off from the outside world and left to fend for herself. However, she remains in the home. It is unclear whether the house is a place in which she either refuses to escape or is unable to escape. Even though she is with James, he leaves her more and more alone, denies her every bit of love.

From this house/state of splendid isolation Josie too has a visceral need for love. She was not to have these feelings again until she and her husband befriend the local priest. He comes every day and tells her Biblical stories, albeit Samson and Delilah, while she teaches him the names of flowers. One evening she waits for him in a field and, when he does not come, she goes home leaving her corset and a note. Paud, a half-witted hired hand, finds it and gives it to James who beats her for it. She decides that nothing ever goes well in love. The two lovers never speak again. O'Brien comments, "Between lovers there is that something to be said, but what gets said is either too much or too little, never the one living word" (153). With this statement, O'Brien conveys to the reader the hopelessness and lack of promise love holds. O'Brien has also conveyed

this hopelessness simply through the men Josie chooses, a married Jewish man and a priest.

Josie suffers silently for a long time, protesting quietly along the way. Finally, in an act of anger and resentment, she secretly aborts James's child, specifically to spite him; because he has yearned for one so much. In a review of *House of Splendid Isolation*, Hermione Lee states that Josie's "'isolation' in the old house is like the island's, claustrophobic and cut off from the rest of the world in its own bitter commitment to the past. Like those who long to unite the country, she longs to die 'whole.' Like her, Ireland has abused and raped and has killed its own children" (52). Josie has killed her child as a protest; her countrymen have done the same. Josie, like Kate and our other heroines, is symbolic of Ireland. They all feel emptiness because of the death of a mother, betrayal of a father, loss of family, or loss of the self. Josie protests against her situation in any way she knows how. Ever since she arrived at the house she has been imprisoned, isolated, and trapped. She has been without love, family, or even community. In fact, she, at no time, has any friend or companionship. After her husband dies in a freak accident, she has no one left. She eventually leaves for a nursing home only to return to the house years later to die alone.

If *House of Splendid Isolation* had been written in O'Brien's earlier years, the tragic story of Josie's life would have ended here with her return to the desolate house. This is not true of this novel. Throughout the story, O'Brien has cleverly woven the additional political element into the novel. This new political focus increases Josie's detached situation. Essentially waiting to die, Josie unknowingly becomes involved with

a political struggle when an IRA gunman, McGreevy, seeks refuge in what he believes to be an abandoned home.

At this point in the novel, Josie's husband has died and she is within her third stage, a return to the lonely self. However, she is the only protagonist to truly surrender to this state as she returns to the house to die there all alone. Josie has clearly accepted her fate. Here, however, O'Brien has involved her in a further Irish dilemma. Ironically, only through this outer catastrophe is she able to find a friend.

McGreevy's character is a bit of a dichotomy because although he is an IRA gunman and has killed numerous people, he is also one of the most compassionate male characters that O'Brien creates. His character serves many roles in the book. His political involvement and position in the war sets Josie against him, further alienating her, yet at the same time the two become companions, confidants, and close friends.

One critic thinks McGreevy is "a thinly sketched figure, eluding the reader as much as the police, and this leaves Josie's attachment to him unconvincing" (Smyth 141). Although their attachment is neither blatant nor obvious, it is there, but more importantly, O'Brien's point is evident. These are two highly private, lonely, and spiritually bankrupt individuals. Just their sharing of stories and memories and the care they have for one another are attachment enough, and the attachment is certainly mutual because it has become necessary. It is interesting that although O'Brien feels this way, in her novels she works to isolate the women but does not go the extra step to empower them to ever be content with what they have. For that, they are left on their own to figure it out. She is careful not to deny them their, and the reader's, own learning experience.

In a National Public Radio interview, Rebekah Presson points out that in McGreevy we see a different male character from what O'Brien usually represents, "a highly sympathetic male character who has a respectful relationship with a woman." One critic sees McGreevy as "a transmutation of her husband in a purer, better form" (Elkin 26). The former is certainly true and the latter could also be correct. The important part is that within the relationship there is a mutual respect, even though there are disagreements. More importantly, however, there is also a mutual need. Both open up to one another about their past, both argue about the present state of the country's war; McGreevy is set sternly in his ways while Josie sees the violence and pain that the war has caused. In the novel, she becomes torn in her caring for McGreevy and what is ethically right and sound. She says, "If she tells the police it means he will get killed, and if she doesn't it means that something else will. 'Do something . . . Do something.' Everything, even the silenced clock is saying it" (169). As opposed to Kate who at least attempts change, Josie remains in a state of inaction and paralysis throughout the novel. However, her inaction in itself is also a decision to do nothing about this very human murderer in her home.

It is important to note that Josie has several opportunities to tell the outside world about McGreevy. She chooses not to. She does this to protest the war as well as Ireland; she will not take part in the struggle. The only part she does have is in telling McGreevy how insane the war is. At one point she shares her uncle's (also an IRA volunteer) diary he was writing in up until the day he was shot by the Black and Tans. Josie and McGreevy have the following discussion:

"Why did you show me this?" he asks.

“So’s you’d know.”

“Know what?”

“That we are on the same side.”

“ . . . Innocent people.”

“For Christ’s sake, I’m trying to save my fucking country, so stop telling me about innocent people.”

“Then fucking do it . . . Without having to kill and maim innocent people,” she says, shocked at her own directness.

“Look, missus . . . You stick to your gracious living and your folklore.”

“Are you afraid of me?” she asks, and allows a smile.

“Why should I be afraid of you—you?”

“Afraid of what I might say.”

“Talk has got us fucking nowhere in our fight.”

“Maybe you don’t want it to.” (91-92)

Interestingly, Josie finds power and a voice in her old age; she has no one else, no time left, nothing to lose. We are relieved to see some type, any type, of personal empowerment. Perhaps this is possible as Josie is the eldest and strongest heroine in both of the trilogies.

O’Brien allows McGreevy to let Josie get to him; he allows himself to care for her, perhaps because he sees in her his mother or his wife, both of whom he cares deeply for, or perhaps because he only allows women in because they are the only elements in his life that give him feeling, make him feel human. McGreevy leaves one night and Josie follows him out into the cold, wet, and dark countryside. He goes back, finds her,

and brings her to a nearby home where two sympathizers live. While doing this he has risked his life, the operation, and the men he works with know it. When he finally gets to the meeting point, one soldier confronts him:

“Has the woman got to you? How did she do it? Tea and scones or the jukebox?”

“The woman has not got to me.” (175)

But she has and he knows it. It is why he went back to get her, and it is why he sends a message to her, and it is why he goes back to the house when he knows he shouldn't. He allows himself to sleep in a cozy bed, have a drink with her even though it is against policy, and it is why he stays, only because she has asked him to. The relationship the two share is intimate as far as that they share a house, secrets, memories, and pain, but certainly not sexual. They are two lonely souls who find comfort within one another. This factor sets *House of Splendid Isolation* apart from the other novels because in no other book is there a mutually friendly relationship between an adult man and an adult woman. Here, however, the political element is the only element over which the two disagree. Their commonalities lie in their positions of isolation and loneliness.

The novel ends abruptly in a shoot-out in which Josie is accidentally killed and McGreevy is caught. With Josie's death, O'Brien makes clear the social injustice of the war while also commenting on Josie's own inability to free herself. In a review of the book, Margo Jefferson discusses how O'Brien is able to keep her story now in both “deadly camps”: that of the hatred that springs from love as in her first trilogy and political hatred (par. 12). In another review, John L'Heureux applauds O'Brien's “study of the nature of war: the sorry operations of love and hate that unite husband and wife,

the police and the protester, the civilian and the I.R.A. ” (7). Through the novels in the second trilogy, O’Brien continues to reveal something greater than just the disappointment of romantic love. She is revealing the disappointing inability for a man and a woman to come together.

The events that do happen through the novel are typical of O’Brien and her work; they are far from any fairy tale, Cinderella or otherwise. The love that is realized in the novel is a strange type of love between Josie and McGreevy. They are united literally through Paud, who sent McGreevy to Josie’s home. Figuratively they are united through loss and Ireland and loneliness. Hermione Lee points out that the confrontation between Josie and McGreevy “requires him to justify his life to her, and requires her to recall her past” (52). Through his justification, he too relives his own past. There is a final reflection for both as, unknowingly, Josie has reached the end of her life and he has reached the end of his life as a free man.

However, O’Brien also continues to suggest that love is the channel for an escape from the everyday monotony of life in all of the protagonists. It is why they search so diligently. Finding love is an intrinsic need the women, in particular, have in O’Brien’s books, and it often is “the only hope they have” because it is all they dare to hope for. Although Josie no longer searches, one young girl in *House of Splendid Isolation* who dreams of love as an escape is in love with McGreevy. She hopes one day he will get over the death of his wife and come to her:

It was the only hope she had; it kept her warm, it kept her being able to milk and fodder and to go to mass and bingo and think of the Big Dipper,

not the painted one at the carnival, but theirs, his arms hoisting her up, up beyond the grey mountains to the blazing heavens. (158)

This type of love is never achieved in this novel or any of the others in either trilogy. Why? Because it is unrealistic to bring to life a fairytale love and Ireland especially in Ireland where O'Brien will not allow fairy tales to exist. In an interview with Nell Dunn, O'Brien comments on the fairy tale notion that disillusioned many young girls into thinking men will never leave them.

I think far from protecting ourselves we ought to learn to believe and know that this [is] going to happen. I don't mean that one should be bitter and say 'Oh, he's going to leave me in 1966' but this is what blights friendship and marriage and everything—is this little Cinderella Dream that you get one man and one woman and that it lasts, you know, they live happily ever after. I think the marvelous thing would be for a woman, or a man—women fear it more [. . .] who was able to say to herself and I've never met a woman who was (I wish we all were), 'It is beautiful for this moment and I'm with this man and the moon is round and tomorrow—God knows.' I think this would be splendid. (71-72)

Josie, another Caithleen, has journeyed through the three stages of development: isolation and loneliness, a search for love, and was left with the lonely self. O'Brien, using a refreshing and advanced style, has retold her story while adding an inescapable twentieth century Irish dilemma.

In *Down By the River*, O'Brien again negates romantic love and focuses on the need for and the betrayal of a familial love. It is evident from the start of the novel that

the first stage has been achieved within Mary, the twelve-year-old protagonist. If the reader were to question it, after the first chapter it becomes quite obvious. Mary will spend much of the novel searching for love and security from the world. However, although she has achieved the first stage early on, her search for love involves challenges and rejections that will repeatedly leave her isolated and alone. She, like Caitheleen, continues to be isolated by land, men, women, religion, and the community. However, in this novel, O'Brien emphasizes the role of a particular political situation and its effect on the heroine.

In an essay on Edna O'Brien, Rachel Lynch states, "She depicts in shocking detail the routine oppression and brutalization of women in small rural communities, revealing a society sharply divided along gender lines, and one in which even the company of other women offers very little solace" (37). Although Lynch was not directly discussing *Down By the River*, the statement certainly can apply to the novel. Mary's search for love is at the most basic human level. She is the worst sort of victim. Unlike some of our other protagonists who have partially volunteered themselves for victimhood, Mary has volunteered nothing and has received the deepest betrayal.

As the trilogy is politically rooted, O'Brien has based the book on the very public 'X' case in Ireland in 1992 in which a young girl demanded to have an abortion after being raped and impregnated by her friend's father. Due to the fact that abortion is illegal in Ireland but freedom of travel is guaranteed, the girl and her parents became "unhappy pawns in the struggle between Church and State" (Grossman 30). Although the issue of abortion is the political element with which the novel deals, the main concern lies within Mary's personal struggle. While the outside world can only focus on the well-

being of the unborn child, the reader cares only for Mary's well-being. In true O'Brien fashion, Mary's mother dies in her early childhood and she is left with a sexually, physically, and emotionally abusive alcoholic father who rapes and impregnates her. For most of the novel, much of the country does not know the truth and chooses to sympathize with the father and shun the daughter rather than vice-versa. Mary is left very much alone, isolated by her small rural village, her mother's death, her father's betrayal, a tribe of abortion activists, and a critical Irish public. In a review of the book, Zacharek states, "That community's cruelty is the bitter, driving force of the book—but it's Mary's suffering and loneliness that are at the heart of it" (2).

The opening chapter works to underscore the fact that Mary is isolated. As in *House of Splendid Isolation*, *Down By the River* also opens with a descriptive passage of the land in which Mary is surrounded. This is important as it becomes obvious that Mary has no close neighbors to run to for help. It leaves a young girl alone to be raped in the vast and desolate countryside by her own father. The land holds religion, history, a father's secret, a child's terror, and it holds no voice for a woman, much less a young girl:

Ahead of them the road runs in a long entwined undulation of mud, patched tar and fjords of green, the grassy surfaces rutted and trampled, but the young shoots surgent in the sun; flowers and flowering weed in full regalia, a carnival sight, foxglove highest and lordliest of all, the big furry bees noising in the cool speckled recesses of mauve and white bell. O sun. O brazen egg-yolk albatross; elsewhere dappled and filtered through different muslins of leaf, an after-smell where the poor donkey collapsed, died and decayed: the frame of a car, turquoise once; rimed in

rust, dock and nettle draping the torn seats, a shrine where a drunk and driven man put an end to himself, then at intervals rubbish dumps, the bottles, canisters, reading matter and rank gizzards of the town riff-raff stowed in the dead of night. (1)

O'Brien begins this passage in a celebration of the natural countryside and the Irish landscape. The description slowly deteriorates to broken cars and rubbish dumps. O'Brien subtly comments that if it weren't for the people, the land would still be beautiful. This very much reflects her own mixed feelings of Ireland in which she adores the landscape but is repeatedly appalled with different aspects of the society. O'Brien continues to underscore this statement with the opening scene in which she juxtaposes the beauty of nature and the ugliness of man.

In the beginning of *Down By the River*, the father and daughter are out fishing on their land after surveying the bog to sell off part of it to have bottled up and labeled "antiquity." They contemplate the recent fire on the land and blame it on daytrippers. The dad says, "I wonder why they came in here."

She replies, "To see the scenery."

"You can see scenery anywhere but you can't get as lonesome a place as this" (3). And with that, taking full opportunity of the isolation, he proceeds to rape his daughter in the cold and wet field where O'Brien describes Mary's feeling "as of having half-died" (4). O'Brien creates a brilliantly written passage as the earth, the father, and the girl are briefly and chillingly unified:

It does not hurt if you say it does not hurt. It does not hurt if you are not you. Criss-cross waxen sheath, uncrossing, uncrossing. Mush. Wet,

different wets. His essences, hers, their two essences one. O quenched and empty world. An eternity of time, then a shout, a chink of light, the ground easing back up, gorse prickles on her scalp and nothing ever the same again and a feeling as of having half died.

Her pink canvas shoe had fallen into the water and she lifted it funnel-wise to free it of ooze. He looked at her, a probing look, looked through her as if she were parchment and then half-laughed.

“What would your mother say . . . Dirty little thing.” (4 – 5)

The passage is almost too painful to read with the innocence of the pink canvas shoe and the verbal insult as he blames the event on her in the end. Mary washes herself, puts what's left of herself back together, and follows him home never to speak of this.

O'Brien, in her quest for revealing the victimized Irish female, will be her voice.

O'Brien ends this first chapter with a brief passage of total contrast to the scene above. In a very matter of fact way, she describes a typical image of the urban courts manned by an all male society. This is used to foreshadow the court battle that will ensue. O'Brien writes, “men of principle who know nothing of the road or the road's soggy secret will one day be called to adjudicate upon it, for all is known, nothing is secret, all is known and scriven upon the tablet of time” (5-6). Nothing will be kept secret because of fate, and nothing will be kept secret anymore because of Edna O'Brien, because there is a story to ensue. Her point is also that the people who will one day decide her fate for her are men who not only are obviously not women, but have no experience of the implications of being a woman, let alone, raped. These also are men of a totally different caliber; they are refined judges rather than country farmers. They are

worlds apart in this tiny country. Grossman wrote that “by casting Mary’s violator as her father, O’Brien indicts patriarchal tyranny more directly” but I would also add that having her judges be all men magnifies this further (Grossman 30).

O’Brien uses both the land and the father to isolate Mary from the very beginning. While the reader is shocked and horrified, Mary is alone and afraid. After the rape, Mary longs to escape from the danger of her father and yet she remains mute in regards to the rape. Her inability to speak of it is the only element of self-victimization that occurs within the text. Because of guilt and embarrassment, she simply does not admit to anyone what has happened to her.

Similar to Caithleen, Mary is sent to a convent school finding a source of security within the strict rules and ordered activity, “everything about the convent reassured her” (32). Mary is further isolated her in the novel when her mother soon dies from cancer, and she finds herself back home at her father’s beggings. Mary’s comfort that she received from the convent is gone and now she not only must be subjected to her father’s sexual perversions, but she has no one to talk to.

O’Brien furthers this idea of patriarchal isolation several times in the novel by having the brutish and ignorant male judging the mute female. Mary’s father, James, and his friend Jacko are discussing the state of the country’s problems. Jacko states, “I’ll tell you where the money is now . . . Being a woman, lying on your back and having kids galore . . . Unmarried mothers fleecing the country . . . The more they have the more dole they’re given” (71). Jack later tells James that, “None of them need to get pregnant now . . . They’re on the pill . . . They’re on the patch . . . All they’re after is your lucre” (77-78). A more narrow-minded perspective on the state of pregnant mothers cannot be made.

Unknowingly, Jacko is discussing this with a man who has raped and impregnated his own thirteen-year-old daughter.

O'Brien creates many women in *Down By the River*, who not only abandon her emotionally, but also betray Mary for the sake of their own reputation and/or religious and moral beliefs. The greatest alienation for Mary is the death of her mother. Secondly, there is only one girl in the beginning who knows what is going on because she "had done washing, Lizzie had seen things" (54). Lizzie does not tell anyone what she thinks, even after Mary's mother dies and Mary is asked to stay home for a few months and "mind her father" (54). Lizzie's paralysis speaks not only for her own weakness, but for her knowledge of the country and the crime she is dealing with. Just as it is not easy for Mary, it also remains formidable for a young country girl who does the washing to announce an unimaginable crime.

Very early on in the novel, O'Brien introduces Roisin, a powerful pro-life activist who uses religion to back up her cause and, in fact, the first chapter we see her in is the aptly titled chapter, "Thou Shalt Not Kill." Roisin states quite clearly at this gathering of women that even if a girl is raped, "all an abortion will do is compound the crime . . . there can be no exceptions . . . never" (23). This is a sentiment that is shared by much of the country and soon becomes the main hurdle in Mary's young life as, with the help of a neighbor, she attempts to leave the country and have an abortion. Right before it is scheduled to happen she is sent back home because the local community has discovered what is going on and demands that she return immediately. Upon her return to Ireland, she is met by a tribe of pro-life women led by Roisin whose main goal is to frighten Mary into not having the abortion by claiming such things as, "it's not your child" (154).

O'Brien describes them: "They were seeing to everything. Her new family of bossy women" (180).

Mary finds herself being lectured to about religion and God's will. Even while in hospital for shock, a nurse gives her a frightening argument about the wrath of God (170-71). It only gets worse as she then finds herself in the custody of a cousin who also continues to preach to Mary, who is now almost completely mute. The Bible and the Catholic precepts are the argument that many of the characters use to try to control Mary's fate.

Not only are these women ignorant to who the father of Mary's baby is, they have absolutely no interest in becoming a nurturing form of support for Mary. They care for only one thing, the unborn child. They resort to idiotic analogies, giving Mary a fish and dropping it out of the bowl so Mary will save its life, as if saving a goldfish would make her want to have her father's child she conceived while being raped. They leave Mary little notes around the house, almost haunting her. Meanwhile, "despite everything she did not believe she was having it: it was a globule and she would believe it only when the feet pressed on the wall of her stomach and kicked and she would lick back, they would have a kicking match" (184-85). Everyone is oblivious to her emotional condition. Seeing only the physical, they are uninterested in Mary's personal plight. O'Brien clearly illustrates the hypocritical state of these Irish characters. They pretend to be concerned with such admirable things as life and God and heaven and earth yet they ignore the needs of the young girl. They also ignore the possibility of an array of evils that could do this to a thirteen-year-old girl.

Interestingly, but not mistakenly on O'Brien's part, the only characters who are willing to help Mary are the ones without religious and political and, therefore, ulterior motives. A teacher at school, her lawyer, a young boy, a woman she stays with are all interested in finding out what really happened. Finally, her lawyer reads her diary and finds what he had come to suspect.

In the novel, O'Brien includes a brief but powerful interaction between Mary and a boy, Luke, which allows her to have the only honest relationship in the novel. Mary's encounter with him marks a step into her second stage for love and acceptance. She is able to open up a bit to him, for it is he whom she comes closest to telling what happened. She reveals in a letter:

I have something huge to ask you. I know it's awful but I think I am going to be a mother and I am afraid. Could I stay here for a little while [. . .] Every person has to have one best friend and once they have that they are flying it [. . .] There are two kinds of alone, there's the kind which you are and the kind which I am. Your alone is beautiful, it's rich. I will go to a doctor soon. The person whose it is is the last person's it should be. I would rather not say, ever. Out in the country things get very murky. I would like to live in a city because if you scream someone can hear you.

(98)

Here it is clear that Mary is within her search for love as she longs for a friend, anyone who will be kind to her.

It is essential that the friend that Mary finds is a boy. It proves to the reader that a mutual, honest, nonsexual and non-violent relationship with a male is possible. Also,

when the boy is brought in for questioning, when he is forced to show the letter Mary wrote to him, we see that the general Irish public sees that a boy and a girl being just friends, especially when she stayed with him, is not normal. Lastly, this relationship benefits both the reader and Edna O'Brien. Miss O'Brien not only demonstrates that she is capable of having a decent male figure in the novel, but she is able to suggest that the alliance with a male may actually be possible. The novel ends on a similarly hopeful note, which acts as a refreshing change to O'Brien's fiction, especially within such a dark and tragic novel.

Another point that O'Brien is able to articulate through the character of Luke is that, even though Mary has been violated sexually, she still has the hope of romantic love. O'Brien writes, "She thought that if he were to kiss her it would be like an enchantment or that even if he were to bend down and she were to feel the condensation from his lips falling onto hers that it would be a transport from the old and awful life, like in a fairy tale when a person is released from damnation" (94-95). The image of Mary being woken up by the prince's kiss or being quenched by him and given life is a telling image of where she is and where she, like many girls and even women, want to be. She wants desperately to be saved from her hell. She too wants the fairy tale love story, or at least a happy ending.

Although within the text Mary has moved to her second stage of searching for love, she continues to be repeatedly isolated throughout the discourse of the story. Religion and politics are two of the elements that help to achieve this alienation. By going to England to have an abortion, Mary has broken the law. Ever since she came back, she has been under strict watch with a varied number of guardians, has been

assigned a lawyer, and is forced to go to court to defend herself. In Ireland, there is no separation between Church and State. This problem leads to the courtroom where it weighs on the minds of the lawyers unlucky enough to have to either represent or prosecute the case. Two lawyers discuss the problems of the case in front of the courthouse:

“We’re a Christian country . . . We’re a model for the whole world.”

“We’re pagans, Ambrose . . . Pagan urges run in our blood . . . Pagan love . . . Pagan lust . . . Pagan hate . . . It’s why we need God so badly.”

“The unborn shall not be moved from jurisdiction of the court . . . It’s written . . . Sacrosanct.” (253)

They are quite aware, not only of the importance of the case, but of the implications it will have on the thirteen-year-old Mary, not to mention what their decision means for the entire Catholic country. In fact, at times they seem to be more concerned about the country, as if it is on trial rather than a girl and her father and luckily they are absolutely correct. I say luckily because just as the abortion issue will affect the entire country, there remains a part of an Irish Catholic family on trial as their secrets are revealed to the entire world. While the situation is made more problematic because it becomes so public, the situation is still, none-the-less, revealed. Even though O’Brien uses the fictional world to expose these truths, through it, as Mary Flannery points out, “O’Brien shows us, nowhere are the forces of patriarchy, religion, and the law as tightly bound as in Ireland” (2).

Lost within the political and religious argument is Mary and her own wishes. Toward the end of the novel, Mary listens to a woman, Mrs. Fitz, as she discusses the five judges who will try her case. She is very quiet as she writes down the names of the men who will decide her fate. When Mrs. Fitz asks her what she is saying to herself Mary finally says something, “I’m saying that if I could be the judges and they could be me, that if we could swap and they’d know every bit of my life,” and she stops then and puts her hand to her mouth, ashamed of the habit of hoping” (239). We know what she has hoped for. If that were to happen, then she would be free to do as she pleases with her body. She is correct. So, while Mary cries that no one knows her plight, O’Brien is simultaneously doing that which Mary cannot—telling her story.

O’Brien’s final message of the dangerous implications that come with regarding religion so highly and a child’s personal and emotion struggle as a mere afterthought is conveyed right after Mary miscarries. Roisin screams at her that God will curse her (259). Roisin then demands that Mary get down on her knees and “confess before God that [she] did this” (260). Mary pleads that due to the pain she is in, she can’t. Finally a woman grabs her, holds her, and as the other women start to pray, she whispers in Mary’s ear, “You’re not going to die . . . You’re not . . . Going . . . To die” (260). And we remember that she is scared and frightened and alone and terrified. Shocked and bleeding, she is alone without any living parent. We see that God must only represent fear and hell and invasiveness and pain to Mary. We see that, thus far, this is what life must mean to her as well; while these other women are so preoccupied with their pro-life cause, they have forsaken the life of a terrified thirteen-year-old girl. O’Brien certainly comments on the hypocrisy of religion and its ideological beliefs. She has succeeded in

alienating Mary through Mary's father and his actions, her mother's death, the rural land, her denial of friends, but also through the religious and political state of the country and its inability to be progressive and modern.

Mary is perhaps the most isolated of the four protagonists of O'Brien's two trilogies. The very subject of incest is a terribly problematic one. The act of making love is mocked as it becomes a violent and egregious act against a supposed loved one. Mary is left raped, alone, with no parent, no voice, no love, and little hope at any kind of life. Mary is left to face these truths and her world on her own.

For much of the book, Mary is in shock and in a mode of survival. Even survival seems too much, and twice she attempts suicide. That which makes her want to cease existing defines her existence. It is no wonder she wants to die. O'Brien gives Mary only a couple sources of relief in the novel. She gives her an escape at a convent school in which she feels safe, a friend in Dublin, and a scant number of adults who never quit in their attempt to help Mary and discover the truth.

Mary is continuously surrounded by a society that "wants to control her and own her, rather than people who want to help her. In her own district, she attracts odium merely for existing [. . .] O'Brien captures all the scorn and rage of people who believe they have never put a foot wrong" (Mantel 11). "The implication clearly is of a deep rot at the very core of the society which spawned it" (Birch 2). And this is what O'Brien intended. It is not just the betrayal of a father and of a mother and of a friend and neighbor. It is the betrayal of a judicial system, strangers, fellow women, and an entire country. O'Brien alienates Mary from everyone to magnify her loss.

It is hard to ignore that another rejection that Mary feels is the lack of sympathy of the entire nation. As they slowly discover the story and the truth of what can happen to a young thirteen year old in their country, there remains an incredible lack of sympathy. One critic stated, “Mary’s tragedy, her lost youth, her soiled virginity, her violated psychè are not the central issues of this novel. Rather her tale serves as a backdrop for O’Brien to address a larger issue, a seemingly more important issue—the failure of a society to protect one of its most vulnerable” (Clarke par. 12). While the particular issue that is either in the backdrop or in the forefront may be debatable, this is an important point to address. As Mary travels from home to home towards the end of the novel with little acceptance, love and hope, her need is magnified and her search quite desperate. Her deepest need for love is only from herself and her desire to even live.

Unlike any other ending in the trilogy, the ending of *Down By the River* offers a glimmer of hope and positive expectation to both Mary and the reader. Due to the fact that Mary is so young, although she was very much alone throughout the novel, she never truly enters the third stage. In fact, at the end of the novel, Mary is a bit older and is out with her friends and it is still evident that she is still searching. “Mary sits at a center table, people milling and moiling, men stooping to get the wink. Nowhere the face that she is searching for. The face she does not yet know” (261). She continues to imagine what it would be like to have someone who she could “tell it all, all of it, down to the last shred.” She feels that only in love could she be able to finally speak of what happened. Mary believes that it is love that will set her free, but O’Brien has something different in mind.

O'Brien makes her point in the very last paragraph of the novel. Mary has been lured up on stage to sing. O'Brien writes: "Her voice was low and tremulous at first, then it rose and caught, it soared and dipped and soared, a great crimson quiver of sound going up, up to the skies and they were silent then, plunged into a sudden melting silence because what they were hearing was in answer to their souls' innermost cries" (265). Mary is able to set herself free by finally emitting her own pain.

Down By the River is a triumph for O'Brien as well as her subjects. In a review of the book, Judith Grossman comments, "Mary is an isolated child of that village which O'Brien knows intimately; her vision is powered by anger on behalf of such girls, utterly abject persons at the mercy of family tyranny and conspiracies of silence" (30). Mary has been put through an unbelievable political and emotional ordeal. She has been isolated by her parents as well as her surroundings, has searched for love, help, and caring from others, and, luckily, has refused to be left with the lonely self; she is too young. O'Brien uncharacteristically offers a more positive ending. Perhaps in hope of the future of a country or even a young girl of whom this story was based on. Through Mary's experience, O'Brien has voiced the experience of others who are unable to tell their story.

Wild Decembers is O'Brien's last installment of her second trilogy. In it she not only creates a similar female character involved in an intricate political and romantic love story, but she also displays a mastery of her new style. The novel's heroine is Breege. Breege is another Caithleen character who, through similar circumstances, is in the midst of her developmental stages. In *Wild Decembers* O'Brien tells an intricate tale involving a land dispute woven with Breege's own personal struggle for love. Uncharacteristically, Breege is not the center of attention in this novel as our other heroines have been. She,

nevertheless, is a clear representation of O'Brien's typical Irish woman. *Wild Decembers* tells the story of a complex relationship of three quintessentially Irish characters—Joseph Brennan, Breege Brennan, and Mick Bugler.

Like *House of Splendid Isolation*, *Wild Decembers* deals with men fighting over land, except now the issue is land rights. Where Josie was confined to her house, Breege is isolated on a mountain near a small village where she lives with her brother, Joseph Brennan. The premise of the story is that the Brennans own ancestral land which has been disputed over for years by their adjacent neighbors, the Buglers. Mick Bugler, after living in Australia for years, returns to reclaim his family's land.

In *Wild Decembers*, O'Brien tackles the age-old problem of land rights. In this ancient land, the exact lines of demarcation of farmland are blurry and vague, spanning generations of scribbled notes and penciled in agreements. Even today this is still an issue in Ireland. In an interview after the release of the book, O'Brien states, "When I was researching *Wild Decembers* I went to a lot of courts in County Clare where I come from. These courts are crammed with unfortunate people who are spending their money and their hope and their energy on a piece of land—not all of it is very large—on right of way, on ownership and on feud. Now that is true of Ireland" (1).

As the land is so important in the novel, O'Brien depicts it as a character in itself. She is able to achieve this with a polished writing style she has adapted in this last collection. O'Brien's techniques continue to be far more varied compared to her first trilogy. Paul Perry of *The Houston Chronicle* states, "The tenses change with heady abandon, and the point of view shifts in a dizzying, disorienting reclamation of the senses through language" (2-3). In this novel most of all, there is a distinct feeling at times you

are reading a poem and yet at other times it is an intense and dramatic love story. As with the other two stories in the trilogy, she emphasizes not only the importance of land but its meaning to the people by opening with a lengthy and poetic description.

Fields that mean more than fields, more than life and death too. In the summer months calves going suck suck suck, blue dribble threading their black lips, their white faces stark as clowns. Hawthorn and whitethorn, boundaries of dreaming pink. Byroad and bog road. The bronze gold grasses in a tacit but unremitting sway. Listen. Shiver of wild grass and cluck of wild fowl. Quickening.

Fathoms deep the frail and rusted shards, the relics of long ago, and in the basins of limestone, quiet in death, the bone babes and the bone mothers, the fathers too. The sires. The buttee men and the long-legged men who hacked and hacked and into the torn and breathing soil planted a first potato crop, the diced tubers that would be the bread of life until the fungus came. (1)

O'Brien conveys the value the Irish people place on the land. She shows their work, their troubles, and their mind-set.

O'Brien's characters have always been linked closely to the land as it often reflects their own emotional persona. This is quite true of Breege. Like the other protagonists in the second trilogy, Breege is full of emptiness and loneliness when we meet her. The first stage has been achieved as she is a young girl in her late teens or early twenties. Breege's mother died when she was young leaving her to her brother who has gone as far as to blame the death on Breege's late arrival into the world (24). The

father's passing is not mentioned; clearly O'Brien puts more emphasis on the relationship between mother and child than father and child. The motherless child continues to be left alone with no role model, no source of comfort, not even a reliable parent to fall back on. Breege, alone on the mountain, remains to herself. She is quiet, demure, and naïve to the outside world. Brooke Allen, of *The New York Times Book Review*, describes Breege as "Excruciatingly old-fashioned, she does not aspire to anything beyond the mountain; her sole mission is the care and emotional support of her brother, her life entirely untouched by modern notions about what women might achieve on their own" (7).

The patriarchal isolation almost always stems from Breege's brother, Joseph. In a review of *Wild Decembers*, Molly Winans wrote, "Joseph is a man utterly possessed by history and its grievances, trapped, ready to mistrust at every turn" (2). Although Joseph is Breege's brother, he is more like a father to her. Being without parents and living in a male-dominated society, Joseph reserves the right to tell her when and if she can go to a dance and takes the right to discipline her when he deems it necessary. Like Kate, Josie, and Mary, Breege is parentless. The motherless daughters in both of the trilogies are full of a loss and a longing for love. O'Brien fills them with loneliness (or empties them of love) at a young age so from the beginning they are forced to discover on their own. Not only are these girls given no role models or images of strong women to look up to, they are given nothing remotely similar. It further magnifies the Irish female situation that so many came from an isolated, lonely, and unnurtured beginnings.

Like Mary and Josie's search, Breege's search for love is different from Kate and Baba's search. Where Kate and Baba left home on their quest, Breege is at home when the hope and promise of love is met on her doorstep in the form of Mick Bugler. To the

quiet, unassuming Breege, Mick in many ways is like a knight in shining armor. Their meeting is delightfully romantic, a situation that is uncharacteristic of O'Brien. Mick enters her world on a tractor, "ensconced inside his glass booth" (3), waving to Breege, a young woman totally surprised by this handsome stranger. He was "a tall fleeting figure, apparition like, so eager to master his surroundings that he rarely used a gate or a stile, simply leapt over them" (4). Breege is immediately taken with him. Mick was not only new and different, but he was foreign, enchanting and handsome. Mick excites a sexuality in Breege unseen until this point. From then on, she longed for him.

We first see that Breege believes that a man can make her feel quite empty when she discovers that the object of her affections, Mick, has a fiancé, Rosemary, back in Australia. "She went quite peculiar. She felt empty. What is empty. What is full" (64). Later, "the day would have to be got through. Then the night. Emptying. Emptiness" (65). Breege is the first of our protagonists to articulate her empty feeling so early in her story. However, O'Brien does not allow her to realize this fully and act on it in a self-empowering way. Breege has felt her isolation for years; she now needs to remedy her loneliness and her emptiness.

As quickly as Breege was made to feel empty and alone, she can also be fulfilled. One evening, Mick and Breege consummate their relationship in a graveyard. She thinks of this night as "her reward for months and months of looking out at wet grass, or a bit of wet path drying in the sun, and sometimes even thinking that a garment blowing on the line prefigured the arrival of a visitor that just might be him" (171-72). There seems to be nothing more for Breege in life. O'Brien stated in an interview with Nell Dunn that this is one of the reasons why she thinks women should have careers, so that there is

more to life than the love of a man, even a good man (72). O'Brien conveys this in the novel clearly as she does not allow Breege's relationship to be rewarded. This relationship will not be successful. Breege has chosen a man she cannot have. Not only is he engaged to another woman, but he is a family enemy.

Breege shares the story with her brother and her lover, all three of them suffering. Mary Winnans writes, "Each character is torn so many ways" (20). Breege is not only an isolated and lonely woman with apparently little opportunity in life that she is aware of, but she becomes further isolated and victimized in her brother's battle for the family land. Through every situation she is unable to speak, unable to attempt reconciliation, unable to leave. At one point in the novel, she becomes so overwhelmed in her position between Joseph and Mick that it affects her mental state and she has a brief stay at an asylum. Breege becomes weaker and weaker throughout the novel until she is finally left alone in the third stage of her development.

For Joseph, the son of a past enemy is a present enemy. He has been brought up to worship the ancestral land above all else, admitting, "It is God to me" (21). When Bugler first appeared on his tractor, Joseph admires the machine as well as the man. When it was stuck on his property, Breege states, "My brother stayed out there with it long after it got dark. He was talking to it, touching it, and maybe wishing, wishing" (7). Joseph attempts a relationship with Bugler as he shows him the land, tells him stories of their ancestors, and teaches him the traditions of their county Cloontha. However, when Bugler starts to inquire as to the rightful ownership of certain land, the feud is resurrected. He starts to hate Bugler because of the threat of losing his land. Letters between solicitors are exchanged, and a court battle ensues. Joseph's hate is fed by the

ongoing battle throughout the novel. During this time, Breege watches the two people she cares and loves most in the world tear each other apart. Joseph becomes utterly obsessed with the case. Even after Mick drops it for the sake of Breege, Joseph cannot.

Through Breege's relationship with her brother as well as his obsession with the land, O'Brien brings to light another Irish characteristic—the importance of family. When he was younger, Joseph was forbidden by his mother to leave home. He obeyed her, forsaking the love of a woman for the loyalty to his family. Breege almost masochistically obeys her brother, never stating her own needs or wishes. In a review of the book, Brook Allen states, “It is with Breege and Joseph, loving, resentful and umbilically connected to the point of tragedy, that O'Brien has achieved the novel's real triumph” (7).

In *Wild Decembers*, the small insular town as well as its inhabitants work to isolate Breege. In particular, Breege struggles with difficult women who further her pain in the novel. One of the worst violators is a hairdresser named Josephine who learns Breege has feelings for Mick Bugler. She conspires with the town freak, The Crock, to play a cruel practical joke on her. They send her poems anonymously as they know she will think they are from Bugler. Following an “anonymous” note, Joseph finds her cache of letters and beats her to the amusement of the townspeople. The Crock was involved because of his hatred towards lovers (17); Josephine's reasons are no better. Breege realizes what has happened, for although naïve, O'Brien doesn't allow her to be mindless:

She now saw through it completely. There was the Crock who would have conspired with Josephine and others waiting to catch her out so they

could nudge one another at Mass, then rush up to her afterwards and invite her for a coffee to the hotel. Bugler would soon be told of it and they would all have a good laugh. (87)

In one of the most horrible scenes in the book, Joseph does find Breege's love letters which they both think are from Mick Bugler. He proceeds to humiliate her, calling her a streetwalker and beating her.

He struck her with his hands, struck wildly and sometimes in his fury missed altogether. He laughed, bitter mirthless laughter, and challenged her to admit it, that yes, yes, she would have thrown herself at Mick Bugler, craven. His temper grew all the greater because she refused to answer. He struck her now viciously. Her confession was essential to him. (86)

Joseph continues to hit her until she finally bleeds. Throughout the entire beating she is mute. She admits to nothing but also denies nothing; she cannot deny what is true. We see that she, like Joseph, knows that loving Bugler is unthinkable. We can't help but assume that what makes this particularly painful for both is that the source of Breege's adoration is a member of a family the Brennans have been feuding with for years.

The novel has no kind women. This is especially true of two sisters, Rita and Reena. In this patriarchal society women have discovered their own power: sex, gossip, and blackmail, and they use it to gain money, land, and other provisions: They arrive early in the book the morning after the tractor is stuck on the hill.

She [Rita] was the brains and Reena the nymphet. She made the deals, bought and sold the cattle, and harangued her friendly solicitor to write

letters, to make hell for this person or that who got in her way. People feared her. Even those who did not know her feared her. At discos the men shied away from her, but that did not matter. Reena could coax them out, and soon after, Rita followed to ask if they would like to come for coffee later. The bachelors, especially the visiting ones, were the easiest prey. (12)

The two women are referred to as both witches and demons. Bugler is warned of their manipulation but does not pay heed. Later in the book, he is seduced by both.

The last woman used to alienate Breege is Rosemary, Mick's fiancée, whose mere existence is a problem for our heroine. Later, Rosemary is also a problem for Mick who eventually chooses Breege over Rosemary. O'Brien has deemed it necessary to include not only a family feud and Joseph's disapproval to keep them apart, but also a third woman to complicate things further while also emphasizing the message that love will not be possible, for anyone.

Uncharacteristically, Edna O'Brien does not include overt religious references in *Wild Decembers*. The religious undertones are in the sexually inhibited beliefs of the townspeople. Essentially, that is why her brother beats Breege. She has committed no sin. She has merely received "love" letters, kept them, and has been seen out walking with Bugler which has been the source of gossip. Aside from Breege being referred to with Biblical references, depending on if she is being "good" or "bad" in the eyes of others, there is not much mention of the importance of the Church. When Josephine planned to lay her trap to humiliate innocent Breege she states, "Ivory Mary no more. Mary Magdalene now" (79). The reference here shows what little latitude a young, shy

and naïve girl like Breege is given. Perhaps because Breege had essentially been “Ivory Mary” up until Bugler comes to the village, the villagers enjoy her supposed “fall from grace” so much.

At the end of the novel, Breege is pregnant, Joseph in jail, Mick dead, and Rosemary living miles away from her native Australia, family, and friends. Rosemary and Breege are left on the hill, living alone, in their two separate houses. Even in their desperateness and emptiness, they cannot reconcile themselves nor be comforted by one another.

Breege, like Kate, Baba, and Josie, is left in the third stage of her development. As she has taken no action to remedy her situation, O’Brien will not reward her. There is no handsome prince to save her or even a strong brother to protect her. She will need to find her own inner strength to survive as a young woman and as a single mother. Her survival is not guaranteed and neither is the progress of rural Irish women, but at least they have been heard.

Conclusion

Edna O'Brien has spent the last forty years giving voice to the unheard rural women of Ireland. When she left Ireland in 1959, she rejected much of what Ireland had taught her while also feeling the need to voice that which she was rejecting. Through her fiction, O'Brien has represented the victimized and sacrificial women of the Irish countryside. She began this tradition in the 1960's with *The Country Girls Trilogy* and has continued it up through her second trilogy written within the last decade.

In *The Country Girls Trilogy*, O'Brien created Caithleen from her own childhood experience. Caithleen soon became a prototype for many of O'Brien's characters. This character showed the world what it was like to be a Catholic female growing up in a small village in Ireland. In every book, this protagonist was isolated and lonely, searched for love and, in the end, was left with the lonely self. In O'Brien's second and last trilogy, she not only based her characters on the character of Caithleen, but with the exception of Mary who only goes through the first two stages, they too experience these three developmental stages.

Within this second trilogy, O'Brien added a political element in an attempt to change her theme from love, loss, and loneliness. However, her new political focus has only worked to add to her theme rather than create a new one. She has proved that through the political issues O'Brien raises, the rural Irish woman is further victimized.

In the 1984 interview with Philip Roth, O'Brien discussed her theme of loss which is so prevalent within her female characters. She connects the innate emptiness women have with the act of making love to a man. She explains:

The woman's fate is to receive sperm and to retain it, but the man's is to give it and in the giving he spends himself and then subsequently withdraws. While she is in a sense being fed, he is in the opposite sense being drained, and to resuscitate himself he takes temporary flight. As a result, you get the woman's resentment at being abandoned, however briefly, his guilt at going and, above all, his innate sense of self-protection in order to re-find himself so as to reaffirm himself. Closeness is therefore always relative.

O'Brien's notion that the female is waiting to be abandoned can be seen in both of the trilogies and, indeed, in much more of her work as well. So we are not surprised by the fact that our protagonists are consistently left empty and needy.

Even through their attempts at love, the characters are unsuccessful. Eugene, Frank, and Bugler, (there is no "Prince" in *Down By the River*) all are tall dark and handsome men unknown to the protagonist when they fall in love. All are swept off of their feet and consequently dropped in one fashion or another. Our heroine's sense of loss and loneliness is only made greater through the relationships they choose; none of the women end up happily joined at the end of their novels. O'Brien continuously feels the need to demystify the fact that having a man equals eternal happiness. Caitheen never finds happiness or love and commits suicide, Josie died in her house of splendid isolation unable to escape, Mary is alone but still young and there is hope that she is finding her voice, and Breege is left alone, pregnant, and completely by herself. Through their own disillusionment, women are consistently left and betrayed by men. The men need not change however; it is the woman's position to empower herself.

O'Brien has succeeded in voicing the unheard women of Ireland while also growing as an artist. Throughout her career, she has succeeded despite the fact that her books have been both banned and burned. She has survived awful reviews, the rejection of a country's approval, and the disapproval of her own mother. Through it she has continued to be true to her subject and her calling. Recently, she has pushed herself further and has bravely changed her style. Her stylistic changes became quite evident, particularly when comparing the two trilogies. In the last trilogy she has withstood both pans and praises and with each book, her writing has become more sophisticated and rich. Her most notable change has been her poetic use of language. Some critics have been quite critical of her new style as Drinn Malloy was when he referred to her praise as "over-indulgent rhapsodizing" (par. 15). Others have been less negative. Ron Hansen in a review of *House of Splendid Isolation*, which was extremely experimental and often confusing, stated, "*House of Splendid Isolation* is a worthy experiment in political fiction" (35). John L'Heureux comments on the same novel, "This is a brave book, and if it does not altogether succeed, the attempt nonetheless merits praise" (7). In a review of *Down By the River*, Dan Cryer offers praise when he states, "*Down By the River* displays a veteran writer still taking risks and still succeeding" (2). With *Wild Decembers* she reached a delicate balance in her language and her storyline and the two sustained each other beautifully. Brook Allen writes on the novel, "O'Brien's prose is her own and firmly under control, an apt instrument for the precise, poetic recollection of a distant world" (7).

O'Brien, like Ireland, constantly battles with the beauties of yesterday and the realities of today. Perhaps Yeats said it best when he wrote, "Romantic Ireland is dead

and gone” (55). Writers like O’Brien help to change this romantic Ireland to an Ireland that is real and true. O’Brien’s Ireland reflects well the people who, with much history behind them, are stuck in their loss and isolation, unable to move forward. O’Brien’s Ireland is a character unto itself in every novel she has written and its effects on the women within it are much stronger than was previously thought. Through both trilogies, O’Brien’s message to the women of Ireland has remained constant: they are left alone because they are the only ones who can make themselves feel whole.

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