Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien: Catholicism, Sexuality and the Female Bildungsroman

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Abstract

This thesis will explore the themes of Catholicism and sexuality in Kate O'Brien's novels *Mary Lavelle* and *The Land of Spices* and Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* trilogy. Moreover, it will explore the basic characteristics of the *Bildungsroman* genre through James Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and will illustrate how the main issues in Joyce's colonial Ireland and its relationship to youth at the end of the 19th century continued to burden the female protagonists of the 20th century post-colonial *Bildungsroman* novels. Additionally, the thesis will provide accounts of the contrast challenges faced by the male and female characters in their journeys to self-development.

The thesis in particular examines Kate O'Brien's and Edna O'Brien's portrayals of heroines navigating the strict social and religious frameworks of mid-twentieth century Ireland. The themes of sexuality and Catholicism, family and gender, and leaving and returning to Ireland will be explored to illustrate the characters' understanding of the world and its gender-prescribed norms imposed by the Church and the State.

Keywords: Kate O'Brien, Edna O'Brien, *Bildungsroman*, *Mary Lavelle*, *The Land of Spices*, *Country Girls*, sexuality, Catholicism, gender roles, James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Contents

1) Introduction

Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien are renowned for their portrayal of female experiences in Ireland, utilising modernist narrative styles to explore themes that challenge societal norms. Their works often delve into the consequences of being situated in Ireland, spanning from the end of the 19th century to the mid-20th century, capturing the complexities of Irish identity through the lenses of religion, sexuality, and societal expectations. These narratives reflect the tensions between personal desires and the restrictive frameworks of a predominantly Catholic society, offering a rich field for literary analysis.

Firstly, this thesis will define the *Bildungsroman* genre through literary theory, exploring the foundational characteristics of the genre through an analysis of James Joyce's seminal work, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This analysis will highlight how the socio-political landscape of colonial Ireland, as depicted by Joyce, continued to resonate in the post-colonial context of the 20th century. Furthermore, the thesis will illustrate how the themes of youth, identity, and rebellion in Joyce's work echo in the struggles faced by the female protagonists in the *Bildungsroman* novels of Kate and Edna O'Brien.

In the second chapter, the thesis will explore post-colonial Ireland's political and societal conditions and how the country's independence influenced the lives of its youth and women. It will examine the arrival of modernity in Ireland and its implications for the nation. The chapter will also highlight the unique aspects of the female rendering of the *Bildungsroman* in contrast to its male counterpart.

Additionally, the thesis will contextualise the lives and works of Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien, noting how their novels reflect autobiographical elements and the zeitgeist of their own development from youth to maturity.

Furthermore, the thesis will delve into the intricate themes of Catholicism and sexuality as portrayed in Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* and *The Land of Spices*, alongside Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* trilogy. By juxtaposing these narratives, the thesis aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which Catholicism influences the characters' sexual identities and personal freedoms.

The thesis will provide a comparative account of the gender-specific challenges encountered on the journey to self-development through the portrayals of the heroines in Kate O'Brien's and Edna O'Brien's novels as they navigate the rigid social and religious frameworks of their time. Through a detailed examination of themes such as sexuality, Catholicism, family dynamics, and the motif of leaving and returning to Ireland, the ways these elements influence the protagonists' understanding of the world and their place within it will be explored. The analysis will consider how the Church and the State imposed gender-prescribed norms, and how these norms are both challenged and reinforced in the narratives.

By situating these novels within the broader context of Irish literature and the *Bildungsroman* genre, the thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of how historical and cultural forces shape individual identity and gender roles. It will also shed light on the enduring legacy of colonialism and its impact on personal and collective consciousness in post-colonial Ireland.

1) The *Bildungsroman* genre

2.1) Introduction to the chapter

The *Bildungsroman* genre has long been an important part of the literary tradition, offering narratives that explore the development and maturation of protagonists within their socio-historical contexts. This genre remains significant because it provides insights into the personal and societal challenges individuals face as they grow and evolve.

Firstly, here I will define the *Bildungsroman* genre: its origins, characteristics, and why it remains important. Following that, I will focus on the modern Irish *Bildungsroman* and what differentiates it from other European literary traditions through an analysis of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a novel considered representative of the modern Irish youth experience. I will also examine how Joyce represented women, providing a point of contrast with the two authors I will focus on in my thesis.

Ultimately, I will show how the female Irish *Bildungsroman* diverged from the male-centered novels of formation. By focusing on Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien as representatives of the female Irish *Bildungsroman*, I will illustrate how these works highlighted the unique challenges faced by women and gave voice to a previously silenced part of the nation.

2.2) The *Bildungsroman*

The *Bildungsroman*, also known as the 'coming-of-age story' or the 'novel of formation', has been a popular literary form and one of the most important genres in Western literature since the eighteenth century. The genre derives its name from the German words "Bildung" meaning education or formation and "Roman" meaning novel.[1] Johan Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-6), written during the German Enlightenment, is recognized as the first novel in this genre.[2]

Evidence of its significance and popularity can be found in the fact that this genre has a deep-rooted tradition in Germany, France, Britain, Russia, and the USA.[3] Franco Moretti, a literary historian, has stated that the reason for the rapid spreading of the genre was that it helped writers and their readerships deal with the immense and fast-paced social changes taking place in their countries. Additionally, he equated the progress of a young person with that of European culture, saying that "youth is modernity's essence."[4] In the nineteenth century, the *Bildungsroman* was one of the predominant forms of the novel and a key subgenre of realism. In the twentieth century, it was modified to a modernist form, exemplified by James Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

The main characteristic of the *Bildungsroman* novel is the narration of the moral development and psychological growth of the protagonist on the journey from childhood to adulthood.[5] The *Bildungsroman* emerged as a genre specifically dedicated to the maturation of youth, "whose private desires are gradually reconciled to and enfolded in the social order".[6] In these novels the protagonist faces a constant struggle to balance personal ambitions with societal norms and expectations. The central themes of this genre are self-discovery and personal growth.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the essence of the genre revolves around a person undergoing a transformation, someone who "emerges along with the world and reflects the

[1] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/german-english/bildung, accessed 15.03.2023
[2] Graham, 2019. p.1
[3] Graham, 2019. p.1
[4] Moretti, 2000. p.5
[5] MacKay, 2010. p.31, p.197
[6] Townsend,2017. p.337

historical emergence of the world itself".[7] While the transformative journey to adulthood is recognised globally, the experience of adolescence varies across different social and cultural contexts of different nations. Youth are often taken as representatives of their nation in a specific era, and through their journey, they can either celebrate or criticise their society. Furthermore, while navigating their path to adulthood, young protagonists, for the first time, encounter the implications of social norms and existing structural inequalities, highlighting the tension between personal freedom and societal expectations. Achieving authenticity in a world that demands conformity is thus brought into focus through the narrative.[8]

Lastly, while the *Bildungsroman* initially focused on white and heterosexual men, as a genre it developed and gave room to the representation and expression of marginalised and silenced groups. Various authors, such as Charlotte Brontë, Kate O'Brien, Edna O'Brien, and Zadie Smith "used this form of narration to interrogate and subvert white, heteronormative patriarchy, undermining the supposed universality of male experience through woman-centred accounts of female maturation."[9] Besides the women's perspective, different authors have used this form of narration to write about the experiences of LGBT people and postcolonial situations.

[7] Bakhtin, 1986. p.23
[8] Graham, 2019. p.4-8
[9] Graham 2019. p.7

2.3) James Joyce and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

In the nineteenth-century realist *Bildungsroman*, sexuality was thought of in strictly reproductive terms. This reproductive meaning was both biological as well as social through the institution of marriage. According to Franco Moretti, realist *Bildungsroman* examined the relationship between the individual and society based on "modes of compromise and exchange logic, where the reward was happiness and freedom."[10]

Contrastingly, James Joyce introduced a new conception of *Bildungsroman* and human sexuality into Irish literary discourse with his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916):

> In the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, beginning with James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the Irish Catholic Bildungsroman functioned as a crucial site on which Irish culture thought about, worried over and negotiated the connection between sexuality and modernity. (...) He re-wrote the nineteenth-century realist plot and gave to European culture 'modernism's founding Bildungsroman'.[11]

In his novel, Joyce replaced the compromise and exchange logic of the realist *Bildungsroman* with the "Oedipal logic of separation and identification".[12] His narrative was based on the connection between sexual desire and individual freedom. While the realist *Bildungsroman* promised happiness and freedom within society, the Joycean narrative maintained that the individual had to fight against conformity and even flee into exile when he found that this fight was futile in Ireland itself.[13]

With his modernist Irish *Bildungsroman*, Joyce positioned sexual discourse at the crossroads of the psychological narrative, which explored the formation of the individual, and the historical narrative of the formation of the nation.[14] This was his response to the social context of the time, which sharply contrasted with the practice of expressing and exploring one's sexuality. In Ireland, up until the 1960s, sexuality was repressed "as part of a drive to

[10] Moretti, 2000. p.8-9
[11] Cronin, 2012. p.22
[12] Cronin, 2012. p.30
[13] Cronin, 2012. p.23
[14] Cronin, 2012. p.34

restrict the formation of modern subjects; sexuality was the victim of power".[15] The biggest role in the creation of the deafening silence on sexuality was played by the Roman Catholic Church.

According to Inglis, the Church and the State were so deeply intertwined in Ireland that cultural norms not only permeated the Church but also shaped individual identities. A Catholic in Ireland was "likely to have a high level of embodied cultural capital within Irish society".[16] This cooperation between the Church and the State was often presented as a force that stifled protagonists' psychological development in the classical *Bildungsroman* sense. Their formation of identity was hugely influenced by their internal struggles of trying to define themselves within Irish society, especially if they questioned or denounced Catholic faith and practices.

The title of the novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, encapsulates the essence of the *Bildungsroman*, as Stephen's youth and journey become the crucial element of the narrative. Simultaneously, it is a *Künstlerroman,* as his development unlocks his growth to maturity as an artist. The novel is strongly autobiographical, as Stephen's development closely reflects Joyce's personal growth.

Country, family, and religion are focal points in this novel. They undisputedly influence the hero's moral and psychological development, serving as points of struggle in his search for individuality. Stephen's notable declaration— "When the soul of a man is born in this country, there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me about nationality, language, and religion. I shall try to fly by those nets"[17]—depicts the central conflict of the *Bildungroman:* the antagonism between social expectations and personal development. Joyce left Ireland for continental Europe at least partly because of his disagreement with the ideas promoted by the Irish Literary Revival and the Gaelic Revival, and Stephen's contemplation of the world reflects Joyce's disapproval of the state of his country and highlights the hero's struggle to form an identity in a constraining society.

The themes of nationality and religion are intertwined and personified in the figure of Parnell, whose fate becomes a point of contention in the Dedalus household during the Christmas dinner scene. The question of what takes precedence, nationality or religious dogma, and the family's involvement with it significantly affect Stephen.

[15] Cronin, 2012. p.3
[16] Inglis, 1998. P.70
[17] Joyce, 2011, p.210

After this scene, Stephen faces an injustice at school when the prefect unjustly 'pandies' or lashes his hands to make an example out of him, and he denounces him to the rector. This marks the first act of defiance against the nets flung at him by society. While walking to the rector's office, he passes by pictures of Catholic martyrs. There is a strong message in this walk through images of moral victors, foreshadowing his ambition to become a spiritual guide for Ireland, to "be true to his country and help to rise up her language and tradition".[18]

Sexuality, another prevalent theme, is shown in connection with religion and artistic creation. Stephen rejects the Roman Catholic Church's dogma by indulging his desires to "sin with another of his kind, to force another being to sin with him and to exult with her in sin".[19] However, alongside his lust, he yearns for a connection with another human being:

> He wanted to be held firmly in her arms, to be caressed slowly, slowly, slowly. In her arms he felt that he had suddenly become strong and fearless and sure of himself […] It was too much for him. He closed his eyes, surrendering himself to her, body and mind, conscious of nothing in the world but the dark pressure of her softly parting lips. They pressed upon his brain as upon his lips as though they were the vehicle of a vague speech; and between them he felt an unknown and timid pressure, darker than the swoon of sin, softer than sound or odour.[20]

After hearing a priest's homily, he becomes obsessed with sin and eternal damnation. Stephen internalises the doctrinal teachings of the Catholic Church that sexuality is inherently sinful, leading him to rigorously adjust his behaviour in a form of self-imposed martyrdom.

The clergymen notice his piety, and he is asked about his call from God to become a priest, which he initially sees as an award for his volitional suffering. When he is presented with the possibility of achieving that which his upbringing and education saw as the most important role possible, Stephen trusts his instinct for individuality:

> At once from every part of his being unrest began to irradiate. […] Some instinct, waking at these memories, stronger than education or piety, quickened within him at every near approach to that life, an instinct subtle and hostile, and armed him against acquiescence. The chill and order of the life repelled him. […] His destiny was to be elusive of social religious orders. […] He was destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snares of the world.[21]

By rejecting the altar, Stephen regains his autonomy and the strength to follow his individual development, which is the call to be an artist and to cross from boyhood to manhood:

> This was the call of life to his soul not the dull gross voice of the world of duties and despair, not the inhuman voice that had called him to the pale service of the altar. […] His soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood, spurning her grave-clothes. Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and

[18] Joyce, 2011, p.83
[19] Joyce, 2011, p.100
[20] Joyce, 2011, p.101-102
[21] Joyce, 2011, p.165

> power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable.[22]

After the climax of his vocational narrative, Stephen goes to the beach and comes across a girl who is vividly portrayed as "a beautiful and strange seabird",[23] who presents a mortal symbol of the freedom of expression of art. This moment leads him to reject religious idols and seek his way in the secular world. When he shares his plans to enrol in the university with his family, they think he is making a major mistake. To pursue the vocation of an artist, he will have to defy his family.

In another scene significant to the themes of nation and language, Stephen talks with the dean of studies, and they have difficulty understanding the words "funnel" and "tundish".[24] The dean's unfamiliarity with the word "tundish" epitomises the cultural dissonance at the core of the Irish experience. Although "tundish" has Anglo-Saxon, Germanic roots, it was displaced by the Latinate "funnel" in Britain but survived in Ireland, brought over by earlier colonists. For Stephen, the dean—an Englishman—represents England's institutional and cultural dominance over Ireland. Through their conversation, Stephen realises the necessity and importance of creating a distinctive and genuinely Irish voice for himself, even as he recognizes the paradox of doing so within the English language, which he sees as both familiar and alien. Stephen acknowledges that, although he must express himself in the oppressor's language, it will always feel foreign to him.[25]

After this conversation, Stephen begins to lose interest in the university, as he recognises the dean as a symbol of the intertwined power between his nation's two rulers, the Roman Catholic Church and the British Empire. For true artistic expression, he must free himself from the influence of these institutions. By the end of the novel, the hero is certain that he will have to go into self-imposed exile, detaching himself from the shackles of both national and religious authority. He delivers his famous *non-serviam* speech to his friend:

> I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether to call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile and cunning.[26]

[22] Joyce, 2011, p.165
[23] Joyce, 2011, p.176
[24] Joyce, 2011, p.194
[25] Joyce, 2011, p.195
[26] Joyce, 2011, p.255

The novel ends with Stephen rejecting not only the religion into which he was born, raised, and educated but also the broader demands of nationalism and the notion that Irish identity must be determined by an attachment to the Roman Catholic Church.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is deemed a quintessential piece of modernist literature not only due to its various innovative narration techniques, including stream of consciousness and its non-linear structure, but also because of its examination of the fragmented and developing self. By breaking away from traditional storytelling, Joyce successfully mirrored the complexity and uncertainty of the modern experience. In his novel, Joyce delivered a sharp critique of the institutions central to the Irish identity— the church, family, and country. However, while Joyce presents a polished critique of these institutions, the portrayal of women in the novel remains problematic, and is often defined by the same patriarchal limits it seeks to question and abolish. This raises an abundance of questions tied to the role and representation of women in the narrative, which will be the focus of the next section. Through the examination of the portrayal of women in Joyce's novel, we can get a greater understanding of how the Irish *Bildungsroman* negotiated the themes of power, gender, and identity.

This examination becomes the key to understanding the works of Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien. Both authors reflect and expand on Joyce's themes and narrative style, addressing the complexities of gender and identity in their own right. Their novels continue the conversation Joyce began, illustrating the enduring influence of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* on Irish literature. Both Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien portray female protagonists on journeys of self-discovery and provide a critique of social norms, as their protagonists must explore and develop their desires and identities outside of the constraints of their Irish upbringings, be it their families, nationality, or gender norms. Additionally, Joyce's influence in evident in their narrative styles, through which they provide deep psychological insights in their characters' development, reminiscent of his stream of consciousness.

2.4) The representation of women in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

The female characters in the novel reflect Stephen's attitudes and internal conflicts towards the Irish nation and his vision regarding his race's history and complex present. His awakening to the problems of his nation happens simultaneously with his sexual awakening. Sexuality is directly connected to the politics examined in the novel, and the notion of Irish womanhood is interrelated to that of the Irish nation.[27]

In examining the representation of women in the novel, it is most straightforward to divide the characters into two distinct groups: figures of authority and figures of desire. Stephen's mother, Mrs. Dedalus, and his governess, Dante, present the two female authority figures in the hero's narrative. Their representation is best observed through the Christmas dinner scene, where the correlation of sexuality and politics in Ireland of Stephen's time becomes apparent.

During the Christmas dinner, a heated discussion erupts regarding the political fall of Charles Parnell, which consequently led to his death and, for some, the fall of Ireland. Dante takes the stance that Parnell got what he deserved for his affair with Katharine O'Shea and that his sexuality, which was proclaimed immoral by the Roman Catholic Church, had to be punished. Through her reaction, Dante becomes a type "representing all her countrymen, who, in spite of their intelligence, upbringing and education, define the Irish nation only on the basis of its submission to the institution of the Roman Catholic Church".[28] Dante represents the extreme Irish Roman Catholic suppression of sexuality and of the pluralism needed for a democratic society. She becomes the personification of an Ireland that decided to be "the scullery maid of Christendom".[29]

Another important factor in the discussion is Stephen's mother, Mrs. Dedalus, who is not as aggressive as Dante and tries to remain impartial during the discussion. But she rejects any blame being assigned to the Roman Catholic Church for the failure of the Home Rule Campaign. For her, the basis of being Irish is being Catholic, which means that its religious

[27] Ćurko, 2015. p.102
[28] Ćurko, 2015. p.103
[29] Joyce, 2011, p.239

moral framework and dictum should have precedence over Ireland's fight for autonomy and independence.[30] These two women represent the vision of the Irish race that Stephen will renounce. Stephen considers the rejection vital to completing his journey towards his identity and his vocation.

The second group of women in the novel represent the figures of desire. They are depicted in two binary roles: as Virgin Marys or as Mary Magdalenes or temptresses. This view of femininity is heavily influenced by his Catholic upbringing which strictly separated the soul from the body while denying the body.[31]

Emma Cleary, Stephen's one-time beloved, should be a central female figure in the novel. However, through the years, her character remains undeveloped, and she serves only as a mirror for Stephen's contemplations on romance, artistic creation, and the self-creation of one's identity. Stephen is not capable of expressing his feelings towards her, and she is passive in the narrative, and does not get beyond her role as a symbol of Stephen's desires and fears. In the final sections of the novel, Stephen finally confronts Emma and talks to her, which allows him to perceive her beyond the religious and cultural ideals of purity and femininity that he had internalized. Moveover, her symbolic role, the role of the Virgin Mary figure, is challenged when Stephen witnesses her 'betrayal'. Emma's interaction with a priest, in which she engages him while playing with a phrasebook of the Celtic language, invokes in Stephen a sense of betrayal and highlights her ignorance of her identity, which she shares with their country.

In contrast to Emma, the prostitutes and the young peasant girl who wants to seduce Stephen's friend, Davin, represent the fallen woman and the temptress. Davin tells Stephen the story of the young woman who lived in the wilderness and isolation of the Ballyhoura Hills, a location that might speak of an idealised rural, Catholic, Ireland, who offered herself to him, a stranger. This story produces in Stephen's mind a symbol of the "batlike soul":

> The last words of Davin's story sang in his memory and the figure of the woman in the story stood forth, reflected in other figures of the peasant woman whom he had seen standing in the doorways at Clane as the college cars drove by, as a type of her race and his own, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness and, through the eyes and voice and gesture of a woman without guile, calling the stranger to bed.[32]

Stephen is of the opinion that Emma and the young peasant, who synthesise Irish womanhood, share with him and his Ireland at the end of the 19th century a need to regain their liberty in

[30] Ćurko, 2015. p.105
[31] Ćurko, 2015. p.106
[32] Joyce, 2011, p.189

order to form their identity. What is needed for this process is self-actualization and development, and for it to commence, they must betray the Roman Catholic Church and the British Empire.[33]

Another important female character is the girl Stephen sees after he has fully embraced his vocation as an artist:

> A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane's and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh. Her thighs, fuller and soft-hued as ivory, were bared almost to the hips, where the white fringes of her drawers were like feathering of soft white down. Her slate-blue skirts were kilted boldly about her waist and dovetailed behind her. Her bosom was as a bird's, soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some dark-plumaged dove. But her long fair hair was girlish: and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face.[34]

Her presence provokes a climax in the novel's narration as he sees her transform before his eyes. Her "mortal youth and beauty"[35] reinforce in him the idea that the transcendental is not limited to the religious and it can be brought on by earthly experiences. Nevertheless, just like most of the female characters in the novel, the girl is only a symbol, a muse whose purpose is to ignite in Stephen a sense of artistic creation.

Joyce's portrayal of women in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man* provides a perspective through which to examine the works of Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien. Both authors explore similar themes of identity, sexuality, and the Joycean nets imposed by the Irish society. However, Kate O'Brien's novels often portray women who challenge and resist the rigid moral and social codes of their time, standing in contrast to the submissive and conservative figures of Dante and Stephen's mother in Joyce's novel. Edna O'Brien, on the other hand, delves into the complexities of female desire and autonomy, echoing the duality of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene figures in Joyce's narrative. By contextualising their novels within the framework established by Joyce, we can better understand how these authors give voice to the marginalized experiences of Irish women, challenging traditional narratives and offering new perspectives on identity and self-actualization.

[33] Ćurko, 2015. p.108
[34] Joyce, 2011, p.176
[35] Joyce, 2011, p.177

2)A Portrait of the Artist as a Young *Woman*: Introduction to Kate and Edna O'Brien's female gaze

The form of the *Bildungsroman*, as previously mentioned, mirrors the cultural context and period to present the specific struggles of youth in a particular time and place. Therefore, it is important first to give an account of the societal limitations put on Irish women in post-colonial Ireland as the authors examined in this thesis, Kate and Edna O'Brien, explore the developmental journeys of Irish heroines from the beginning to the middle of the 20th century. According to Meaney, "In post-colonial southern Ireland, a particular construction of sexual and familial roles became the very substance of what it means to be Irish".[36] The novels explored in this thesis will differ from Joyce's work in terms of the representation of gender and the political situation of Ireland, as Joyce's novel was written in a colonial setting, and these novels were written in a post-colonial setting. The female Irish *Bildungsroman* presented a female perspective in a society that looked to keep women in the domestic sphere.

In post-colonial Ireland., women's role in society and their representation in literature was heavily constructed by Church edicts which might be said to find legal expression in the 1937 Irish Constitution. Articles 40 to 44 were on 'Fundamental Rights', but crucial for the role of women is Article 41 on 'The Family', which stated:

Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937. Article 41, The Family

1.	1.	The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.
	2.	The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State.
2.	1.	In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
	2.	The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.
3.	1.	The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack. (…)[37]

[36] Meaney, 1994. p.190-1
[37] https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/coi37b.htm accessed 12.3.2023.

This Article defined a woman who was expected to devote her life to the home and her family. Moreover, the perception of Ireland as a traditional society was intricately linked to the ideological composition of the image of 'the family'.[38] The State and the Church worked hand in hand to impose gender role expectations and practises for Irish middle-class women in the first half of the 20th century.[39]

The task of the *Bildungsroman* genre was to explore the protagonist's journey in reconciling their need for individuality and autonomy with societal roles and expectations. The fulfilment of this task was aggravated in conditions where a character is placed in a society that naturalises their role as beings who have no need for individual growth while emphasising their role as selfless caregivers for the common good. Both Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien provided their readerships with explorations of the consequences for women who do not or cannot fit into the roles devised for them by the Church and the State. Their portrayals of women contested the concept of the family as it was glorified in the Constitution.

A shared ambition of the women in these novels is self-fulfilment, whether in a quest for education or a career, and this can be achieved only by rejecting the family unit.[40] The female protagonists of the Irish *Bildungsroman* have to either abandon their nation's ideology and alienate themselves from their social context or stay in the conditions imposed by the Church and the State and deal with the subsequent lack of autonomy it affords them as mothers and wives. While the male *Bildungsroman* showcased the incompatible forces between the individual and society, between dominant religious frameworks and the desire for freedom, the female *Bildungsroman* had the additional role of showing the difficulty of abiding by the prescriptive gender roles.

[38] Wills, 2001. p.37
[39] Tighe-Mooney, 2009. p.52
[40] Tighe-Mooney, 2009. p.63

3.1) Kate and Edna: Lives and Contexts

Kate O'Brien was born in Limerick on December 3, 1897. She was one of ten children, and one of the events that made a significant impact on her early life was the death of her mother, Catherine O'Brien, in 1903. As a result of her family situation, she was sent at the age of five to Laurel Hill, a French convent school in Limerick, becoming their youngest border ever. In 1916, she earned a city council scholarship to University College Dublin, from which she graduated in 1919. After her graduation, O'Brien moved to England and the United States. In 1922, she returned to Ireland but quickly moved to Spain to work as a governess in Bilbao. She returned to Ireland in 1950 and spent a decade writing there, but ultimately left to go to England, where she died in Kent on August 13, 1974, aged 76.[41]

Her travels and its subsequent experiences were of great importance for all her works, but especially for the two novels that are examined in this thesis, *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *The Land of Spices* (1941). Both novels were banned by the Censorship of Publications Board in Ireland as soon as they were published, the reasons being the depiction of scenes of adultery in *Mary Lavelle* and of a homosexual encounter in *The Land of Spices*.[42]

The Censorship of Publications Act was introduced in 1929. It was the fruit of a campaign for state censorship of film and literature that gained momentum right after independence and the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. As Cronin notes, this period used morality campaigns to introduce and solidify the emerging class distinctions but also to broaden the predominance of the Catholic bourgeoisie that came into power:

> This regulatory ideal of sexuality allowed the middle class to define themselves as bearers of stability and order in a new moral economy. It also produced an ideological framework for defining the manifest class divisions of the new state in terms of social delinquency and moral incompetence rather than in political and economic terms.[43]

In other words, in the period when O'Brien wrote and published her novels, sexuality in Ireland was not considered part of individual psychology and character formation but was seen as a matter of public concern and an integral part of enforcing and maintaining social order.

[41] The Kate O'Brien Papers, University of Limerick, i
[42] O'Neill, https://www.womensmuseumofireland.ie/exhibits/kate-obrien accessed 3.2.2024
[43] Cronin 2012. P.52

The works of Kate O'Brien that are examined in this thesis depict the formation narratives of two young Irish girls and deal with their struggles to form themselves in alignment with the gender norms imposed by the Church and the State. This was controversial in her time, as the public morality discourses "emphasised the volatility and vulnerability of youth".[44] Cronin has argued that Irish youth came to be equated with the state of the new Free State:

> the relationship between youth and age came to stand for the political relationship between the citizen and the state, with citizens needing to be protected from themselves as much as from any external forces.[45]

It is in this light that the *Bildungsroman*, which speaks of the relationship between the individual and society, can be understood in this period.

Edna O'Brien was born on 15 December 1930 in Tuamgraney, County Clare, Ireland. She described her village as "enclosed, fervid, and bigoted":[46]

> Raised in poverty in Catholic rural Ireland and educated in a convent school, Edna O'Brien became maligned in Ireland for describing her experience. The youngest of four children, she was born to a profligate, hard-drinking father and a steadfast, hard-working mother. Literature was regarded as wicked, and hell was more real than heaven.[47]

Kate O'Brien came from the Catholic bourgeoise, and her path as a professional author was less problematic than Edna O'Brien's, who came from a family that had had wealth, but had lost it before Edna was born, thanks to her father's hard-drinking habits. This resulted in her family influencing her decision to pursue vocational training instead of taking a more intellectual route.

Edna O'Brien was educated at the Convent of Mercy in County Galway and later attended the Pharmaceutical College of Ireland. She married the writer Ernest Gébler, with whom she moved to London in 1959 and had two children. However, the marriage eventually ended in divorce.[48] As in the case with Kate O'Brien, Edna O'Brien embedded many autobiographical facts into her trilogy. Even though she spent most of her life in England, she was an avid social activist and often returned to Ireland, from which she built most of her literary themes. The author recently passed away at the age of 93, with her last novel, *Girl*, published in 2019.

[44] Cronin 2012. P.54
[45] Cronin 2012. P.54
[46] Guppy, 1984. https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2978/the-art-of-fiction-no-82-edna-obrien accessed 17.3.2024
[47] Adams, https://www.fembio.org/english/biography.php/woman/biography/edna-obrien/ accessed 17.3.2024
[48] O'Reilly, https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/edna-obrien accessed 17.3.2024

Even though her trilogy, *The Country Girls* (1960-1964), is considered one of the representative *Bildungsroman* novels of the Sixties, it is important to first explain the social context of the 1940s and 1950s (the years of Edna O'Brien's development), and then the social context of the 1960s, as it all influenced the trilogy's narrative.

Cronin acknowledges the epistemic shift in Irish Catholic sexual discourse during the 1940s and 1950s. Catholic advice literature, which peaked in the 1940s to 1960s, presented middle-class Irish Catholics with an ideal of marital intimacy that promised sexual pleasure and personal fulfilment. This marked a change from earlier views, proposed in the 1930s by the public morality discourses, that saw sexuality as a social threat needing to be controlled. Instead, sexuality was now seen as part of one's self-development within marriage, contributing to a stable society. The objective remained consistent, but the perception of one's sexuality evolved into an aid for building a dynamic but stable society.

This epistemic shift was brought about by two world wars and the global capitalism crisis of the 1930s. In Ireland, this shift was unique because marriage became a symbol of the independent Irish state's future, especially as the population decreased, and emigration led to a demographic crisis. By the 1950s, significantly low marriage rates in Ireland's rural regions led to the belief that the country's stagnation was as much cultural as it was economic or political. The country's sexual culture was pinpointed as a crucial factor, because the number of Irish marriages and the country's overall conditions were closely linked and were both seen as being in a critical state of decline.[49]

While the 1940s and 1950s Catholic sexual discourse focused more on individual development, it retained elements of the 1920s and 1930s public morality discourse such as concerns over the country's youth being influenced by inappropriate literature, dancing, and the popular press. In essence, the goals remained the same, only the approach shifted. [50]

A noteworthy feature of the self-development through sexuality model was its demand for adherence to an existing hierarchy of class and gender distinctions. Catholic advice authors believed in inherent or 'natural' differences between men and women. Despite criticizing 'modernism', they embraced some of the more conservative notions of Freudian theories, stating girls were more 'emotional' and boys 'sexual'. Interestingly, while literature denoted boys as more proactive in pursuing sex, it tasked girls with moderating sexual activities, which

[49] Cronin, 2012. p.116-140
[50] Cronin, 2012. p.116-128

involved a hypocritical and misogynistic double standard. The responsibility of maintaining 'purity,' averting premarital sex and pregnancies was largely and unfairly placed on young women. Any failure to keep their 'purity' risked their prospects for marriage and motherhood. Advice literature consistently reminded girls that men didn't marry women engaging in premarital sex. Similarly, boys were warned against marrying girls who lack respect for themselves.[51]

The decades that marked Edna O'Brien's childhood and development can be seen in her novels' connection to history. Her heroines live in a quickly disappearing world and her formation narratives emphasize the challenges of achieving *Bildung* due to the unyielding nature of the past. The progression of the *Bildung* narrative is continually hindered by the regressive narrative centring on childhood trauma, loss, and family breakdown.[52] On the other hand, her *Bildungsroman* novels also emphasised youth in a period when 'youth culture' was vividly changing Irish social life. Ireland had a rapid capitalist progression in the 1960s, and the new dynamic youth culture was an indicator of the nation's modernisation process. In this decade, youth was also a public policy focus, as reforming the education system was deemed a national development priority. Another reason for the differences between her novels and those of her forerunners could be that O'Brien was influenced by various trends in post-Second World War Western culture, such as the focus on the disoriented adolescent as a cultural archetype, with prototypical figures such as J.D. Salinger's Holden Caufield in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Jim Stark, portrayed by James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). There was an evident cultural shift in the 1950s concerning alienation, which was no longer perceived as a sign of an extraordinary individual but rather as an intrinsic aspect of youth itself.[53]

When Philip Roth asked her about her female heroes, Edna O'Brien responded:

> 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. If you want to know what I regard as the principal crux of female despair, it is this: in the Greek myth of Oedipus and in Freud's exploration of it, the son's desire for his mother is admitted; the infant daughter also desires its mother but it is unthinkable, either in myth, in fantasy or in fact, that that desire can be consummated.[54]

O'Brien identifies the root of female despair through a psychoanalytic lens and points out that while a son's desire for his mother is recognized, both in myth and defined as a part of human

[51] Cronin, 2012. p.130-131
[52] Cronin 2012, p.180
[53] Cronin 2012, p.176-182
[54] Roth, 1984. https://www.nytimes.com/1984/11/18/books/a-conversation-with-edna-obrien-the-body-contains-the-life-story.html accessed 17.2024

psychology, the idea that a daughter might desire her mother is considered unthinkable. In essence, O'Brien is highlighting the deep-seated emotional conflicts and societal taboos that contribute to the struggles of her female characters. This theme of unfulfilled desire and the search for emotional catharsis is central to her work.

O'Brien's novels, with their tragi-comic undermining of traditional romance conventions, align with contemporaneous works that questioned the restrictive, suffocating, and contradictory femininity ideals imposed to middle-class women in the post-war consumer society. The sexual experiences in her novels of the 1960s are vividly portrayed and devoid of the aesthetic and moral overdetermination present in earlier novels, such as those of Kate O'Brien's.[55]

Edna O'Brien's significance and social activism in Irish literary tradition can be found in her pivotal role in changing literary censorship laws. All three novels in *The Country Girls* trilogy and her later books, *August Is a Wicked Month* (1965) and *Casualties of Peace* (1966) were banned. This caused an ongoing controversy and led to the campaign against censorship, and the author often returned to Ireland to publicly back this campaign. O'Brien also took part in a highly publicised meeting with the anti-censorship activist and English professor Fr Peter Connolly,[56] in Limerick in 1966. Later that year, O'Brien also helped establish the Censorship Reform Society in Dublin. This campaign brought about the modification of the censorship laws in 1967, which set a twelve-year limit on a book's ban, which caused an instant lifting of the prohibition of several thousand books. Arguably, her novels and activism played a part in the broader cultural redefinition of sexuality and societal transformation in Ireland during the 'sexual revolution' in other Western countries.[57]

[55] Cronin, 2012, p.182-184
[56] Cronin, 2012, p.173
[57] Cronin, 2012. p.177-179

2) Kate O'Brien: *Mary Lavelle* & *The Land of Spices*

Kate O'Brien took to full-time writing after the success of her play *Distinguished Villa* (1926). Her debut novel, *Without My Cloak*, was published five years later in 1931 and considered a great success. She received the James Tait Black Prize and the Hawthornden Prize. The author has a varied opus, which includes fiction such as the novels *The Anteroom* (1934), *Mary Lavelle* (1936), *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938), *The Land of Spices* (1941), and more. O'Brien also wrote an autobiography about growing up in Limerick, *Presentation Parlour* (1966) and the biography of *Theresa of Avila* (1951), whom she admired as "a woman who had made herself powerful in a male world and supreme within female communities".[58] She also wrote travelogues. The first was a political travelogue, *Farewell Spain* (1937), in which she supported the leftist cause in the Spanish Civil War and strongly criticised Franco. This resulted in the author having problems entering Spain between 1937 and 1957. Her second travelogue, *My Ireland* (1962), presented a lively and engaging record of places in Ireland that the author loved. She also adapted some of her novels as plays, such as *The Anteroom*, composed film scripts, and wrote journalism.[59]

The two female *Bildungsroman* novels by Kate O'Brien analysed in this thesis are *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *The Land of Spic*es (1941). Both novels deal with 'the roads less travelled' for women in twentieth-century Ireland, one dealing with becoming an expat and turning to a vocation and the other with the religious life of women and the calling of an artist.

Mary Lavelle is set in 1922, and according to Michele Roberts (2000), the main theme is "forbidden love versus Catholic morality".[60] The novel starts with the young heroine leaving her family and fiancé, John, in Mellick to become a governess for the three daughters of the Spanish Areavaga family: Pilar, Nieves, and Milagros. Mary is twenty-two years old, and at the start of the novel, we see a strong need for independence:

> To go to Spain. To be alone for a little space, a tiny hiatus between her life's two accepted phases. To cease being a daughter without immediately becoming a wife. To be a free lance, to belong to no one place or

[58] Walshe, 2006. p.66
[59] Reynolds, Hourican, https://www.dib.ie/biography/obrien-kate-a6479 accessed 3.2.2024
[60] Roberts, 2000. vii

> family or person — to achieve that silly longing of childhood, only for one year, before she flung it with all other childish things upon the scrapheap.[61]

The only wish Mary had during her childhood was "to be free and lonely",[62] however, she is stifled by her surroundings. Even though Mary had some money in the form of inheritance from her godmother, her father denied her any access to it and strongly protested her spending it to assist any training for future employment: ""Absolute waste", he said, unless a girl is downright plain".[63]

Upon her arrival in Spain, it reminds her of Ireland, and she gets to know the other anglophone governesses who all happen to be "from impoverished wings of that non-easily definable section of society, the Irish Catholic middle-class".[64] She becomes especially close with two misses, Rosie O'Toole and Agatha Conlan. She soon realises that the Irish misses, apart from O'Toole and Conlan, do not like Spain and that they remain isolated in that society. On the other hand, the misses do not have anything to return to, differentiating them from Mary. Within that group, Mary learns of womanhood:

> Although she did not observe the fact, she was growing up fast on this foreign soil, much faster than she or John, when they argued about the value of such growth, could have anticipated. Left to herself anywhere, bereft of the family setting and the Irish backcloth, bereft of the dominating authority of John, she might have put out unexpected shoots. But here where all was new and where duty, exacting only a minimum of personality, left her what she had never had enough of under Aunt Cissy's wing, time to observe and meditate; here where she was flung for sociability among a mixed company of tough and sad and battered fellow-country- women, all older than herself; here where, as it happened, the scene, the sky and the people were agreeable to her, she was racing very fast out of heedlessness. She was beginning to put two and two together with more method and detachment than John, for instance, might have thought quite necessary.[65]

In Spain, Mary realises that she is an adult and possesses the autonomy that comes with that stage of her life. She begins to nurture her development in this foreign country and even goes to the bullfight or *corrida* through which she falls in love with Spain:

> But the wound of the bullfight was in fact - though she tried to forget and ignore it - the gateway through which Spain had entered and taken her. She did not know how much an afternoon in the bullring had changed her. But, young and very conventional, to have learnt through the movements of one's own nerves the difference between shock and revulsion; young, virginal and virtuous to have learnt in one's own breast that emotion at its most crude can by relation to a little art enchant, overwhelm, and seem eternal - that is an awful lesson, most disconcerting to the gentle and orthodox.[66]

[61] O'Brien, 1984. p.34
[62] O'Brien 1984. p.24
[63] O'Brien, 1984. p.23
[64] O'Brien, 1984.p.80
[65] O'Brien, 1984. p.92
[66] O'Brien, 1984. p.112

Although the bullfight changed Mary's views of the world, she still thinks of herself as striving for "the restricted ways of happiness and faith"[67] like the Irish, and unlike the Spaniards who thrive on "brutal realism."[68] However, this notion is challenged when Juanito, Areavaga's eldest and only son, and his wife, Luisa, visit his family. Even though they rarely see each other, Mary and Juanito fall hopelessly in love. Mary is dumbfounded by her feelings for Juanito and how they differ from the ones she bears for her fiancé, John, and she decides to return to Ireland.

As Mary prepares for her return to Ireland, she and Juanito meet again and kiss, which leads to her questioning her morality. The two misses with whom she had developed strong relationships both have their struggles. Rosie O'Toole marries a Spanish shopkeeper named Pepe and is estranged from the group of other misses as she has 'renounced' her possibilities of ever returning to Ireland, while Agatha Conlan confesses to Mary that she likes her "the way a man would".[69] Mary is not disgusted by Conlan's confession as she equates Conlan's longings as right or as wrong as her own for Juanito:

> Seeking strength against the perversions of their hearts and escape from fantastic longings. Seeking mercy, explanation and forgiveness because they are so vicious as to love each other, seeking wearisome strength, in the midst of life, to forgo the essence of their own. Oh bitter, unforeseen exactions! (..) Oh, Lord have pity! Help us to have pity on each other, to make some sense sometime out of this tangle of our longings![70]

Mary and Juanito ultimately spend a night together, and Don Pablo's death, caused by the emotional shock of discovering Juanito and Mary's affair, adds a heavy burden of guilt and regret to their relationship. Juanito realizes that his father spent his final moments aware of their indiscretion, which deepens his sense of responsibility and sorrow. Juanito chooses not to tell Mary that his father knew about their affair, believing that their love is genuine and that they wouldn't intentionally do anything 'savage' to each other. Mary returns to Ireland only to confess everything to John and to take her godmother's hundred pounds before leaving again: "That was all. That was the fruit of her journey to Spain. Anguish for everyone and only one little, fantastic, impossible hope. Yet there it was - a real story."[71]

The Land of Spices is situated in the same place where the story of *Mary Lavelle* begins and finds its end, the town of Mellick, which is used as an imaginary counterpart of the author's birthplace, Limerick. In her introduction to the novel, Clare Boylan (2000) describes 1930s Limerick as "a limited, self-satisfied place, prosperous, nationalistic and rigidly Catholic",[72]

[67] O'Brien, 1984. p.124
[68] Ibid.
[69] O'Brien, 1984. p.248
[70] O'Brien, 1984. p.249
[71] O'Brien, 1984. p. 300
[72] Boylan, 2000. vii

and those adjectives are well represented in the story's narrative. The novel takes place between 1904 and 1914, and the cusp of the First World War, and it depicts the struggle of Anna Murphy to pursue her destiny. Alongside Anna Murphy's story, the novel narrates the retrospective story of Helen Archer, or the Reverend Mother, Mère Marie-Hélène, detailing her upbringing that led her to give her life to God and become a nun, all the time conveying "a serious study of the politics and power of an all-female hierarchy."[73] The driving motives of the novel are "the breaking of hearts, and the role of heartbreak in the moulding of character."[74]

The novel starts with the story of Anna Murphy, the youngest-ever-boarder of the convent *La Compagnie de la Sainte Famille* at the age of six. Anna is an extraordinary child whose potential is noticed by Mère Marie-Hélène. The Reverend Mother is an Englishwoman at the head of a French order of nuns in the Irish countryside. She is considering leaving her post and requesting a transfer back to Belgium. She feels defeated by the Irish and their efforts to push Irish nationalism in the educational curriculum of her convent. The links between religion and nationalism dominate the conversation between the local Bishop, young Father Conroy, and the Reverend Mother, where the Bishop, defending the stance of Father Conroy, states, "Irish national life is bound up with its religion."[75] The Reverend Mother replies: "You see, our nuns *are not* a nation, and our business is not with national matters. We are a religious Order."[76] However, the Reverend Mother, who was ready to leave the convent because of "the self-satisfied parochialism of her Irish nuns and clergy",[77] finds a new purpose when she sees Anna Murphy, who reminds her of her childhood and character and decides to stay.

As Anna gets older and progresses, the novel, as Boylan notes, depicts these characters' two stories:

> the emotions and vulnerabilities are revealed like a play of shadow and light: in the young girl who hardens with each hurt, in the older woman whose dulled emotions begin to show more colour like an old painting restored.[78]

The novel gives us a glimpse of Anna's family situation and why she was sent to the convent so young. Her father, Harry Murphy, is a drunk and "in some unspecified way a monster" to her mother, "a woman of delicate and religious sensibilities".[79] However, Maud Murphy, her mother, is bound to her husband, and she cannot leave him "since there was a thing called 'duty'

[73] Boylan, 2000. viii
[74] Boylan, 2000. vii
[75] O'Brien, 1988. p.16
[76] Ibid.
[77] Boylan, 2000. viii
[78] Boylan, 2000. ix
[79] O'Brien, 1988. p.41

which confessors had to insist upon with Catholic wives, Maud's cross must be carried, it seemed."[80] The situation makes her detached and not interested in the children. As Anna's father cannot provide for the family, the future of the household lies in the hands of her grandmother, Mrs Condon, who influences all decisions. This power play creates an even deeper divide in her family as Anna's father rages against his enemies:

> Her mother, her grandmother, Mother Agatha, Father Doolin, the whole pious Cabal who disapproved of him, trembled for his example to his family, and scattered them in babyhood to holy prison-houses where his drunkard's breath could not contaminate them.[81]

The loss of innocence of the main protagonist can be exemplified through two stories, the first being Anna's encounter with injustice during the *finir/ finant* story. During an exercise in the conjugation French verbs, Anna made a small mistake conjugating the verb *finir* which led Mother Mary Andrew to mark her whole exercise as wrong. For the first time, Anna fell victim to the opposing attitudes of the nuns in the convent. Mother Mary Andrew saw that the Reverend Mother admired Anna for being an exemplary student and for having better results than girls much older than her. As Mother Mary Andrew disliked the Reverend Mother, she did everything she could to take the award for academic excellence away from Anna. As a result, Anna was shocked by the pettiness of those who should have been devoted to doing good:

> She did not cry out loud any more, but she was choking and shaking with tears. She had never before been the victim of an injustice which she could see; she had never been shaken and dragged, and arbitrarily refused a pleasure she had won and been promised.[82]

After the incident, Anna was changed, becoming a very detached and cold-hearted child. It was a "shock that made her both defensive and cunning".[83] She turned inward and developed a profound love for reading, which marked her as annoying and absent-minded in her peer group and prevented her from forming ordinary friendships.

The second occurrence that changed Anna came years later, towards the end of her schooling. Anna and her family went to Doom Point, their summer lodge, for holidays, but this time their father could not pay for it, and they were Granny's guests. As Anna matured, she gained a better understanding of the trouble this arrangement presented to her family, "she felt it as a slur on the Murphys, a sign that the family was going downhill".[84] This recognition signified the end of her childhood, leaving a deeper mark on her than she initially understood. The event that gave her childhood innocence a final blow was her younger brother Charlie, the

[80] O'Brien, 1988 p.41
[81] O'Brien, 1998. p.50
[82] O'Brien, 1998. p.113
[83] O'Brien, 1988. p.117
[84] O'Brien, 1988. p.205

person she held dearest in the whole world, dying in a drowning accident at Doom Point. When Anna returned to school the next semester, Mother Reverend noticed a

> violent disturbance of the individual that had hitherto been in no hurry to uncover itself, but had lain defensively still so long, so wisely young and content. She saw growth, too fiercely fertilised by a pain which she apprehended day after day as almost increasing in this troubled victim's mind.[85]

When it comes to the Reverend Mother, the novel portrays the journey that resulted in her being a nun:

> When she was eighteen Helen Archer had, for a reason admitted to no other human being, turned her back upon herself, upon talents, dreams, emotions- and undertaken the impersonal and active service of God. Her rash decision rewarded her. Spiritually, by an increasing faith in God, which gave her power to keep her life serenely at His disposal; practically, with professional success, for she became the most intelligent and capable member of the Order.[86]

At the point in her development when she should have blossomed, she witnessed an act that shut her off from the 'secular' world forever. The Reverend Mother recalls her childhood and her family having to move from England to Belgium for a reason caused by her father but unknown to her, "in his first pain and excitement of self-discovery he fell into some offence against society, some stupid sin, which made it necessary, or at least wise, for him to live in exile."[87] Years later, at eighteen and ready to go into the real world, the Reverend Mother or as she was then, Helen Archer, caught sight of her father in an embrace of love with a man, his assistant Etienne. It was then she realised:

> that was the sort of thing that the most graceful life could hide! That was what lay around, under love, under beauty. That was the flesh they preached about, the extremity of what the sin of the flesh could be. Here, at home, in her father, in the best person she had known or hoped to know.

For Helen, what she thought of as her father's selfishness impacted her life, but more importantly, she felt betrayed by the person she thought most pure. Helen Archer's heart grew cold, and she decided to join the Order as a form of punishment for her father's sin:

> And she too, in her turn, was to punish his sin. She, towards whom he was conscious of no iota of wrong or disillusion, was to turn in terror from his love, and from all he had thought and implanted, and leave him to the lonely years, to the days of loss and decline - alone.[88]

Another reason Helen Archer gave herself to God was to distance herself from all emotions.

The second heroine in the novel, Anna, is at the end of the novel presented with her greatest challenge: to follow her path of development against her family's wishes. Although Anna is granted a County Scholarship for excellence, her grandmother objects to it strongly.

[85] O'Brien, 1988. p.240
[86] O'Brien, 1988. p.19
[87] O'Brien, 1988. p.151
[88] O'Brien, 1988. p.151-152

Mrs Condon firmly opposes any further education of girls, thinking that knowledge is “wasted on girls”.[89] It is the Reverend Mother who wholly protests against Mrs Condon’s wishes to stop Anna’s further education that would provide her with a job that would allow her to give back to the family. She claims that the Bishop himself wants to see Anna in high education and Mrs Condon would not defy hierarchical power.

The Reverend Mother gets promoted to the highest role within the Order, as she is chosen to be the next Mother General, “she had been placed in final human authority above them”,[90] and this means that she will return to Belgium. This fact is bittersweet, as she knows she will return to an empty home, as her father has died. However, in Anna she recognized the artistic and individualistic character of her father. This helped her come to terms with her emotions and release herself from harsh self-judgement. Through gaining this awareness she managed to reconcile her past feeling of resentment and guilt towards her father. Her time in Ireland and her relationship with Anna provided her with a new perspective, enabling her to appreciate the qualities she had once mercilessly judged. This psychological and emotional development marked a significant transformation in her character, since she decided to embrace her father’s influence and to forgive herself for her past. Eventually, this change enabled her to return to Belgium with a sense of peace and openness, as opposed to the coldness and bitterness she might have alternatively felt.

The novel ends with uncertainty regarding both Anna's chances of success and the future for the Order. However, Anna is given the gift of "being allowed to run this obstacle race to the unknown. It was the only track she could see -and it had one great point- it ended in emptiness, on a wide horizon. That was all she asked."[91]

[89] O’Brien, 1988. p. 206
[90] O'Brien, 1988. p.291
[91] O'Brien, 1988. p.280

4.1) Kate O'Brien: Sex and Catholicism

Both of Kate O'Brien's novels were banned on the premise that they depicted unacceptable behaviour regarding sex that could lead to moral corruption. *Mary Lavelle* depicts scenes of adultery, and *The Land of Spices* gestures towards a homosexual relationship. However, Cronin (2012) states that her novels did not present a challenge to the public morality discourse because they portrayed explicit sexual scenes, but rather because they presented the idea that "sexuality had inescapable moral consequences for the individual and the social order",[92] and shared a "modernist vision of sexuality as a vital force with the potential to radically transform the self and revolutionise society."[93]

Even though O'Brien presents sexuality as a vital force in her novels, she is conscious of the disruptive and irrational nature of the libido. Sexuality is presented as a moral problem for her heroines, which is aligned with the "pre-Freudian, theological notion of sexuality"[94] By accepting the disruptive and erratic characteristics of the libido, O'Brien introduces a tension between the liberating potential of sexuality and its capacity to cause moral and personal turmoil. This tension is central to the moral tests her heroines face, through which they reach their personal development. The protagonists in O'Brien's novels gain their individual development when subjected to moral tests centred on sexuality. Through these they build their understandings of autonomy, social relations, obligations to society, and future vocations.

Mary Lavelle is presented with three moral tests throughout the novel: the bullfight, her relationship with Agatha Conlan, and her relationship with Juanito. The bullfight scene starts with Mary's perception of the act as 'sinful'. But to perceive terrible beauty, one must face terrible pain, and she comes to see the bullfight as presenting "echoes of the Christian sacrifice".[95] This scene is later connected to Mary's and Juanito's sexual experience, after which Mary is described as "no longer Aphrodite, but a broken, tortured Christian, a wounded Saint Sebastian."[96] According to Roberts, the relationship between the bull and the matador mirrors sex in "the wish to abandon oneself to the powerful other",[97] and sex is illustrated as a "deflowering [as] formally violent as the corrida".[98] The violence in the bullfight can be seen

[92] Cronin, 2012. p.84
[93] Ibid.
[94] Cronin, 2012. p.84-85
[95] Roberts, 2000. ix
[96] O'Brien, 1984. p.308-309
[97] Roberts, 2000. ix
[98] Ibid.

as a metaphor for the intense passion and sometimes destructive nature of sexual relationships. The act of "deflowering" being compared to the corrida (bullfight) highlights the connection of violence and intimacy. However, even if the bullfight is morally wrong within Mary's existing moral framework, her time in Spain leads to her wish to participate in it as a spectator and then engage in self-reflection about the consequences.

Correspondingly, the relationship with Juanito and Mary's willingness to participate in it, shows that Mary is ready to gain her autonomy and deny societal restrictions. However, she does not denounce these, bit keeps them in her mind at the time of her indiscretion:

> she thought of school and home, of John, of God's law and of sin, and did not let herself discard such thoughts. They existed, as real and true as ever, with all their traditional claims on her – but this one claim was his, and she would answer it, taking the consequences."[99]

Mary does not wish to escape Catholic morality, which states that her behaviour is socially disruptive, even though she acknowledges that this moral framework is insufficient, as shown in the challenge that their adultery posed to orthodoxy and the institution of marriage. The gravity of their sin is seen in its consequences, but Mary is ready to accept that she and Juanito have no future together as Catholics. According to Reynolds, this was the reason the novel was banned, "the Censorship of Publications took alarm at the audacity of an Irish girl daring to exercise individual judgement . . . choosing to do something which she and they regarded as a grave sin."[100]

Another moral test based on sexuality is found in the scene where Agatha Conlan admits to Mary that she has romantic feelings towards her. This pivotal moment challenges both characters' understanding of morality and sexuality. Their feelings are contextualised within the moral code of the Catholic doctrine, which defines such feelings as sinful and unnatural. Despite this, Agatha's decision to confide in Mary and her subsequent actions—such as requesting Mary's picture—indicate her struggle to reconcile her emotions with the religious teachings she has internalized. Mary's response is equally meaningful. She does not think of her as 'perverse' but gains a greater sympathy towards her as she equates Agatha's feelings as natural or unnatural to her own feelings for Juanito. This mutual understanding allows both characters to question the rigid moral framework imposed on them by their religion and society, leading to a deeper exploration of their individual moral beliefs in the context of forbidden or socially unacceptable desires.

[99] O'Brien, 1984. p.308
[100] Renyolds, 1987. p.62

When thinking about her and Agatha's feelings, Mary watches people going to pray at St. Geronimo: "seeking strength against the perversions of their hearts and escape from fantastic longings (…), mercy, forgiveness and explanation because they are so vicious to love each other."[101] Mary's development is evident as she gains greater compassion and a deeper understanding of humanity.

In *The Land of Spices*, sexuality is portrayed as a driving and 'fantastical', almost otherworldly, force. Helen Archer's liberalism—her initial belief that individuals should be free to follow their desires and happiness, guided by their personal moral framework— is challenged when she witnesses her father's involvement with a man, driving her to recognise the pain that even 'good' people can inflict on others while pursuing their individual desires and wishes.[102] The sexuality of her father provokes her judgement, and she deems him morally detestable. Her choice to judge her father and embrace hatred signifies her fundamental rejection of the notion of personal freedom**.** However, "through her mediations, the Revered Mother is driven toward a much more Protestant faith of personal interpretation of Christian doctrine and individual accountability before God",[103] which can also be seen in the religious practice of both Agatha Conlan and Mary Lavelle. These modifications to Catholic doctrine result in a more nuanced ethical perspective that includes both personal responsibility and obligations to others.

The outcome of Helen's moral test can be interpreted dually: she either succeeds in navigating her moral development or is perpetually scarred by the trauma her father passes on to her.[104] However, the true value of this intergenerational narrative becomes evident through the character of Anna Murphy.

At the novel's end, Anna experiences an epiphany regarding her future vocation while practising for her final exams with Pilar. While engrossed in reading Milton's *Lycidas*, Anna perceives Pilar's beauty in a new light, as a "lustrous potentiality" and as "something life could be about".[105]Anna is transformed by this erotic encounter which "demonstrates that she can successfully evade the polar extremes of Henry's unthinkingly selfish sensuality and Helen's damaging recoil from human sexuality."[106] This experience allows Anna to reconcile the

[101] O'Brien, 1984. p.249
[102] Cronin, 2012. p.101
[103] Wallace, 2006. p.22
[104] Cronin, 2012.p.102
[105] O'Brien, 1984. p.271-272
[106] Cronin, 2012.p.104

contrasting traits of Reverend Mother's strict moral judgement and her father's artistic individualism, finding a balanced understanding of her own identity. Through the recognition of one's sensuality, Anna comes to understand her vocation as an artist, just as Stephen Dedalus did in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.*

In both novels Kate O'Brien uses sexuality to test the morality of her protagonists and to showcase their development through how they manage their desires and their obligations to Catholic doctrine. The author does not focus on the sensual or emotional gratification derived from sexual desire but rather on its 'fantastical' aspects. This 'fantastical' nature of desire is inherently disruptive to fixed social and moral norms, highlighting the protagonists' struggles and growth as they navigate these challenges.

In these novels, sexuality is used as a catalyst, pushing the characters and the readers to confront situations where their inherited moral framework will be challenged. Through her fiction, the only way to reconcile conflicting desires, demands and obligations is to rely on one's own conscience. The reward for leaving one's comfort zone and exercising the rules of moral conduct is the procurement of 'sympathy'. By confronting the moral predicaments or trials of sexual desire, the protagonists develop relationships of understanding, devotion, and support. This 'sympathy' signifies a development towards a deeper understanding of human nature and the complexities of moral choices. For example, when the protagonists face moral dilemmas related to their sexual desires, they are forced to question their preconceived notions and biases. The process of introspection and moral questioning leads to personal development and a more nuanced understanding of themselves and others, highlighting the transformative power of empathy.

These relationships could potentially be erotic, like the dynamics between Mary and Juanito or Anna's perception of Pilar. Yet, eroticism is not essential, as seen in Mary's emotions for Agatha, Helen and Henry's relationship, and Helen's affection for Anna. Alongside attaining sympathy, the characters experience personal growth and the emergence of new possibilities that come with questioning their given moral framework. In the context of the novels, sexual desire has a utopian character.[107] Sexual desire in these novels is portrayed as having a utopian character because it serves as a powerful force for personal and social transformation. The protagonists have to break free from the constraints of their inherited moral and social norms and are encouraged to envision and strive for a liberated and authentic existence. This utopian

[107] Cronin, 2012.p.107

aspect of sexual desire is about the potential for creating a better, more understanding and empathetic, world.

4.2) Kate O'Brien: Gender and Family

Both novels delve deeply into the distinctions between male and female societal roles and the rigorously prescribed gender expectations prevalent within Irish culture. They offer a rich exploration of the underlying factors that perpetuate these differences and the societal norms that enforce and maintain traditional gender roles.

Alongside societal norms, which are both influenced by and a consequence of these expectations, the author delves into the obligations imposed by the family on its members within a rural middle-class context. This exploration serves as a critique and challenge to the Church and State edicts that shaped the powerful discourse of Irish family life in the early twentieth century, a time when private lives were subject to public scrutiny.[108] The novels highlight the significance of the family in one's development, particularly the relationships that the protagonists have with their mothers. These relationships, which often go against the Constitution and Church dictums, portray mothers as more than just primary caregivers, but as figures who fulfil the trope of the absent mother.[109]

The three accepted modes of female experience—the roles assigned to women in society—find expression in a game the girls play in the convent in *The Land of Spices*. The game is called "Nun, Married, Old Maid"[110] and the girls played it with no context, meaning it was a widespread and accepted game that predicted the results of girlhood.

If *Mary Lavelle* examines the issues that emerge from spinsterhood and the institution of marriage, *The Land of Spices* explores convent life and the bonds of sisterhood, presenting it as an alternative hierarchy and social construct. In both novels, the protagonists, Mary and Anna, wish to be free and independent but are initially denied this. Through Mary's reminiscence of her childhood before leaving for Spain, it is clear that she internalised her father's and society's notions. She recalls, "She has no idea of why when she was twelve or thirteen her main idea had been to be free and lonely", and finds it odd "that a little girl should have had that notion of perpetual self-government".[111]At the beginning of her stay in Spain,

[108] Tighe-Mooney, 2009. p.5
[109] Tighe-Mooney, 2009. p.119-127
[110] O'Brien, 1988. p. 118
[111] O'Brien, 1984. p.24

Mary reflects on her brothers, who also left Mellick, and feels it is impossible for her to do the same. To break free from her predestined roles, Mary first has an affair with the Spanish way of thinking; then she has an actual affair with Juanito. Her time in Spain gives her enough courage and strength to follow her childhood wishes, to be free and to roam.

Like Mary Lavelle, Anna Murphy also has a terrific wish for freedom but also realises:

> whereas a boy and an eldest son may expect to command the sacrifices and co-operation of others to his ends, a girl can do no such thing. And that in fact if a girl sees liberty as the greatest of all desirables, she will have to spin it out of herself, as the spider its web- her self-made snare in which to catch Anna did not yet know what.[112]

Societal and familial expectations in *The Land of Spices* are personified in Anna's grandmother, Mrs Condon. Mrs Condon looks to keep Anna away from higher education, stipulating that it will only harm the family, as she will not be able to reimburse them for financing her schooling in the convent. Anna is only granted the opportunity to go to university after the Reverend Mother involves the Bishop, a male authority figure, in the decision-making.

In both novels, the protagonists lack the nurturing role of a mother and must seek guidance outside of their family circle. In *Mary Lavelle*, Mary's mother dies when she is just a baby, and her aunt Cissy becomes the primary female role model in her life. However, "Aunt Cissy never answered Father – she echoed him. She never stood up for anyone, never took anyone's part, never uttered an opinion."[113] Therefore, Mary had to look up to the group of misses in Spain, guided by Agatha Conlan, for counsel.

In *The Land of Spices,* Anna's mother, Maud Murphy, prioritises her marital duties and reflects on her lack of maternal nurturing in relation to her husband's conduct. She thinks, "But if one lives five miles from a town; if – men being as they are – it was impossible to keep a governess in the house; if a husband drank all night and sneered at his wife all day, how else were the children to be educated, and protected?"[114] This indicates that Maud feels trapped by her circumstances and is unable to provide the nurturing she wishes she could. Even at the end of the novel, the Reverend Mother does not need to offer a justification to Anna's mother why the girl should continue with her education but to Anna's grandmother. This situation is brought on by the family's loss of money, which was Anna's father's fault, but it deeply impacts on her mother, who is unable to rectify the situation.

[112] O'Brien, 1988. p. 209
[113] O'Brien, 1984. p.21
[114] O'Brien, 1988. p. 45

In these novels the daughters are represented as the products of a cultural setting that stifles and represses women's individualism, and this is perpetuated by mothers who are themselves shaped by patriarchal institutions. Achieving a sense of self for these daughters is only possible in the absence of their mothers. A negation of the mother figures and a separation from them become the necessary sacrifices for their personal development and independence.[115]

The mother role in the novels is replaced by other modes of female society that have the same nurturing structure. In *Mary Lavelle*, the protagonist learns about womanhood within the society of other Irish misses in Spain, "here where she was flung for sociability among a mixed company of tough and sad and battered fellow-county-women, all older than herself (..) she was racing very fast out of heedlessness."[116] In this space, she can see both the challenges and rewards of assuming the role of a wife versus being independent. Through her relationship with the other women in Café Aleman, Mary gains profound sympathy, but the pinnacle of her development comes from her relationships with Agatha Conlan and Rosie O'Toole. Conlan confesses her romantic feelings towards Mary, to which Mary reacts with understanding, but she also teaches her about how to negotiate between instilled moral frameworks and doctrines and one's sense of individualism.

Another character who shows the capacity to be completely religious but never afraid to re-examine the doctrine is one of Mary's protégées, Milagros, who is, according to Boylan,

> an emblematic female character. She embodies, albeit at a remarkably young age, the detachment so highly prized by O'Brien. (…) We're not surprised that this girl, in many ways the most attractive and well-balanced figure in the entire novel, should be thinking of becoming a nun.[117]

Even though Milagros is younger than Mary, she was raised in an environment that supported her critical thinking, and she becomes one of the characters who signify the strength of detachment and individuality.

In *The Land of Spices* that role is Helen Archer's. This novel illustrates that, for most of O'Brien characters, the only socially accepted path to freedom for a woman was through becoming a nun. The convent is a society where there is a clear hierarchy of women, and it, as an institution, commands the broader society's respect. However, the purpose of the convent is dual: it could also be regarded as just a place "to (…) train (…) Irish girls as suitable wives",[118] or an "awkward, finicky, bourgeois instrument forged by an eighteenth-century lady

[115] Tighe-Mooney, 2009. p.234
[116] O'Brien, 1984. p.92
[117] Boylan, 2000. x
[118] O'Brien, 1988. p. 92

for the pious training of girls around the world".[119] However, within each woman, there is hope that devotion to a religious life might provide liberation from the martyrdom of being a wife and mother and that it is a role of power and independence, one respected by society. Helen Archer becomes the perfect example of the possibilities for women when she becomes Mere Générale at the end of the novel, as "she had been placed in final human authority above them".[120]

It would appear from this novel that the only alternative to motherhood as an accepted form of womanhood was to be found in the religious life, as it desexualised womanhood. At the beginning of the novel, the act of profession—taking vows to join a religious community, such as becoming a nun—is eerily similar to marriage. The postulants are called "brides" of Christ, and they are dressed in "white silk and lace veils",[121] and take on new, often male names. Furthermore, after the ceremony, the girls would have their "Reception breakfast" and eat "white-iced 'Reception' caked".[122] The Church equated women dedicating their lives to God with the state of marriage, reflecting societal norms that could not permit women to be regarded as individuals.

[119] O'Brien, 1988. p. 59
[120] O'Brien, 1988. p. 291
[121] O'Brien, 1988. p. 3
[122] O'Brien, 1988. p. 7

4.3) Kate O'Brien: Leaving and Returning to Ireland

Both novels share the notion that women have to leave their surroundings to fulfil their *Bildung*. In *Mary Lavelle*, Ireland represents home for Mary, and in *The Land of Spices*, Ireland represents otherness for Helen Archer.

In Mary's reflection on childhood, we see how society pushes women into the domestic sphere, making them docile and preventing their development. It is not important how a woman perceives herself but how she is perceived—as successful or unsuccessful in her relations with her father, husband and children. For Mary, leaving Ireland is necessary to regain her autonomy, but she is allowed to go there because of the faith and cultural values that her country and Spain share:

> In Spain, Mary is not entirely on foreign soil. The Catholic ethic is strong there, and she shares the values of religion and a certain philosophy of life; she suffers little dislocation in this context and shares the rules of Catholicism with the family in whose home she is to work as governess.[123]

Catholicism is her way out, as it brought middle-class Ireland into contact with Catholic Europe. Through her religion, she encountered otherness, and her time in Spain made her simultaneously more vulnerable and autonomous. Spain is a catalyst that causes Mary's catharsis and development; in Mellick such a thing was impossible because "the rules of society and Church shackle, quench, inhibit and condemn."[124] At the end of the novel, Mary returns to Ireland but just for the length of time it takes to claim her inheritance and end her relationship with John. She knows she must leave Ireland and fulfil her developmental track outside her community. In Spain, she has achieved her childhood dream of being "free and lonely"[125] and has seen the possibilities waiting for her after she has cast away the 'Joycean nets' of home, family, and Church.[126]

The theme of leaving and returning to Ireland is also explored through the other misses in Spain. They are all from the Irish Catholic middle-classes but are in a country where their lack of wealth is painfully clear. While the misses in Spain all had to leave Ireland to secure their well-being, their Spanish counterparts are wealthy and respected members of society. Regardless, the misses reject Spanish culture, and all hold to the empty promise of returning to Ireland, even though it is clear that this is not possible. In addition, it is interesting to see that

[123] Ryan, 1989. p.181
[124] Ryan, 1989. p.185
[125] O'Brien, 1988. p.27
[126] Ryan, 1989. p.210

while in Spain, the misses in Alemando café all long for the companionship of the English men; if they were in Ireland, they would denounce them as colonisers and a foreign force.

The Land of Spices introduces us to the theme of exile through the character of Helen Archer, or the Reverend Mother. At the start of the novel, her stay in Ireland is, for her, a "harsh and painful test of endurance",[127] as she is faced with hostility from the convent's pupils, nuns, and the local clergy. She is painfully aware that she is an English woman running a French institution in a country "aggressively devoted to shaking off all badges of colonisation."[128] She fears her stay in Ireland will make her merciless and lonely.

The only reason she decides to stay in Ireland is Anna Murphy. However, her time in Ireland proves crucial for her development, as she experiences the misery of absolute alienation there. As she begins to understand the pain of being shunned and rejected, she becomes more empathetic to her father's conditions and his homosexuality, which had made her deny him for her whole of her adult life. Her decision to stay and keep Anna safe is in part influenced by her father, as she feels that he would like this child and her temperament. In turn, her relationship with Anna is the primary catalyst of her development.

Unlike Mary Lavelle, Anna's freedom is not defined by leaving Ireland; it is found in her education. While Joyce's Dedalus's need to have the best education was taken as a given, for a girl like Anna, the right to higher education is a battle that must be won. At the end of the novel, the Reverend Mother helps Anna gain her freedom and convinces her grandmother to let her go to university, as "It is suggested that in this new changing Ireland, the female will have choices, and will have functions other than those in the domestic sphere".[129] Anna's form of leaving Ireland is in her rejecting the prescribed gender roles for women of her period. It is unclear if either of the heroines will ever go back to Mellick, and with "the feverish increase in activity within the Church to promote social code to correspond with a religious one",[130] it is unlikely that they would be accepted within the community if they did.

[127] Ryan, 1989. p. 102
[128] Ryan, 1989. p.102
[129] Ryan, 1989. p.130
[130] Ryan, 1989. p.212

2) Edna O'Brien: *The Country Girls* trilogy

Edna O'Brien was a prolific author who has written an extensive array of novels, plays, collections of short stories, a biography of James Joyce, and a travelogue. Her authorial debut was the novel *The Country Girls*, published in 1960. It was the first book in a trilogy of novels (*The Lonely Girls*, published in 1962, and *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, published in 1964) which became known as *The Country Girls Trilogy.* In 1986, the trilogy was re-released with the addition of an epilogue called *The Epilogue*. Banned by the Irish Censorship Board, all three novels faced significant public outrage, being reputedly burnt in her native village. However, the trilogy is celebrated for challenging the silence surrounding sexual and social issues during the repressive post-war period in Ireland. For this reason, it will be the central work analysed in this thesis.

The Country Girls trilogy caused a storm of controversy because it validated the experiences of young Irish women and their resistance to traditional Irish Catholic roles, and included frank depictions of their first sexual experiences. As *Bildungsromans*, the novels brought youth to the forefront at a time when Irish social life was being significantly reshaped by emerging youth culture.[131] This youth culture was a sign of how the country was being moulded by modernisation. According to Kiberd, "The salient feature of O'Brien's 'Sixties' novels was her focus on the sexual passions and betrayed emotions of a whole generation of Irishwomen".[132] Through her trilogy, Edna O'Brien shows the overdue effect of the sexual revolution and feminist movements on Ireland. However, these novels illustrate development narratives that emphasise the fact that development is impossible because the weight of the past stifles all attempts of a forward motion.

The *Country Girls* trilogy chronicles the experiences of Caithleen 'Cait' Brady and Barbara 'Baba' Brennan, two Catholic Irish girls born in a village in the west of the country. Following their move to Dublin, they then go on to England. The first novel introduces us to

[131] Cronin, 2012. p.179
[132] Kiberd, 1995. p.566

Cait's childhood and everyday life, which she narrates in a manner that brings it into the present. It begins:

> 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.[133]

For Cait, her alcoholic and abusive father is a significant burden on her family: his actions result in financial ruin for the Bradys, and her mother has to take on the role of the household's sole parent and sole proprietor. She sees the sacrifices her mother makes for her and the fear and anxiety she has when her father goes on one of his endless benders. Even though she is just a child and is petrified of the possibility of her father coming home and killing her mother while she is in school, she tries to cheer her up, "She was the best mama in the world. I told her so, and she held me very close for a minute as if she would never let me go. I was everything in the world to her, everything."[134]

Baba's family is worlds apart from Cait's. Her father is a veterinarian who is seldom home and, in Cait's eyes, a gentleman, and her mother, Martha, is the stark opposite of Cait's mother. "Martha was what the villagers called fast"[135], a term used to describe a woman perceived as being promiscuous or morally loose, often engaging in relationships or activities quickly. Martha is bored with village life and makes fun of her husband. One night, the Brennans take Cait to a play, and there she gets the worst news of her life – the death of her mother. The 'grown-ups' disclose to Cait that her mother was in a terrible drowning accident, and they are looking for her body, but they may never recover it, and she must come to terms with the fact. Remembering the news, she recalls:

> I heard nothing, because you hear nothing, or no one, when your whole body cries and cries for the thing it has lost. Lost. Lost. And yet I could not believe that my mother was gone; and I still knew it was true, because I had a feeling of doom and every bit of me was frozen stiff. (…) I knew that Mama would never have a grave for me to put flowers on. Somehow she was more dead then than anyone I had ever heard of. (…) It was the last day of childhood.[136]

That summer, when she was fourteen, her first relationship started. It was with Mr Gentleman, a French man who was married and whose real name nobody in the village could pronounce, but he was well thought of as 'gentle' and 'refined'. One day, they went to Limerick together, and she narrates their meeting as follows:

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[133] O'Brien, 2017. p.3
[134] O'Brien, 2017. p.7
[135] O'Brien, 2017. p.39
[136] O'Brien, 2017. p.52-58

> My soul was alive; enchantment; something I have never known before. It was the happiest day of my life. (…) my new god, with a face carved out of pale marble and eyes that made me sad for every woman that hadn't known him.[137]

The girls go off for their schooling to the convent and find the religious life there challenging. Cait, however, in the convent finds a place where she can be herself, because she is a good student, and friends there do not mock her and make her feel small continually. Baba, however, finds their new surroundings extremely difficult and, for the three years they spend there, she tries to devise a plan to get them expelled. While at the convent, Mr Gentleman and Cait continue to see each other secretly. In Cait's memories, that was a happy time, and Mr Gentleman and she often pretended that she was his "freckled-faced daughter" and he was her father. For her, it was "nice playing make-believe", and "he promised when I went to Dublin later on he would be a very attentive father".[138]

Soon after, Cait and Baba forged their plan to get expelled from the convent. They wrote profanities on the back of a picture of the Virgin Mary and left it lying around for somebody to find. After the act, Cait felt ashamed. Cait is unaware of the consequences of the expulsion and leaving the life of education. But even though she can go to another convent because of her scholarship, she follows Baba to Dublin.

The girls are excited about the possibility of moving to a big city, and Cait feels no remorse about leaving their families and their village. On the train to Dublin, they "began that phase of our lives as the giddy country girls brazening to the big city".[139] The girls decide to abandon their country girls' identity because they "were grown up and independent."[140] They start going out on dates while being drastically different in their expectations of men and love. Baba has a more rational nature and 'wants to go places' and knows that her wishes will be met in the company of older men, while Cait fantasises about young men, romance, and love.[141] However, Cait is still in her secret relationship with Mr Gentleman and is not speaking to Baba about it.

At the end of the first novel, Baba gets tuberculosis and must go to a sanatorium for six months. Mr Gentleman and Cait had arranged to go to Vienna to be together, but the plan blows up in their faces on the day of their expected departure, and Mr Gentleman leaves Cait waiting for him in the rain. Arriving home, she comes across a telegram from Mr. Gentleman which

[137] O'Brien, 2017. p.73
[138] O'Brien, 2017. p.129
[139] O'Brien, 2017. p.154
[140] O'Brien, 2017. p.169
[141] O'Brien, 2017. p.184

reads: “Everything gone wrong. Threats from your father. My wife has another nervous breakdown. Regret enforced silence. Must not see you.”[142] The first novel thus ends with the end of Cait’s first relationship.

The second novel, *The Lonely Girl*, starts two years later. Cait now works at a grocery shop in the north of Dublin and is immersed in books: “All the nicest men were in books—the strange, complex, romantic men; the ones I admired the most.” [143] She hasn’t seen Mr Gentleman in two years and remembers him as a ghost figure. Baba is back with Cait and spends her days pretending to be fast and dating men. Cait continually wishes to encounter a remarkable new man.[144] This wish is fulfilled when she meets Eugene Galliard, the second man in her life. In him, she finds her second, ‘dark-faced’ God:

> I felt suddenly at home with him. (…) his face was long and had a grey colour. It reminded me of a saint’s face carved out of grey stone which I saw in the church every Sunday. My elbows touched his, and I had that paralyzing sensation in my legs which I hadn’t felt since I’d parted from Mr Gentleman.[145]

Being in love again ends her desolate state, and she remembers not being lonely because she was with someone with whom she wanted to be.[146]

Eugene, a married protestant, has a specific way around Cait, often teasing her and scolding her for being naïve and on the basis of her rural background and cultural legacy which he stereotypes, even going as far as christening her Kate, as “Caithleen was too ‘Kiltartan’ for his liking”.[147] Kiltartan refers to a region in County Galway, Ireland, where Lady Gregory, a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival, lived and worked. She crafted a unique form of Hiberno-English, known as Kiltartanese, to reflect the distinctive speech patterns and rhythms of the local people.[148] Eugene and Kate start seeing each other more often, and even though she knows he is married and eventually finds out that he has a child, she regularly goes to his house. She becomes utterly dependent on him and their relationship. As the time comes for them to consummate their relationship, she is utterly frozen by fear and ashamed as she had been “brought up to think of it as something unmentionable, which a woman had to pretend to like, to please a husband.”[149] Eugene shows some sympathy towards her situation, but he leaves for a work trip, leaving her with a book titled *The Body and Mature Behaviour*, and she thinks she

[142] O'Brien, 2017. p.223
[143] O'Brien, 2017. p.227
[144] O'Brien, 2017. p.230
[145] O'Brien, 2017. p.237
[146] O'Brien, 2017. p.255
[147] O'Brien, 2017. p.258
[148] https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/lady-gregory-5059831-Mar2020/ accessed 26.8.2024
[149] O'Brien, 2017. p.289

will never see him again. They have no contact for a while, but he writes to her saying that he forgives her everything.[150] The same day, Kate finds another note for her, but this time, it is a message threatening to inform her parents if she does not end her relationship with a man who is evil and "has lived with numerous women and then walked out on them".[151]

On the following New Year's Eve her father comes to Dublin and drunkenly barges into the shop where she worked. He had got his version of the letter, in which the 'friend' who had written the message expressed concern and "would not like to see a nice Catholic Irish girl ruined by a foreigner."[152] Her father decides to force her to come home with him, but she makes an escape plan and returns to Eugene. Soon after Kate and Eugene reconnect, her father follows her and tries to force her to come back with them. This leads to Kate's hiding under the couch and her father and his friends beating up Eugene. Eugene is badly hurt, and Kate is deeply ashamed of her people: "They've ruined, and ruined, and ruined me. He'll never look at me again."[153] She believes Eugene will always mentally link her with them and will continue to look on her as a savage.

Kate stays with Eugene in his country home, and they buy her a fake ring so that people will not ask many questions: "We bought a wide gold ring, and he put it on me in the shop— "With this expensive ring, I thee bed."[154] After buying the ring, Kate and Eugene consummate their relationship and start living as a married couple. Even though she puts a lot of effort into moulding herself according to his standards, Kate starts to slightly resent Eugene for all the rules he sets for her and their everyday life, and he becomes disillusioned by her. After a few fights concerning their worldview, power dynamic and faith, Eugene stated:

> "It's funny", he said, "the difference between fantasy and reality. When I met you those first few times in Dublin by accident, I thought to myself, Now there is a simple girl, gay as a bird, delighted when you pass her a second cake, busy all day and tired when she lies down at night. A simple, uncomplicated girl." He spoke mournfully, as if he were speaking of someone who had died.[155]

Meanwhile, Baba has been living the 'fast' life alone in Dublin and becomes pregnant. She rushes to Kate for support and describes her situation:

> She said he was a married man and he worried in case his wife might get to hear of it. (…) She said that the man had taken it very casually and said goodbye to her on the upstairs of a bus the day before. "See you around" were his parting words to her.[156]

[150] O'Brien, 2017. p.310
[151] O'Brien, 2017. p.312
[152] O'Brien, 2017. p.314
[153] O'Brien, 2017. p.398
[154] O'Brien, 2017. p.399
[155] O'Brien, 2017. p.432
[156] O'Brien, 2017. p.441

Kate and Eugene's quarrels have got worse, and she decides to leave him to teach him a lesson and go back to Baba, always confident that he will come to her. Baba is not pregnant anymore, but she is still sure that she will leave for England, and Kate decides to go along with the plan solely based on the notion that Eugene will come for her, and she will not have to follow through with it. However, Eugene never came, and she had to go through with the plan. Unlike when she left the country for the 'fairy lights' of Dublin, she is sorrowful this time, "I could hardly believe that we were moving, that we were leaving Ireland. (…) And gradually the city of Dublin started receding in the mauve twilight (…) We were both crying."[157] The second novel ends with the girls in England. Baba works as a receptionist at a Soho hotel while Kate works in a delicatessen shop and goes to London University at night to study English—she finally has some autonomy and is "finding her feet."

The third novel, *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, differs from the previous one in that the narration is divided between Baba and a third-person narrator. Baba lets the reader know about the last year of their life and starts with her description of Kate as "too sedate and good; you know, that useless kind of goodness".[158] After a year of living in London, Kate called Eugene and "they took up their old refrain", fell in love and had to get married because she was pregnant. She recalls that on the day of their wedding, they fought because he purposely offended the priest who performed their marriage ceremony in a Catholic church. At this time, Eugene called Kate "nothing but a farmer's daughter, reverting to a type" and said that "she had no breeding".[159] Eugene and Kate went to live in the country after she gave birth to their son Cash.

In the meantime, Baba had started a relationship with a builder named Frank she met at an Irish club. She gives her perspective on relationships and sexuality and says that they married not out of love but convenience. Kate and Eugene also returned to London, and she and Baba "met regularly to discuss their plight".[160] As her marriage proved disheartening, Kate started an affair with a married man, and Eugene "began to sense it at once, although there was no evidence that he knew".[161] Despite the fact her husband became even more cruel, Kate decided to end her affair, but it was too late. Eugene found the letters they had exchanged, and in response to her plea that she would try and be better, he responded: "I'll be better." (…) "You

[157] O'Brien, 2017. P.477
[158] O'Brien, 2017. P.483
[159] O'Brien, 2017. P.484
[160] O'Brien, 2017. P.491
[161] O'Brien, 2017. P.496

won't. It's your nature to lie, like your lying, lackeying ancestors".[162] After their falling out, Kate took her son Cash and fled to Baba, but after a period, she decided to concede and return him to Eugene. Eugene was free of Kate, but she was left bound to him by fear, sexual necessity and what she thought was love. This fear ultimately leads to a nervous breakdown, which results in her being hospitalised.[163]

On the other hand, Baba and her husband cannot have a child, a situation caused by his infertility or lack of knowledge regarding sexuality, and as a result he becomes "very rough in his ways."[164] She has an affair with a drummer and ends up pregnant, but unlike Kate, she is not smitten by a great love story and does not leave with a broken heart. She tries to induce an abortion with castor oil, but it proves unsuccessful. Baba refuses to be apologetic, and her husband claims the child as his own.

Kate lives independently but loses the battle with her internalised hatred.[165] At a party, she meets a man and has casual sex with him, which leads to a revelation that this does not interest her without the claim of love, which, in her mind, brings stability in a form of a man who will protect and guide her. Eugene took Cash and fled to Fiji. "It was a big moment, the one when reality caught up with a nightmare, the crest and the end."[166] Kate was outplayed by Eugene whom she trusted enough to think he would never take away her son. Over the years, she maintained a relationship with her son through letters. In a final act of trying to mend her mistakes, she decides to have herself sterilised to eliminate the chance of making the same mistake again.[167] The third novel ends with Baba's remark about Kate after her operation. She feels that Kate has willingly removed "some important region they both knew nothing about",[168] as too much has been taken from her.

Twenty-two years after the trilogy's conclusion, Baba returns in *The Epilogue* and recounts the events of the last twenty years while she travels back to Ireland and their village in the country. Twenty years ago, Kate tried to slash her wrists at Waterloo Station. Baba recalls that she thought a saviour was coming, "a male Florence Nightingale might kneel and bandage and swoop her off to a life of certainty and bliss". However, that was not the case, just a lot of

[162] O'Brien, 2017. P.513
[163] O'Brien, 2017. P.582
[164] O'Brien, 2017. p.520
[165] O'Brien, 2017. p.605
[166] O'Brien, 2017. p.641
[167] O'Brien, 2017. p.647
[168] O'Brien, 2017. p.648

crying and pain.[169] Baba had her daughter, Tracy, who rejected her from the moment she was born. She refused her milk and moved out as soon as she was old enough. Baba, like her mother, 'was not the maternal type', and she puts the weight of everything that followed with Kate on that mistake, "the old umbilical love". [170] Eugene and Cash returned to England, and Kate even won custody as Cash declared he wanted to be with his mother. Their son grew up and got a scholarship to Harvard, which meant he had to move to America— "the big rupture".[171] Yet again, Kate was left without her child and with a new romance that came to an end as soon as it brought new traces of hope. Realizing that her emotional vulnerability and stagnation was her downfall, one night, she went swimming in a lake and drowned:

> It was death by accident (…). She got carried away and went in there after dark and took the plunge. Alone and covert as always, not knowing whether it was deliberate or whether she just wanted to put an end to the fucking torment she was in.[172]

Baba is on her way to return her ashes to Ireland and scatter them with her son.

The ending of Baba's story is that her husband survived a massive stroke, which reduced him to a childlike status, and she had to be his nurse. The interesting consequence of this is that she doesn't hate him anymore and has become selfless, changing her nature and ways.

[169] O'Brien, 2017. p.651
[170] O'Brien, 2017. p.657
[171] O'Brien, 2017. p.676
[172] O'Brien, 2017. p.669

5.1) Edna O'Brien: Sex and Catholicism

Throughout the trilogy, Cait is prone to seeing God in her love interests. Her first love, Mr Gentleman, has a ""holy-picture" quality", [173] and is her "new God, with a face carved of pale marble".[174] Eugene is portrayed as a man who has "a saint's face carved out of grey stone which (she) saw in the Church every Sunday",[175] and, later on, as a "stranger, a mad martyr nailed to his chair".[176] In *The Epilogue*, Baba mockingly characterizes Cait's final lover as the "Holy Ghost because of his fugitive ways".[177] Cait attributes holy images to the men in her life because she is waiting for salvation from her family trauma. As a girl in Ireland, she could not see safety outside of marriage despite seeing what marriage could do to a woman. According to Cronin:

> Rather than yielding the originality and authenticity of a new self, in the Joycean and Kate O'Brien mode, here sexuality is a matter of simulation and repetition. Cait seems to be trapped in a repetitive cycle rather than on the trajectory of self-development and self-discovery associated with the classical Bildungsroman. Instead of producing a transformation, sexuality reiterates how Cait is immobilised by her history. Her first sexual experience is subtended between the symbolic presence of her mother and the literal presence of her father.[178]

In this society sex was the greatest tabu, and this was reinforced through religious doctrine. This can be seen in the scene in the convent, soon after the nuns find the picture with Cait and Baba's signature. The image contains sexual content, and at the moment of their expulsion, the nuns and other girls look at them as though they are filthy and loathsome, "In the hallway, girls looked at us as if we had some terrible disease, and even girls who had stolen watches and things gave us a hateful, superior look".[179]

This kind of hypocrisy extends itself throughout the trilogy, with married men wanting to have sex with young girls but being annoyed with their lack of knowledge and experience, while at the same time being a part of a society that demands from women a Virgin Mary character. Cait's first sexual experience comes just days after denouncing her family and when

[173] O'Brien, 2017. p.261
[174] O'Brien, 2017. p.312
[175] O'Brien, 2017. p.185
[176] O'Brien, 2017. p.351
[177] O'Brien, 2017. p.528
[178] Cronin, 2012. p.188-189
[179] O'Brien, 2017. p.134-135

Eugene bought her a fake wedding ring, which can be seen as "an exchange in which Cait is passively passed from her father to Galliard."[180]

Cait's thoughts before her first sexual encounter express this society's attitudes to, and ignorance of, sex: "I knew that I was about to do something terrible. I believed in hell, in eternal torment by fire. (…) I just wanted to go to sleep and wake up, finding that it was all over, the way you wake up after an operation."[181] It is up to her to decide when she will lose her innocence, but she is left completely crippled by this situation as she has never made any decisions in her life. She is torn between her longing that kissing was the only thing people ever did and her desire to please Eugene.[182]

On the other hand, Baba had a more realistic notion of sex; she saw it as a necessary evil to get to a goal. Her husband was different from Cait's; he was just as inexperienced as her: "An Irishman: good at battles, sieges, and massacres. Bad in bed. But I expected that. It made him hell of a lot nicer than most of the sharks I'd been out with".[183] She confided in her mother regarding the matter and was instructed to grit her teeth and suffer it. Unlike Cait, she does not dream of romance but is painfully aware of the transaction in which she is the "bloody sacrificial lamb".[184]

Through the theme of sex, it is clear that this Ireland is at an impasse: a traditional country that is trying to reconfigure its national identity while at the same time clashing with the aspects of modernism that were coming over from the UK and the US. Even though the girls are part of a generation that is freer in their sexual behaviour, they still fear it as religious dogma is deeply embedded in their everyday lives. What holds them back is the older generations insisting that the clergy must be a part of their decision-making. This can be best exemplified in the scene in which Cait's father has her talking to a priest about her indiscretion with Eugene and later even bringing the local priest, Father Hagerty, to talk her out of living in sin.

The connection between class, sexuality and Catholicism can be best exemplified in Baba's opinions in on Pope John Paul II, found in the *Epilogue*:

> Now, when Pope John Paul II travels he says what Popes have been saying since *secula seculorum* – "Thou shall not sin." He's still for keeping women in bondage, sexual bondage above all, as if they weren't fucked

[180] Cronin, 2012. p. 189
[181] O'Brien, 2017. p.292-294
[182] O'Brien, 2017. p.298-302
[183] O'Brien, 2017. p.487
[184] O'Brien, 2017. p.491

> up enough with their own organs, and whoever said women in the world enjoy all the fucking they have to do – no one, certainly not me. The Pope is all for bevies of children within wedlock, more children to fill the slums and the buses and smash telephone kiosks, because of course it's usually the ones in the slums that breed so profusely, part of their routine, like a fry-up. The smarter ones know all the ropes, know how to keep in with the Pope and still swing from the old chandeliers.[185]

Baba is acutely conscious of the role that the Catholic church imposes on women through its dogma and how the middle and upper classes are not expected to follow the same code of conduct. By restricting a big part of one's personal development, their sexuality, women are left pliable to society to mould them according to its wishes, as they remain forever dependent on male guidance.

[185] O'Brien, 2017. p.666

5.2) Edna O'Brien: Gender and Family

Through *The Country Girls* trilogy, the reader can see how a strictly defined Catholic female identity took a toll on Irish women in the 1940s post-independence era—a country burdened by its history, politics, and religion.[186]

Edna O'Brien portrays two contrasting heroines: a submissive and compliant type of a woman and a woman who defies societal norms, understanding the female situation and not abiding by 'the laws of the land' but challenging the status quo:

> Realizing that the earlier heroines were bawdy and the later ones lyrical I decided to have two, 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 that there was. As well as that, their rather meager lives would be made bearable by the company of each other. Kate was looking for love. Baba was looking for money.[187]

However, the author begins by portraying the Irish female situation through the depiction of their mothers. Cait and Baba's mothers stand in stark contrast, Cait's being a martyr and Baba's embodying qualities considered unacceptable during that period:

> Martha was what the villagers called fast. Most nights she went down to the Greyhound hotel, dressed in a tight black suit with nothing under the jacket, only a brassiere, and with a chiffon scarf knotted at her throat. Strangers and commercial travellers admired her. (…) She wanted two things from life and she got them – drink and admiration. (…) Martha had been a ballet dancer. But she gave up her career for marriage, or so she said.[188]

Through their mothers, the girls internalised what being a woman in Ireland meant. Kate empathised with her mother's trauma, both in life and in death:

> "My mother is dead," (…) I wanted to say something else, something that would convey the commonplace sacrifice of her life: of her with one shoulder permanently drooping from carrying buckets of hen food, of her keeping bars of chocolate under the bolster so that I could eat them in bed if I got frightened of Dada or of the wind.[189]

Through her development arc, she is paralysed by her family situation. In the end, it becomes apparent that her future is not available to her because of her past. Her father, an abusive alcoholic, drives her to search for security in relationships with older married men. She seeks guidance rather than being proactive about her development. In the first two novels, Cait is a

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[186] O'Brien, 1987. p.474
[187] Donoghue, 2000. https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/04/09/specials/obrien-heroines.html accessed 15.52024.
[188] O'Brien, 2017. p.39-40
[189] O'Brien, 2017. p.259

student, but when faced with the possibility of losing support from Baba, she rejects that path that could lead her away from the expected gender roles of being a wife and a mother.

The trilogy sets women up in two distinct roles, which are both internally and externally instilled: the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. Cait's mother is depicted as a Virgin Mary, and according to Cait, her self-sacrifice and death led Cait to view her as a flawless mother figure who could do no wrong. Even when there are hints that her mother's accident occurred while she was trying to escape with her lover, or when Cait recalls that her mother allowed other men to do with her as they pleased in exchange for small favours, the representation of her mother remains immaculate. Guided by this arbitrary role model, which is rooted more in her mind than in reality, Cait feels inadequate. She spends the rest of her life comparing herself with other women, resenting them, and not being able to challenge predefined social roles. She believes that if she succeeds in being the perfect wife or mother, she will finally be free and fulfilled. However, this belief ultimately leads to her tragic end when she comes to the realisation that she cannot achieve this ideal.

On the other hand, Baba and her mother Martha symbolise the archetype of Mary Magdalene, or 'the fallen woman'. This representation is especially significant in a society that stipulates strict rules of conduct that women are expected to abide by. Nonetheless, both women have to 'redeem themselves' through the storyline. As Martha grows older, she becomes more rule-abiding and turns to religion, and Baba is ultimately forced into a "Little Mother" role, the nickname given to her as a joke after her husband has a stroke that leaves him in a childlike state of mind and manner.

There is a noticeable feeling of fatalism, which differentiates Edna O'Brien from Kate O'Brien. While the older author depicts a way out for women, Edna O'Brien demonstrates that there is no escape from the nation's perception of the Irish woman as a caretaker first and an autonomous individual second. According to Kristine Byron, through dealing with motherhood and sexuality, the trilogy examines the formation of feminine gender roles and presents an extensive critique of the Irish Catholic capitalist patriarchy. Furthermore, through her *Epilogue,* O'Brien critiques the traditional roles assigned to women in literature, arguing that the female-romance plot fails to capture the entire female experience in fiction, nor is it enough to completely capture female development.[190]

[190] Byron, 2002.p.448-449

5.3) Edna O'Brien: Leaving and Returning to Ireland

The first significant rupture for Cait and Baba is their departure from their village to Dublin. For Cait, this move represents a desperate attempt to escape the trauma associated with her parents. The village, described as "dead and tired and old and crumbling and falling down,"[191] holds nothing but painful memories for her. Her relationship with Mr. Gentleman, the only foreigner in the village, symbolizes her initial effort to reject her Irish roots and the oppressive environment she associates with her family.[192]

Both girls are initially excited about the prospects of Dublin, envisioning it as a modern metropolis that will offer them freedom and new opportunities. However, upon arrival, they quickly realize that Dublin is not as progressive as they had hoped. The city's culture remains "old-fashioned," and societal norms often thwart their attempts to live brazenly. Cait's relationship with Eugene, an Englishman, further illustrates her desire to distance herself from her Irish heritage. Eugene's disdain for all things Irish and his mockery of Cait's origins reinforce her feelings of inadequacy and her wish to escape her past.

On the other hand, Baba embraces the fast life in Dublin but soon faces the consequences of her reckless behaviour. Her decision to move to England is driven by a desire for even greater freedom and opportunity, and Cait follows her, partly due to her breakup with Eugene.

The move from Dublin to England marks a turning point for both characters. Cait feels a deep sadness leaving Dublin, as it represented a significant chapter in her life and she formed friendships there. Baba, however, is thrilled by the prospect of new adventures and opportunities outside of Ireland. In England, Cait experiences a brief glimpse of autonomy. Away from the paternal influences of her community and lovers, she begins to find her footing,[193], starting to assert her independence, there is a glimpse into a future set in England that may change the self-fulfilling prophecy of Cait's life up to that point. However, her reconciliation with Eugene quickly pulls her back into a pattern of dependence and servility, externalising her countrymen's proclamation, "The tragic history of our fair land. Alien power

[191] O'Brien, 2017. p.153
[192] O'Brien, 2017. p. 321
[193] O'Brien, 2017. p.480

sapped our will to resist."[194] Eugene's subtle and assertive mockery of her Irish origins continues to undermine her self-worth and perpetuates her internalized shame about her heritage.

Baba's experience in England is marked by her marriage to an Irishman, Frank Durack, despite her initial dread of returning to her roots. Frank embodies many of the negative stereotypes associated with Irish men, including excessive drinking and pride. His frustration over their inability to have a child leads to public blame and private roughness towards Baba. Despite her attempts to escape her Irish identity, Baba finds herself entangled in the very traits she sought to avoid.

The final act of returning to Ireland occurs in the *Epilogue*, when Baba travels back to scatter Cait's ashes. This journey is deeply symbolic, representing a full circle in their lives. Cait's death and Baba's act of scattering her ashes between the bogs and murmuring lakes of their homeland underscore the inescapable connection to their roots.

Cait's perception of her home as a place obsessed with death is poignantly reflected in Baba's final wish for her friend: to "rise up nightly like a banshee and battle her progenitors."[195] This wish symbolises hope for Cait to finally free herself from the trauma and constraints imposed by her nationality, family, and religion.

The three big moves in Cait and Baba's lives—from their village to Dublin, Dublin to England, and Baba's return to Ireland—mirror their internal transformations. Each location change corresponds with significant shifts in their identities, relationships, and perceptions of freedom and autonomy. Through these moves, the characters navigate their complex relationships with their Irish heritage, ultimately seeking liberation from the constraints that have shaped their lives.

[194] O'Brien, 2017. p. 378
[195] O'Brien, 2017. p. 668

6) Conclusion

The works of James Joyce, Kate O'Brien, and Edna O'Brien offer a profound exploration of the *Bildungsroman* genre through the lenses of Irish identity, Catholicism, and the experience of youth. While all three authors delve into the complexities of personal development within a restrictive society, their approaches and thematic focuses reveal both similarities and distinct differences.

One of the primary similarities is their exploration of identity and autonomy, emphasising the struggle between personal desires and societal expectations. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce delves into Stephen Dedalus's journey towards self-actualization. As a male, Stephen possesses a voice that allows him to rebel against his family's wishes concerning his university and vocation. He openly defies his family and societal expectations, ultimately choosing to pursue his artistic ambitions despite the disapproval he faces. This rebellion is a significant aspect of his development, showcasing his determination to carve out his own path.

In contrast, the female protagonists in Kate O'Brien's and Edna O'Brien's novels face additional layers of societal and familial constraints. For instance, in *The Land of Spices*, Anna Murphy's quest for autonomy is significantly more challenging. Unlike Stephen, Anna cannot simply assert her will; she requires an advocate in the figure of the Reverend Mother. The Reverend Mother, in turn, must appeal to the Bishop—representing male and religious authority—to secure Anna's opportunity to pursue her education and vocation. This highlights the additional hurdles women face in asserting their independence within a patriarchal society.

Similarly, in *Mary Lavelle*, the protagonist, Mary, must leave Ireland to find her voice. Her journey to Spain is a crucial step in her development, allowing her to experience life outside the restrictive norms of Irish society. Only after this transformative experience can she return to Ireland with a newfound sense of independence and self-assurance. Mary's physical departure from Ireland symbolises the broader struggle for female autonomy, illustrating that women often need to step outside their immediate environment to reclaim their voices and assert their identities.

Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls* trilogy further explores these themes, portraying the protagonists' struggles to assert their identities amidst the oppressive moral and social codes of mid-20th century Ireland. The female characters in these novels navigate a complex landscape of societal expectations, familial obligations, and personal desires, often at odds with the rigid structures that seek to confine them.

Another common thread is their critique of Catholicism. All three authors examine the pervasive influence of Catholicism on personal freedom and sexuality. Joyce's Stephen Dedalus rejects the Church's dogma to pursue artistic freedom. Kate O'Brien's characters grapple with the moral consequences of their desires within a Catholic framework, while Edna O'Brien's heroines confront the Church's restrictive views on female sexuality and autonomy. While all three authors offer a critique of the Catholic Church and its rigid moral framework, Joyce and Kate O'Brien also explore in their works the possibilities of a religious vocation, and all three use Catholic imagery in their portrayal of artistic creation, sexual, and romantic relations.

In terms of narrative style, Joyce's use of stream-of-consciousness and non-linear narrative structures in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* set a precedent for modernist *Bildungsroman*. Both Kate and Edna O'Brien employ similar techniques to provide deep psychological insights into their characters' inner lives, reflecting the influence of Joyce's narrative style.

The contextual focus of their works further distinguishes them. Joyce's work is set in colonial Ireland, with an emphasis on the socio-political landscape of the time and its impact on youth and identity. In contrast, Kate and Edna O'Brien's novels are set in post-colonial Ireland, exploring how the country's independence and modernity influenced the lives of women. They provide a critique of the evolving societal norms and the enduring legacy of colonialism on personal and collective consciousness.

The portrayal of female protagonists also differs significantly. Kate O'Brien's novels depict women who challenge and resist the rigid moral and social codes of their time. Characters like Mary Lavelle and Anna Murphy strive for personal growth and autonomy, often finding strength in their relationships with other women. Edna O'Brien's heroines, Cait and Baba, are portrayed with a sense of fatalism. They struggle against the weight of their past and the societal expectations imposed on them, often finding themselves trapped in cycles of dependency and disillusionment.

Regarding them specifically in terms of the *Bildungsroman*, Kate O'Brien's novels, *Mary Lavelle* and *The Land of Spices*, emphasise the female protagonists' moral and psychological growth within a Catholic framework. Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls* trilogy presents a more fragmented and cyclical approach to the *Bildungsroman*. The heroines' journeys are marked by repeated attempts to escape their past and assert their identities, only to be continually thwarted by societal and personal limitations. The trilogy critiques the traditional female romance plot and highlights the complexities of female development in a repressive society.

The works of James Joyce, Kate O'Brien, and Edna O'Brien offer a rich and nuanced exploration of the *Bildungsroman* genre, each contributing uniquely to the understanding of personal development within the context of Irish society. Joyce's focus on the male experience and artistic freedom, Kate O'Brien's portrayal of women challenging societal norms, and Edna O'Brien's depiction of the cyclical struggles of female protagonists have enriched the literary landscape. Their novels not only critique the rigid societal and religious structures of their time but also provide a voice for the marginalised experiences of Irish women. By situating their protagonists within the framework of the *Bildungsroman*, these authors effectively highlight the enduring relevance of their themes in contemporary discussions on gender, identity, and autonomy. Their works continue to resonate, offering valuable insights into the complexities of personal and collective consciousness in post-colonial Ireland.

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