

Representations of Femininity in the Novels of Edna O'Brien, 1960-1996

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by

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Introduction

In the National Portrait Gallery Bill Brandt's black and white photograph of Edna O'Brien (1980) is exhibited alongside portraits of Doris Lessing and Germaine Greer.¹ The Gallery's implicit recognition of O'Brien as a contemporary woman writer of significance is reinforced by the portrait's caption, which reads: 'Since her first novel *The Country Girls* (1960), O'Brien has addressed the subject [sic] of women in society, of solitude and sexual repression'.

Assessors of O'Brien have tended largely to ignore the 'women in society' element of her work, concentrating rather upon 'solitude and sexual repression' and upon O'Brien's Irishness. It is interesting that for the National Portrait Gallery O'Brien's status as a writer seems to transcend the category of 'Irish writer', to which she is all too frequently relegated despite having spent her entire career in London. Yet O'Brien's perceived status is easily undermined. In the 1960s chapter of *A Century of Women* Sheila Rowbotham echoes the National Portrait Gallery's suggested link between O'Brien and Lessing. Rowbotham's tone is, however, somewhat more reductive of O'Brien; she refers to 'novels [of the 1960s] which explored how to be women, from Doris Lessing's lust and autonomy to Edna O'Brien's romance and abandonment' (Rowbotham, 1997, 338). 'Romance and abandonment' implies, as the more dignified 'solitude and sexual repression' does not, a lightweight and uncontrolled literary output in contrast to the

¹ The date is significant, since it indicates O'Brien's ongoing importance as a literary figure; many of the Gallery's exhibits are transient.

implicitly valorised Lessing.² Rowbotham's 'from ... to' does encourage comparison in terms of a perceived literary hierarchy.

Before going on to outline the theoretical methodologies of this thesis, I shall examine critical responses to O'Brien's persona and writing, focussing initially on media coverage and moving on to literary criticism. Throughout my analysis of media coverage I shall concentrate specifically on responses to *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) since O'Brien's publishers were helpful in supplying a wide range of reviews of this particular text.

In her article 'Edna O'Brien's "Stage-Irish" Persona: An "Act" of Resistance' Rebecca Pelan addresses the issue of O'Brien's standing as a writer, arguing that it is her public 'persona' which has led to 'the relegation of [her] writing to the realm of popular fiction, a ... category which allows the content of her writing to go virtually unnoticed' (Pelan, 1993, 75). Critical responses to O'Brien suggest that she may well have been taken more seriously as a writer were it not for her appearance which has been focussed on by reviewers and even by literary critics to an obsessive degree, often precluding any objective analysis of her work. Time has failed to modify this mixed blessing -- Claudia Pattison, reviewing *House of Splendid Isolation* for the *Western Mail*, affirms that 'with her flame-red hair, milky skin and mesmerising green-flecked eyes, [O'Brien] is a bewitching Celtic beauty, even in her sixties' (Pattison, 1994, 8). O'Brien herself is not unaware of this problem; interviewed by Andrew Duncan for the *Radio Times*, she says:

² I take 'abandonment' to refer to women being abandoned by men (a recurrent element of O'Brien's plots) rather than to sexual abandon. In these terms, 'abandonment' does not contradict the NPG caption's 'sexual repression.'

'I'm a serious writer. Take more notice of the books than how I look. There's a notion that if one is photogenic, to put it jokingly, one is not serious' (Duncan, 1994, 26). Yet Duncan's article begins: 'Her red hair is tousled immaculately, her pale, powdered skin is flawless. She puts her small-boned hands in her lap, opens wide her clear, green eyes and awaits the first question ... Here she is, a veritable flame-haired temptress'. Ann Chisholm concentrates likewise on O'Brien's 'natural good looks -- long greenish eyes, tumbled auburn hair, delicate bone structure [and] slender figure', though she can't resist adding that these 'have lasted well, possibly with a bit of help' (Chisholm, 1994, 10). Denis Staunton defines her 'public image' as 'somewhere between Maude Gonne and Mata Hari' (Staunton, 1996, 6). An entertaining, though less recent example of this genre is Terry Coleman's interview for *The Guardian*. This begins: "'You decide", she said with that red hair, giving me my choice of the room' (Coleman, 1994, 5). As if talking hair were not prodigious enough, O'Brien, 'gazing at [Coleman] with green eyes', proves adept at countering his sensationalism:

Hadn't her first novel, back in 1960, been burned in her native village? 'Have a ginger biscuit', she said, and agreed the book was burned.

Holding a copy of her new book, I said there were some lovely sinful bits in that.

'Have some more coffee', she said. 'You look for the sin. I'll look for the coffee'.

O'Brien has often been accused of capitalising on both her appearance and her Irishness. Ann Chisholm comments upon O'Brien's perceived tendency to play up to the gallery:

Edna O'Brien has a dramatic streak; in manner she is more like an actress than a writer, given to sudden vivid changes of expression and big gestures, flinging her arms wide and her head back to show exhilaration, hunching into herself and shrinking to express grief (Chisholm, 1994, 10).

Chisholm clearly entertains rigid notions of the kind of mannerisms appropriate to 'actress' and 'writer'.

It is difficult to establish the extent to which O'Brien undermines her own position as a 'serious' writer, and how much it is undermined for her. She has advertised shampoo -- Wella's 'Crisan' in the 1970s -- and she has appeared on television chat shows, whilst claiming somewhat improbably in an interview with Claudia Pattison that 'the first book I ever read was *Introducing James Joyce* by TS Eliot' (Pattison, 1994, 8). Elsewhere she cites the formative influence of novels such as *Rebecca*, but also of Tolstoy and Chekhov. O'Brien clearly sees her own work as enduring -- in the interview with Terry Coleman she explains her reluctance to refer to the IRA by name in *House of Splendid Isolation*, arguing that 'a book isn't just for the week or year it's published'. Whilst wanting -- and apparently expecting -- her works to become an established part of the literary canon, O'Brien's attitude towards academics, literary critics and journalists is defensive. In an article called 'It's a Bad Time Out There for Emotion' she argues that:

...the prevailing ethos of literary criticism, especially in England, inclines to the scalping, where the clever bow to the clever, where the merest manifestation of

feeling is pilloried, and where consideration of language itself is zero (O'Brien, 1993, 20).

Given the conflicting nature of perceptions of O'Brien's intellectual and literary status, this is an understandable response.

The media has a somewhat precarious sense of O'Brien's place within contemporary fiction. Clare Boylan argues that 'pioneers in the field of sexual science are women over 40 such as Margaret Atwood, Edna O'Brien, Fay Weldon, the late Angela Carter and Marilyn French' (Boylan, 1995, 4). Along with the National Portrait Gallery, Boylan acknowledges O'Brien's significance as a contemporary woman writer.

Seamus Heaney posits O'Brien as a pillar at least of the Irish literary canon, referring to the manifestation of 'Irish place invoked under two different systems of naming' in writers 'from Oliver Goldsmith to Edna O'Brien' (Heaney, 1995, 1). (Heaney's 'from ...to' seems, unlike Rowbotham's, chronological rather than hierarchical). Yet Mick Brown seems irritated at O'Brien's own familiarity with Irish and other literatures: 'There is a certain theatricality in her manner, in the effusive literary allusions (it is hard for her to navigate a conversation without referring to Yeats, Camus and Gogol, and "Samuel Beckett always used to say ...")' (Brown, 1994, 21). It is telling that Brown's review is entitled 'The sweet one gets angry'; this suggests that Brown's construction of O'Brien was always going to be reductive.

When O'Brien was asked to unveil a commemorative plaque to James Joyce at a house at Kensington where he briefly lived, the literary implication of the event -- O'Brien as a worthy successor to Joyce -- went largely unnoticed. Even as an Irish writer it seems that

she is afforded only limited status in relation to her literary predecessors. At the unveiling O'Brien was somewhat upstaged by the arrival of Joyce's uninvited and indignant grandson who, as David Lister recounted in the *Independent*, 'took the microphone from Miss O'Brien and made an impromptu and decidedly angry speech' (Lister, 1994, 3). It must be admitted that O'Brien did not help herself in getting the appropriate literary mileage out of the unveiling -- Charles Nevin reports her having said before the event that 'she'd better get her hair done or something for the occasion' (Nevin, 1994, 26).³ Interestingly, O'Brien is said to have responded to the whole fiasco with the comment that Joyce would have enjoyed it; this would seem to contradict the recurrent perception of her as a humourless 'drama queen' (Lister, 1994, 3).⁴ Yet O'Brien's projected self-image continues to invite criticism. No sooner has she been classed by Linda Grant as a 'prominent British feminist' than she is cited in *The Independent* complaining about 'card-carrying feminists' and political correctness: the issue of date rape seems especially to have annoyed her (Grant, 1994, 9; 'Quote unquote', 22 April 1995, 14). Writing an obituary of Jackie Onassis for *The Independent*, O'Brien recounts 'one of [their] last conversations': 'She said, "You know, Edna, you always want the trumpets", to which I said, "There are only the trumpets, Jackie"' (O'Brien, 1994a, 14). This is the same Edna

³ In an interview with Julia Carlson, O'Brien, acknowledging the extent to which her 'colleen image' has affected perceptions of her work, expresses her frustration with the idea that 'if you happen to have your hair done, well, then you can't be a serious writer' (Carlson, 1990, 73).

⁴ Reviewing *House of Splendid Isolation* Joan Smith refers to O'Brien's 'fatal humourlessness' and argues that 'too much posing as a tragedy queen has turned her deaf to her own bathetic efforts' (Smith, 1994, 33).

O'Brien who is capable of writing a sober, articulate and objective open letter to Tony Blair, asking about Labour's position on Ireland (O'Brien, 1995, 2).⁵

However whilst Edna O'Brien's contradictory public persona does little to facilitate 'serious' and objective assessment of her work her uncertainties seem understandable, given the extremes of response discernable in critical receptions of her work.

The issue of nationality is a complicating factor in the confusion of personality and text; one early reviewer likened O'Brien's prose to the froth on a pint of Guinness.⁶ Interviewers and reviewers seem generally reluctant to 'allow' O'Brien any political weight -- Peter Conrad, interviewing her for *The Independent on Sunday*, describes *House of Splendid Isolation* as 'a wildly rhapsodic Gothic novel about the IRA' (Conrad, 1994, 49). In her interview with Mick Brown O'Brien expresses her frustration with 'the suggestion that as a writer of books about love, she should not be dabbling in something as combustible as Irish politics' (Brown, 1994, 21). Patrick Skene Catling perceived *House of Splendid Isolation* as inflammatory, commenting: 'As a contribution to international harmony, this novel is oil on a bush fire' (Catling, 1994, 22). Critical responses to O'Brien's perceived trespass onto 'the big boy's turf', as she herself put it in the interview with Mick Brown, seem divided between reproach and scorn.⁷ The publication of *House of Splendid Isolation* coincided broadly with the preamble to the 1994 ceasefire in

⁵ This letter was published in *The Independent* on 5 October 1995. In it O'Brien questions Blair's perceived 'reticence' about Ireland', arguing that '[Gerry] Adams has a relevant place in the political caucus' and suggesting that 'to have met Mr Adams would have been a sign of strength rather than weakness and could hardly have damaged the peace process' (O'Brien, 1995, 2).

⁶ In the course of my research, I requested copies of reviews from O'Brien's publishers, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, now a part of the Orion group. This particular review was sent without a page number or references.

⁷ O'Brien's terminology is significant in the context of her protagonists' recurrent attempts to realise a female space within landscapes dominated and defined by the masculine.

Northern Ireland, and O'Brien was asked by the *New York Times* to interview Gerry Adams. This elicited from Fintan O'Toole the comment that 'Edna O'Brien ... knows a strong, flawed, and emotionally unavailable hero when she sees one' (O'Toole, 1994, 20). Ruth Dudley Edwards revealed that adulation of the Kray brothers 'remind[ed her] of Edna O'Brien and Bianca Jagger gazing mistily into Gerry Adam's flinty eyes' (Edwards, 1995, 15). The alignment with Bianca Jagger is interesting; O'Brien is being perceived once again as a 'personality' and beauty, rather than as an established Irish writer whose entry into the political arena can be justified. Edward Pearce denies O'Brien her right to view Adams as a potential statesman, dismissing her as a 'popular novelist' with a 'silly, novelettish mentality'. Citing 'the recurring absurdity of literary or quasi-literary people venturing into a politics they don't begin to understand' as the reason why O'Brien should stay out of it, Pearce admits that 'political wisdom is, of course, not unknown in major writers', but goes on to argue: 'Edna O'Brien is no more Shaw or Auden than her great man is Mandela. If Adams is a flop-Shamir, I think of O'Brien as the Barbara Cartland of long distance Republicanism' (Pearce, 1994, 18). Pearce's response highlights the difficulties faced by the Irish woman writer who wishes to address political issues. Eavan Boland argues: 'If I wanted to feel the power of a nation as well as its defeat, then I would take on the properties of the hero' (Boland, 1996, 65). Clearly, female-authored fiction is not seen as an appropriate medium for political commentary.

The mixed reviews received by *House of Splendid Isolation* say at least as much about what reviewers and journalists want and need O'Brien to be as they do about her book. Some of the titles are revealing through their very *lack* of reference to the book's subject

matter. An interview in the *Sydney Morning Herald* is captioned 'Looking for trouble', but subtitled 'Edna O'Brien on terrorism, old age and lust' (Chisholm, 1994, 10). I have already cited Mick Brown's 'The sweet one gets angry'; to this can be added 'Sins and lovers', the subheading of which promises 'lustful thoughts and dirty deeds', and the rather more prosaic 'Life, love and Edna' (Brown, 1994, 21; Coleman, 1994, 5; Grove, 1994, 17). Patrick Skene Catling uses the heading 'Oil on the Troubles' whilst more naive responses include 'Terrorism unmasked', 'Caught in the crossfire of politics', and 'Tears and terror in the wind' (Catling, 1994, 22; Reed, 1994, 37; Cusk, 1994, 12; Smith, 1994, 33). The reviews themselves reflect -- when they do get around to the book -- the impossibility of O'Brien's position as an Irish woman writer beginning to comment on the political situation. Angela Lambert expresses some enthusiasm for *House of Splendid Isolation*, but qualifies this by assuming that 'this book is Edna O'Brien's attempt to shore up a sagging reputation'. Lambert refers to 'Ms O'Brien's love-and-leprechaunish pen', pointing out that O'Brien is known largely for her 'fey, charming and obviously autobiographical' earlier works (Lambert, 1994, 22).⁸ Joan Smith manages simultaneously to denigrate O'Brien's previous output and to dismiss her departure, referring to 'wearyingly familiar territory' and arguing that 'what O'Brien has attempted in this novel ... is to graft a narrative about terrorism on to one of her familiar laments for lost youth and frustrated passion' (Smith, 1994, 33). Patrick McGrath suggests that it is the 'political argument' rather than the romance plot which is sentimentalised, arguing on the one hand that 'life with James [Josie's husband] reads like a feminist primer of sadomasochism', and

⁸ 'Obviously autobiographical' will be discussed in relation to literary criticism of O'Brien's work, especially in Chapter 4 in the context of *Mother Ireland*.

on the other that the novel suffers from 'the mildew of sentimentality at its roots' (McGrath, 1994, 21). Ann Chisholm engineers a predictable connection between 'sentimentality' and autobiography, suggesting that 'it is the first time ... that [O'Brien] has chosen to write from the inside about a woman facing physical and mental decay'. Chisholm wonders 'was she decribing some of her own fears?' (Chisholm, 1994, 10).

The identification of Edna O'Brien with her female protagonists is a response common not only to journalists and reviewers but to literary critics. This tendency has led to widespread trivialisation of O'Brien's work. As recently as 1997 two major critical overviews of modern Irish writing were similarly dismissive of O'Brien. Gerry Smyth does not mention her at all in *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in New Irish Fiction*, whilst Neil Corcoran confines his assessment of O'Brien to a paragraph which concentrates mainly on *The Country Girls* trilogy (Smyth, 1997; Corcoran, 1997). Corcoran identifies O'Brien's 'feminism and sexual exploratoriness' but argues that she 'lacks Kate O'Brien's vigorous stylistic signature' (85-86). This seems an ungenerous response given that O'Brien's 'style' is considered distinctive enough for reviewers to be able to refer to 'lyric[ism]' and -- less ambiguously -- to 'wearyingly familiar territory' in the face of her ongoing experiments with a wide range of 'styles' and narrative forms (Abrams, 1994, 11; Smith, 1994, 33).

Despite O'Brien's experimentalism her work continues to be read largely as dressed-up autobiography. As Maureen L. Grogan succinctly points out in her essay 'Using Memory and Adding Emotion', 'there seems to be little consideration of the possibility that the emotional content of [O'Brien's] work is a deliberate artistic choice, not simply an

uncontrolled eruption of the writer's experience' (Grogan, 1996, 9). Autobiographical readings tend in common with media reviews to be related, not only to O'Brien's life events, but to her perceived status as a 'personality'. The title of an article written by Peggy O'Brien for *The New York Times Book Review* reflects the perceived public persona; it is called 'The Silly and the Serious: An Assessment of Edna O'Brien' (significantly not 'of the fiction of Edna O'Brien') (Peggy O'Brien, 1987). Similarly, James Haule's article for the *Colby Library Quarterly* is entitled 'Tough Luck: The Unfortunate Birth of Edna O'Brien' (Haule, 1987). Darcy O'Brien entitles his essay on Edna O'Brien 'Edna O'Brien: a kind of Irish childhood' (Darcy O'Brien, 1982). 'It is easy enough', he writes, 'to trace the realities of this childhood through Miss O'Brien's fiction'. He proceeds to do just this, justifying a somewhat crude analysis of O'Brien's output by passing the buck to the reader:

One's guess is that many if not most of Edna O'Brien's readers must have contemplated the relation between these heroines and their creator. Never mind whether such contemplation be indecent, speculative, out of proper bounds, or unworthy of the professional critic: it is a question that arises and begs to be addressed (185).

Darcy O'Brien's contradictory attempts at critical detachment ('one's guess') do little to disguise his own inability to read O'Brien's work as other than autobiography. Having briefly acknowledged the possibility that such readings may be 'out of proper bounds', he goes on to speculate about 'the initials of the brutal husband in *Girls in their Married Bliss*', which as he ingeniously works out 'correspond to those of [O'Brien's] former

husband', Ernest Gebler (185). My own quarrel with this piece of work is on grounds not so much of propriety as of missed opportunity. Darcy O'Brien could have presented, in a chapter of an edited collection of essays, an analysis placing O'Brien alongside Lessing, Murdoch and Drabble, analyses of whose works are included in *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists*. Darcy O'Brien does acknowledge the uniqueness of his subject, pointing out that 'she had no literary predecessors' because Irish women writers before her 'had been of the Protestant, Anglo-Irish ascendancy' (183). This observation might have provided a useful focal point for a critical assessment of O'Brien's work; instead, it is used as incidental background to identification of O'Brien with her heroines.

I have already cited Peggy O'Brien's article, 'The Silly and the Serious'; this title indicates its author's determination to set up polarities and contradictions. The article itself exposes significant contradictions in Peggy O'Brien's expectations as a reader. Peggy O'Brien transcends the unsubtleties of Darcy O'Brien. Her self-proclaimed aim is 'to understand rather than judge an author's psychology that avoids certain opportunities and embraces others' (Peggy O'Brien, 1987, 474). This leads to a reading which does not so much identify the author *with* as *through* character; critical analysis is used towards generalised psychoanalysis of Edna O'Brien herself. Thus 'her psychology as an author is revealed more by certain decisions she makes, especially with regard to how much she will indulge a narrator' (477). Like Darcy O'Brien, Peggy O'Brien uses the disclaimer that 'one could be forgiven for seeing O'Brien's work as autobiographical' (477). She then proceeds to have her critical cake and eat it, praising 'the artist's special skill in portraying adolescence' whilst suggesting that 'the authorial identity is arrested in its development

and has difficulty in imagining mature adults with clarity' (478-479). Interestingly, Peggy O'Brien's real difficulty seems to be with the general absence in O'Brien's fiction of a tangible author-narrator. She complains that O'Brien 'fails to distance herself from the narrator' (482). Her solution to this dilemma is firstly to psychoanalyse the author, explaining that:

If one reads O'Brien for the extreme effect those first intimates, mother and father, have had on her authorial psyche, then various aspects of her fictional practice become comprehensible ... The collusion between author and character is essentially a blurring of the boundaries between individual and parental identities; and the unresolved nature of these primary relationships accounts for O'Brien's overall obsessiveness (483).

The article goes on to claim that, for O'Brien, 'the creation of fictions is part of an effort to redeem herself, to become whole' (484). This assertion makes heavy weather of a literary output which ironically enough has been popularised largely because of its very accessibility, yet Peggy O'Brien fails to offer any coherent analysis of the gap in critical perception suggested by 'The Silly and the Serious'.

Rebecca Pelan has been the most astute commentator to date on the contradictory perceptions of O'Brien as 'the most widely- published and distributed Irish woman writer of the modern period' and as 'a personality who, almost incidentally, writes books' (Pelan, 1993, 67). Analysing this contradiction, Pelan suggests that 'the authorial persona became the critical focus in direct correlation with the perception of O'Brien as a writer who challenged the dominant discourses of Anglo-American literary criticism by failing to

confine her work within the parameters set for it' (68). This, Pelan argues, is the situation which has engendered O'Brien's perceived 'stage-Irishness'. Pointing out that 'as an Irish writer and a woman, O'Brien was always, to some extent, marginalised' (73), Pelan goes on to suggest that 'the reluctance of feminist critics to engage with O'Brien's work' is attributable partly to the relative absence 'of a culturally different feminist politics' within Ireland (75). In other words, the lack of 'significant gender identification' in O'Brien's work is seen as part of a cultural tradition in which 'writers like O'Brien wrote from within marginalised social positions about women in similar positions' (76).

Ultimately, however, Pelan neglects to answer her own question of 'whether O'Brien, in setting out to exploit her Irishness, had other choices' (76). Instead, she falls back on the argument that 'it would be difficult to deny that O'Brien's persona is not particularly endearing, and has clearly worked to preclude her from acceptance into Irish, British and feminist ranks of respectability' (77). My reservation about Pelan's article is that her analysis of O'Brien's public persona, far from surmounting the problem of O'Brien's marginalisation as an Irish woman writer, actually takes it further. In keeping with the critical tendency which Pelan herself identifies, 'the content of [O'Brien's] writing' goes 'virtually unnoticed' (75).

Though this critical tendency has been significantly halted by the publication in 1996 of *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies: Special Edition on Edna O'Brien*, no book has been published exclusively on O'Brien since Grace Eckley's *Edna O'Brien* (1974). My aim in writing this thesis has been to highlight the importance of the 'women in society' dimension of O'Brien's work, identified in the National Portrait Gallery's caption. To this

end, I have concentrated on the novels and prose texts which I feel are most representative of O'Brien's understanding of 'women in society'. I have excluded the short stories (apart from tangential references) because these have, to date, been more closely researched than the novels.⁹ I have also excluded the novels *Johnny I Hardly Knew You* (1977) and *Time and Tide* (1992) on the grounds that their detailed expositions of the mother-son relationship, though relevant to my thesis, transcend its scope.¹⁰

In examining O'Brien's representations of 'women in society', I have concentrated particularly on her expositions of patriarchal constructs of 'femininity', predominantly in southern Ireland, but also in the patriarchal cultures of London and the Mediterranean. C.L. Innes' *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935* (1993), Ailbhe Smyth's *Irish Women's Studies Reader* (1993), and Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976), have all been indispensable in offering theoretical perspectives on Irish constructs of femininity which, as O'Brien herself has pointed out, indicate an overwhelming preference for women to be 'devoid of sexual desires, maternal, devout [and] attractive' (Carlson, 1990, 76). In looking at O'Brien's representations of 'femininity' in their broader, multi-cultural context, I begin by using Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in relation to *The Country Girls* trilogy (1960-1964), which is set in 1940s through to 1950s Ireland and London.¹¹ In subsequent

⁹ According to *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies: Special Edition on Edna O'Brien* (1996), Maureen L. Grogan is currently working on 'a comprehensive examination of ... the short fiction of O'Brien' (117).

¹⁰ In the light of Irigaray's argument that 'Christianity's cult of mother and son is not a sign of respect for feminine transcendence', it is significant that O'Brien has chosen as the epigraph to *Johnny I Hardly Knew You* Freud's comment that 'A mother is only brought unlimited satisfaction by her relation to her son; that is altogether the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships'. This, I feel, is worth a thesis in itself (Irigaray, 1996, 67).

¹¹ Interestingly, as Peter Lennon pointed out in *The Guardian*, *The Second Sex* was banned in Ireland in 1963, the year after the censorship of *Girl with Green Eyes* (Lennon, 1995, 10).

chapters, I move towards a theoretical framework based on the works of Luce Irigaray, who, in 'A Personal Note: Equal or Different?', acknowledges her debt to Beauvoir (Irigaray, 1993, 9-11).¹²

In my selection and interpretation of Irigaray's writing I am indebted to Margaret Whitford's identifications in *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* of aspects of Irigaray's work such as essence and identity, identity and violence, and maternal genealogy and the symbolic (Whitford: 1991b). These issues are concurrent with those addressed by O'Brien. Irigaray's work offers, therefore, a coherent and relevant theoretical framework within which to explore O'Brien's texts. Whitford argues that:

The problem for Irigaray is: how to locate the means by which the female speaking subject has been excluded from philosophy/discourse/culture, and to work out the conditions for her accession to speech and social existence. 'Identity' may be illusory, but men are still speaking, and speaking *for and in place of women* (137).

This is a 'problem' addressed also by O'Brien, who specifically examines the condition of women 'excluded' from patriarchal discourse, and who addresses throughout her fictions her protagonists' attempts to construct their 'identities'. In her later fictions *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) and *Down by the River* (1996), O'Brien seems implicitly to acknowledge what Whitford identifies as the 'illusory' nature of 'identity' for men as well as women. This is an issue which remains unresolved in the works of O'Brien and of Irigaray; as Whitford remarks: '[Irigaray] has not solved the problem. What she has done

¹² It must be admitted that this acknowledgement is qualified by Irigaray's disappointment at Beauvoir's failure to respond to *Speculum*, in which Irigaray 'wrote an inscription to her as if to an older sister' (Irigaray, 1993, 10). But this does not necessarily undermine the logic of progressing from Beauvoir to Irigaray.

is to offer a possible framework in which its implications can be thought' (138). Their ongoing acknowledgement of the problem is, however, significant in the light of Whitford's analysis of the deconstructive tendency towards denial of 'difference'. As Whitford argues, 'deconstruction does not offer any strategies for dealing with the kinds of problem that feminists are concerned with', largely because 'the possibility of women's difference has not entered the deconstructive imagination' (137). In practical terms, this means that 'the deconstruction of identity continues to leave women in a state of fragmentation and dissemination ...' (123).

Whitford's argument offers a useful starting point for an examination of what has long been perceived as Irigaray's essentialism. O'Brien is similarly vulnerable to this charge. In Chapter 1 I shall examine critical perceptions of *The Country Girls* trilogy as being simply 'about' women's lives in isolation from their broader social contexts. Examining the question of essentialism, Whitford points out that:

In the French context, essence ... is the question of the proper (*propre*), and Irigaray has always insisted that the proper is phallogentric, that women can only be defined, essentialized, from the point of view of *man* (135).

So according to Whitford Irigaray is *not* 'essentialist' in the sense of falling back on -- or indeed of seeking to perpetuate -- woman=nature, man=culture/reason dichotomies. What Irigaray is actually suggesting is that women need to construct their *own* essence, on their own terms. In support of her argument Whitford cites Irigaray's assertion in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* that 'women are seeking to become subjects in their own right,

producers of cultural, political and religious truth' (135). Whitford argues further that 'Irigaray is positing an identity that still has to be created', and that:

If identity is formed by identification with elements in the social/symbolic order, then it means that social/symbolic formations will have to change for womankind to come into existence at all, and this will not leave mankind unaffected (136).

Irigaray's projected changes to the symbolic order are highly relevant to O'Brien's attempts to realise an 'other landscape' in *The High Road* (1988, 157), and to her positing of 'the knowledge that is to be' in *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994, 216). It must, however, be admitted that O'Brien is less openly optimistic than Irigaray about the possibility of change; her most recent novel, *Down by the River* (1996), ends, as I shall argue in Chapter 6, on an equivocal note .

Irigaray's proposals are of the greatest relevance to O'Brien in terms of the maternal imaginary and of the death drives. Again, Whitford offers an invaluable interpretation of Irigaray's blueprint for change:

Bringing the maternal-feminine into discourse does not imply that this is what women's generic *identity* will consist of. On the contrary, it is the condition for distinguishing between mother and woman, so that *woman* can come to be. But woman cannot have a generic identity if there is nothing, or nothing adequate, for them to identify with. The choice between a *phallic mother* and a *castrated mother* offers women no satisfactory choice of subject-position (Whitford, 1991b, 139).

So far from being essentialist in aligning 'woman' with 'nature' and motherhood, Irigaray's concept of a maternal imaginary is an act of resistance to patriarchal constructions of 'woman' and 'mother'. As such, this concept is significant in relation to O'Brien's treatment, not only of the mother-daughter relationship and patriarchal constructions of maternity, but of the Irish woman's relationship to a feminised mother country. In this context, Whitford's argument that 'Irigaray sees the 'feminine' of the philosophers as an attempt at colonization or territorialization which once more pushes out *women*' is pertinent to O'Brien's exposition of the double colonization of Irish women. Like the 'phallic mother' who, as Irigaray argues in *I Love to You*, is incapable of 'intersubjective respect' for her daughter, seeking instead to 'command' whilst the daughter 'listen[s] and obey[s]', and whose only alternative is 'castration', 'Mother Ireland' is simultaneously constructed as victim of patriarchy, and oppressor of her 'daughters' (Irigaray, 1996, 130). Whitford identifies Irigaray's recognition that 'what the daughter wants is to be able to love *another woman*, and not simply a phallic or castrated woman' (139). This desire is articulated by O'Brien in *The High Road* (1988), though she does show that, in the absence of an accepted maternal imaginary, 'love [for] *another woman*' can be realised only to a limited extent, and within a patriarchal framework.

Irigaray sees constructions of femininity and maternity very much in relation to religion, and this is another point of connection between her theories and the works of Irish Catholic O'Brien. Whitford points out that: 'For Irigaray, religion is an inescapable dimension of social organization' (140). Whitford goes on to identify Irigaray's association of 'religiosity [with] other forms of nihilism and destruction of the universe',

including the 'nihilism' of patriarchy. This is an issue crucial to the analysis of O'Brien's fictions from *August is a Wicked Month* (1965) onwards, since 'nihilism' has been detected and critically addressed in these works (Peggy O'Brien, 1987, 484). This is not to suggest that either writer sees 'nihilism' as exclusive to men. Unlike, for example, Robin Morgan, whose exposition of terrorism I examine in Chapter 6 in relation to *House of Splendid Isolation*, Irigaray 'does not suppose that women are essentially non-violent' (Whitford, 1991b, 145). O'Brien seems more equivocal on this issue but she does, as I have argued, begin in *House of Splendid Isolation* to deconstruct 'masculinity' as well as 'femininity', suggesting that neither can be essentialized. Whitford refutes perceived essentialism in Irigaray's theories of what she terms 'identity and violence' in her argument that:

[Irigaray] diagnoses the sickness or crisis of civilization as the ascendancy of the death drives, and if she looks to women for hope for the future, it is because women have less investment than men in the current economy of the death drive, and therefore more motivation to attempt a social and symbolic reorganization (Whitford, 1991b, 97).

Whitford later explains that Irigaray ultimately considers that: 'Each sex must have an economy of the death drives' because:

If you take the death drives seriously as constitutive of the *human* (and not just of men), then it is possible to approach the question of identity and violence, and their relation, as problems to be negotiated -- symbolized and thought -- by women themselves -- and not simply as male or patriarchal issues (138).

As Whitford points out, Irigaray sees the death drives as ordered largely by Christianity, in which 'the body and blood that are ritually consumed are the body and blood of women' (145). Although this seems contradictory, Irigaray's thesis is, in the words of Whitford, that 'the language/house of men', which includes religious discourse, is sustained by 'the blood and flesh of the phantasised mother/woman' (48).

According to Whitford '... the possibility of woman's identity is linked to the possibility of a resymbolization and reorganization of the *death drives* in the imaginary' (123). Woman's state of 'fragmentation' in the current symbolic order 'reproduces and perpetuates the patriarchal violence which separates women'. This fragmented state is examined in O'Brien's fiction specifically in relation to 'patriarchal violence' in *Casualties of Peace* (1966), in which 'violence' is made manifest through sado-masochism and murder, whilst relationships between women are represented as fragile. In *The High Road* (1988), the attempts of the protagonist and her lover, Catalina, to realise an alternative symbolic order through a lesbian relationship, are ultimately thwarted when Catalina is murdered by her husband. Patriarchal frameworks are seen to reassert themselves.

Irigaray sees the deconstruction of identity as nihilistic in itself. As Whitford argues:

For Irigaray, deconstruction, seen from women's point of view, has not been able to imagine any way of addressing its own theoretical death drive, its own 'nihilism'. Her theorization of identity is not a simple regression to patriarchal metaphysics, but an attempt to resymbolize ... (123).

Identity for Irigaray has to be 'theorized' 'from women's point of view because 'in imaginary and symbolic terms, theory, like language, constitutes a house or home for men'

(125). Whitford cites Irigaray's argument in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* that 'men continually seek, construct, create for themselves houses everywhere: grottoes, huts, women, towns, language, concepts, theory etc'. Women themselves are left homeless in the symbolic order. Significantly Lynette Carpenter, in her discussion of *Night* (1970), argues that the protagonists' 'homelessness and the homelessness of all O'Brien's women suggests their tenuous position in an indifferent or hostile world' (Carpenter, 1986, 275). The 'house' motif recurrent in O'Brien's fiction tends to underscore this 'tenuous position'. In *House of Splendid Isolation* the 'big house' of the title, owned by a woman, is invaded by a terrorist, whilst in the short story 'The House of my Dreams', the protagonist's house is inextricably bound with her identity (O'Brien, 1974, 162-191).

Irigaray's identification of male colonisation of language is valuable in the contexts of O'Brien's intertextuality and experiments with *écriture féminine*. As I shall argue from Chapter 3 onwards, O'Brien's references to Joyce suggest the extent to which language has been 'colonized' by the masculine, so that even *écriture féminine* constitutes only a space within patriarchy. Whitford confronts this problem in her chapter on 'Subjectivity and language', pointing out that 'the distinction between speaking *like* a woman and speaking *as* a woman is vital, since to speak *as* a woman implies not simply psychosexual positioning, but also social positioning' (Whitford, 1991b, 29-52). Ultimately, though, the linguistic experiments of Joyce and O'Brien both reveal the 'psychosexual' and 'social positioning' of women, at least in southern Ireland. As Whitford later points out: 'Irigaray's position is that the fictions or myths of a society indicate representationally how that society is structured and organized at other levels' (170). O'Brien and Joyce are

both 'speaking' from within the same patriarchal framework. For women to speak 'as women' the symbolic order, including 'language, concepts [and] theory', needs to be restructured. As long as theory and language provide 'homes' for men, women will be left homeless in the symbolic order.

The issue of women's 'homelessness' is addressed by O'Brien, not only through 'language', but through the concept of a maternal imaginary. In relation to this issue, it is significant that Berg identifies Irigaray's use of imagery as one of the most problematic aspects of her work. Whitford cites Berg's argument that:

For Irigaray, if woman is given an image -- if she is represented -- this representation must necessarily take place within the context of a phallogentric system of representation in which the woman is reduced to mirroring the man. On the one hand, the presence of the woman as blank space -- as a refusal of representation -- only serves to provide a backdrop or support for masculine projections Irigaray attempts to steer a third course between these two alternatives by fixing her gaze on the support itself: focusing resolutely on the blank spaces of masculine representation, and revealing their disruptive power. At the same time, however, she is obliged to advance some image of women if only to hold open this blank space. The images she proposes -- of fluids, caves, etc. -- are empty ones ... (71).

O'Brien is also caught in this dilemma, as I shall argue in Chapter 5 in relation to *The High Road* and -- to a lesser extent -- the short story 'The Mouth of the Cave'. These texts between them use images of the sea, of amniotic fluid, and, in the case of the short

story, of a cave, in the contexts of lesbian sexuality and the possibility of a symbolic order constructed around the feminine. In support of the strategy of employing 'male images of the feminine', Whitford cites Braidotti's argument that 'for Irigaray, the route *back through* essentialism cannot be avoided', and that 'the apparent mimesis is tactical and it aims at *producing* difference' (71). Ultimately, though, 'male images of the feminine' do create only an 'empty' space within patriarchal discourse.

In the context of 'maternal genealogy and the symbolic', Whitford points out that according to Irigaray: 'Since woman is not recognized by the cultural imaginary, theory, no matter how far-reaching and innovative, goes on perpetuating the founding obliteration' (75). This is not a problem which can be solved simply by the construction of a female imaginary. Whitford argues that for Irigaray 'being outside of the symbolic order is not a condition to which women should aspire; the absence of adequate symbolization is the dereliction in which they already exist' (78). This is a realisation which seems to have come to O'Brien by the end of *The High Road* (1988), informing *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) and *Down by the River* (1996). Indeed, in *House of Splendid Isolation* O'Brien illustrates graphically the issues of 'dwelling' and 'dereliction' which Irigaray sees as being analogous with masculine/feminine. What is needed -- and this is argued by Irigaray and implied by O'Brien -- is a *change* in the symbolic order for men as well as women.

Whitford 'hypothesize[s]' that Irigaray's 'alternative symbolic is not envisaged simply as a substitute for what we have now', but as 'a symbolic which, by making a place for the woman ... would allow the woman as lover, and mother as co-parent to enter the symbolic

for the first time' (89). The term 'alternative' is problematic; its connotations of marginalization do not help to advance Irigaray's argument. In the light of Irigaray's work on relationships between women I prefer 'parallel'. Whitford cites Irigaray's argument in *An ethics of sexual difference* that:

A woman's sociality is necessary for love and its cultural fertility to take place. This does not signify that women should enter the current systems of power as if they were men, but that women should establish new values corresponding to *their* creative capacities (169).

This concept, though, need not preclude the realisation of a *replacement* symbolic order; perhaps a parallel symbolic order is a necessary interim stage. Certainly Irigaray's identification of '*a world for women themselves*, which has both never existed and at the same time, is already there, repressed, latent, *potential*' suggests the necessity for a female imaginary to be brought into play (Whitford, 1991b, 169). The concept of 'potential' is similarly highlighted by O'Brien, who, in her conclusion to *Mother Ireland*, offers the possibility of a return to 'the radical innocence of the moment just before birth' (O'Brien, 1976, 144). Just as Irigaray is not 'advocating a regressive retreat to a conflict-free pre-Oedipal state of imaginary closeness between women', O'Brien is not proposing 'regression', but the realisation of a moment of 'potential' (Whitford, 1991b, 15). Although O'Brien abandons her experiments with *écriture féminine* in the interests of engaging with patriarchal discourse, she does not lose sight of 'potential'. Whilst the ending of *Down by the River* (1996) is qualified by Joycean reference, there is a tenuous optimism in the protagonist's final song.

Whitford concludes that:

[Irigaray] is difficult to assess because her persuasion does not lie in her arguments alone; it also lies in her appeal to the forces of change which the *logos* has attempted to exclude; to love, to the imagination, which *desires*, to a possible female heterosexual economy, to amorous exchange ... Irigaray could be said to be constructing in imagination a society that would be fit for women to live in (190).

The concept of 'a society that would be fit for women to live in' is one which continues to be a burning issue for O'Brien, particularly with reference to Ireland, but by the end of *Down by the River* she is concentrating on society as it actually is.

In examining O'Brien's treatment of the issues of essence and identity, identity and violence and the concepts of maternal genealogy and the symbolic, I have kept the novels in chronological order so that O'Brien's *development* of these issues and concepts can be clarified. I begin by examining *The Country Girls* trilogy (1960-1964), which deals succinctly with the construction of 'femininity' under patriarchy in the 1940s -1960s. Chapter 1 of this thesis places the trilogy in a socio-historical context and addresses the banning of *The Country Girls* in Ireland. Contemporary reviews of *The Country Girls* and *Girls in their Married Bliss* are examined and perceptions of the trilogy as lightweight fiction are questioned. Chapter 1 argues with reference to the work of Janice Radway and other theorists of romance fiction that Edna O'Brien is deliberately constructing 'negative romance' as a means of highlighting the position of 'women in society'. To this end, the chapter identifies themes which will recur throughout O'Brien's work: women on the market, the 'masquerade', Irish female identity, and resistance to patriarchal constructs of

femininity, especially of maternity. In this context Kate's voluntary sterilization at the end of the trilogy can be read as an extreme act of resistance.

Chapter 2 identifies *August is a Wicked Month* (1965) and *Casualties of Peace* (1966) as progressing logically from *The Country Girls* trilogy in exposing patriarchal nihilism, identified by Margaret Whitford as 'the death drive' (Whitford, 1991b, 72). In this context extensive use is made of Andrea Dworkin's exposition of patriarchal nihilism in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Dworkin, 1981). O'Brien's treatment of the 'permissive society' of the 1960s is examined to reveal what 'sexual freedom' meant, in practice, for 'women in society'. O'Brien's continuing exposition of 'the market' is identified in *August is a Wicked Month* and O'Brien's identification of similarities between the patriarchal societies of southern Ireland, London and the Mediterranean is examined. Chapter 2 analyses constructs of maternity in *August is a Wicked Month* and *Casualties of Peace*; maternity is particularly distorted in *August is a Wicked Month*, in which the sexually active protagonist loses her son, implicitly as punishment for her transgressions, and subsequently contracts V.D. in an attempt to become pregnant again. This concentration on the diseased maternal body anticipates O'Brien's treatment of maternity in *Down by the River*.

Chapter 3 begins by contextualising O'Brien's experiments with *écriture féminine* in *A Pagan Place* (1970) and *Night* (1972). Distinctions are drawn between *écriture féminine* as defined by Cixous and practised by Joyce and strands of each type are identified in O'Brien's writing. Chapter 3 argues that the constraints of Joycean style are symptomatic of the Irish woman writer's oppression by 'literary fathers' such as Joyce and Yeats. The

chapter goes on to examine O'Brien's attempts to reclaim conceptual and geographical female space within an Irish landscape historically defined by the masculine, outlining patriarchal constructs of femininity in Ireland and the position of Irish women caught between colonialism and what Rebecca Pelan terms 'social imperialism' (Pelan, 1996, 51). The protagonists' revisions of Christianity and attempts to feminise Christian ritual and discourse are examined. These are paralleled by attempts to reappropriate the literary canon. In *Night*, for example, the discourses of Joyce and Shakespeare are significantly revised.

Chapter 4 concentrates on the semi-autobiographical prose work *Mother Ireland* (1976), arguing that O'Brien's shift towards non-fiction is an attempt to resolve the dilemma of finding a female space within the dominant discourse. *Mother Ireland* engages directly with the problematic relationship between Irish women and a 'feminised' Ireland, trying to reappropriate and revise patriarchal constructs. The chapter examines O'Brien's perception of the maternal body of the land as an object for consumption by colonisers, 'social imperialists' and tourists alike, arguing that this is another aspect of O'Brien's ongoing exposition of distortions of maternity under patriarchy. *Mother Ireland* ends significantly with the expression of the desire to return to 'the radical innocence of the moment just before birth' (O'Brien, 1976, 144). This anticipates the protagonist's quest for a maternal imaginary in *The High Road*.

Chapter 5 examines O'Brien's lesbian novel *The High Road* (1988), identifying O'Brien's attempts to realise what Irigaray terms 'the imaginary and the symbolic of intra-uterine life' (Whitford, 1991b, 39). This chapter argues that O'Brien achieves this through

the consummation of a lesbian relationship in an 'other landscape' (O'Brien, 1989, 157). However, the similarities between Irish and Mediterranean cultures identified in *August is a Wicked Month* are ultimately reinforced. The inescapability of the dominant discourse is signified by male characters such as Catalina's violent husband and D'Arcy, a Joycean expatriate, whilst patriarchal domination is placed within a Christian context by the 'martyrdom' of Catalina.

Chapter 6 concentrates on O'Brien's latest published novels, *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) and *Down by the River* (1996), arguing that these engage directly with the dominant discourse. O'Brien moves away from her attempts to realise a symbolic order based on the feminine and begins to identify social constructions of 'masculinity' as well as of 'femininity'. Whilst remaining conscious of the imperatives of the *sexed* body -- in *Down by the River*, the protagonist's incestuous pregnancy is analogised with her mother's cancer -- O'Brien displays a growing awareness of *gender* as, in the words of Judith Butler:

... an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts* ... [which is] instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (Butler, 1997, 402).

In her deconstruction of 'masculinity' O'Brien returns to the issue of 'nihilism' first examined in *August is a Wicked Month*, now represented in its extreme manifestations of terrorism (*House of Splendid Isolation*), rape, and abortion law (*Down by the River*). O'Brien examines the nihilism of colonisers, Garda and terrorists -- the extreme

manifestation of 'social imperialism'. O'Brien continues her exposition of women as commodities, male appropriation of landscape, and distortion of maternity. Chapter 6 concludes by arguing that the Joycean ending of *Down by the River* -- a pastiche of the closing passage of 'The Dead' -- can be read as an acknowledgement not only of the inescapability of patriarchal discourse, but of the need for revisions of 'masculinity' as well as 'femininity' in the existing social and symbolic orders.

Chapter 1

Negative Romance: *The Country Girls* trilogy (1960-1964)

On 30 April 1960 -- the Saturday of the week in which Edna O'Brien's debut novel *The Country Girls* was published -- the *Tuam Herald* ran articles captioned 'Fired Shots at Tinker's Horse', 'A Danger of Spring Grazing' and 'Franciscan Pilgrimage at Knock Shrine'. In Tuam *Behind a Mask* -- starring Michael and Vanessa Redgrave -- was showing at the Mall Cinema and there was a dance at the Phoenix Ballroom.

Despite O'Brien's detailed exposition of the society evoked by the *Tuam Herald*, *The Country Girls* was not among the books which it reviewed. These factors may not have been unrelated. In an interview with Julia Carlson O'Brien suggests that *The Country Girls* may have been banned in Ireland largely because '[she] betrayed [her] own community by writing about their world' (Carlson, 1990, 76). Six months after the novel's publication -- by which time it had attracted wide critical attention, winning the Kingsley Amis first novel prize in 1960 -- it was still being largely ignored by the press of the rural West.

The *Irish Independent* omitted likewise to review *The Country Girls* but acknowledged its appearance by listing it in its column 'Books and Bookmen[sic]' under 'Books sent to us for review'. Books actually reviewed included accounts of bird study in East Africa, caravanning in Europe, World War 1, and the Russian film industry. Irish reviewers' neglect of *The Country Girls* exemplifies the cultural pattern discussed by Mary

O'Connor in her article 'The Thieves of Language in Gaol?' (O'Connor, 1994). O'Connor cites Ailbhe Smyth's comment that: 'We still do suffer dreadfully in Ireland from the sense that something isn't worthwhile and it doesn't exist unless people *out there*, elsewhere, have claimed it and admired it and brought it to wider audiences' (36-37). O'Connor goes on to highlight Smyth's identification of 'the niggardliness and begrudgery within Ireland, where what we produce ourselves is culturally seen as being somehow a second level production' (38). Certainly, O'Brien began to attract wider critical attention in Ireland once her Anglo-American readership was assured.

The Irish Times did, however, include Maurice Kennedy's review of *The Country Girls* (Kennedy, 1960). Kennedy welcomes O'Brien's voice as 'completely individual', though this claim is heavily qualified by the observation that 'there are echoes of Joyce'. No attempt is made to identify these 'echoes', but the comparison is unsurprising. O'Brien was later to acknowledge the influence of Joyce in her article 'Dear Mr Joyce' (Ryan, 1970, 43-47). The multiple and often equivocal references to Joyce which recur throughout O'Brien's fictions reinforce his relative position as 'literary father'. In *The Country Girls*, for example, Baba tells Caithleen:

'Will you for Chrisake stop asking fellas if they read James Joyce's *Dubliners*? They're not interested. They're out for a night. Eat and drink all you can and leave James Joyce to blow his own trumpet' (O'Brien, 1960 [1963], 159).

By 1996 and *Down by the River*, O'Brien's suggestion that the 'literary father' has little to offer which is of relevance to women's position has lost its element of humour. The novel's ending -- a pastiche of the closing passage of 'The Dead' -- points to the

insidious nature of canonical patrilineage. Throughout this thesis I address the issue of 'Joyce' not as writer or personality but as O'Brien's literary 'father'. I do not set out to engage in Joycean criticism since my aim is to demonstrate that regardless of whether O'Brien's pastiche of Joyce is executed consciously or unconsciously -- and in a spirit of homage and/or arising from stylistic and cultural dependency -- it symptomises her entrapment as an Irish woman writer. Joyce of course addresses the issue of cultural paralysis in 'The Dead' and in the broader context of *Dubliners*, and O'Brien's pastiche is to some extent a gesture of solidarity and identification. I would argue though that Joyce is ultimately less 'paralyzed' than O'Brien, not least by critical response. Joyce's experiments with *écriture féminine* -- and it must be acknowledged that these precede the terminology -- earn him the accolade of principal exponent whilst O'Brien's experimental *Night* was dismissed as 'one long act of public literary masturbation' (Terry Eagleton, 1986, pp. 214-215; *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 October 1972).

In 1960 though *The Country Girls*'s perceived 'irreverence' was taken very much at face value and seems largely to account for its popularity. Kennedy states that books such as *The Country Girls* 'shock, and refresh, and stick in the memory, making one read them again and again, while a shelf of unacknowledged masterpieces sits shiny and untouched' (Kennedy, 1960). The specific titles of whatever 'unacknowledged masterpieces' Kennedy has in mind remain undisclosed, as do the particular episodes of *The Country Girls* which 'shock' and 'refresh'. But the generally enthusiastic tone of this review is significantly tempered by the comment that halfway through the novel there is 'a certain sense of strain, a forcing of invention, a slackening of pace'. Kennedy seems to have identified the point in

the narrative at which the sexual disillusionment of the protagonists sets in, marring for him as for other commentators on the trilogy as a whole those elements of O'Brien's writing which simply 'shock' and 'refresh'.¹ *The Times*' review of *The Country Girls* manages to damn O'Brien's 'refreshing' qualities with faint praise having provided a somewhat bald plot summary:

Miss O'Brien shows an ear for dialogue and an eye for description. She is frank and gay. Her fading mansions and trivial episodes hold a certain appeal. In spite of drunken husbands and lovely suffering wives, Miss O'Brien usually displays enough callousness to cauterize her sentiment. *The Country Girls* may be shallow, but it presents a smooth and pleasing surface (Kennedy, 1960).

The response of *The Times Literary Supplement's* reviewer is similar, though less dismissive in tone:

In fact, it is Caithleen's -- and Miss O'Brien's -- evident enjoyment of life, disappointment and all, that gives the book its fresh, youthful quality. Humour and lightness of touch keep its charm from cloying, and numerous small details -- in her descriptions of the Shannon countryside, the discomforts of the convent, the conversations of the two girls -- show Miss O'Brien's gift of quick, sensitive observation.

Rebecca Pelan has pointed out that 'reviews [of the trilogy as a whole] focussed on O'Brien's writing style, consistently described as "fresh", "charming", "honest", "lyrical", and "uncluttered"' (Pelan, 1993, 69). Pelan's argument can be extended to literary

¹ In Chapter 11, for example, Caithleen's first kiss from Mr Gentleman (her first 'real' kiss) is marred by 'a drip on the end of [her] nose' (p. 99).

criticism -- Peggy O'Brien, for example, nostalgically contrasts 'the ebullient *Country Girls*' with what she terms 'the glacial nihilism of the middle novels' (Peggy O'Brien, 1987, 484). Cultural disseminations of *The Country Girls* such as Hilary Mantel's novel *An Experiment in Love* perpetuate further readings of the trilogy as lighthearted *bildungsromans* set in Ireland:

'I have an urge to say to you, Bejasus ...'

'It would be nice if we went about and talked like an Edna O'Brien novel. It would suit us.'

'Yes, it would become us,' I said. 'We haven't the class for *Girls of Slender Means*' (Mantel, 1995, 18).

Our convent was not like the convents that are generally described in novels. We were not told that Our Lady would blush every time we crossed our legs (129).

No matter that at no point in *The Country Girls* does any character utter that idiosyncratic 'Bejasus'.

In the light of Mantel's scepticism about the 'convent experience' Rebecca Pelan's comment that 'there are numerous examples of O'Brien's quaint and curious recollections which become much less curious when compared to those of other Irish women writers perhaps less well known than O'Brien' is pertinent (Pelan, 1993, 72). Critical and cultural responses to O'Brien's output and persona exemplify the unenviable position of the Irish woman writer under review. Mary O'Connor argues that:

As women write, or try to publish, they define themselves (or not) as writers, and they are encouraged to do so (or not) by society in various ways ... Women trying to publish in Ireland have a veritable hurdle-track of obstacles in front of them ... the received vision of self with its limiting idealisations and expectations; the ungenerosity of 'father figures' in the literary world to whom they have perhaps served apprenticeships; the implicit misogyny of mainstream publishing structures (O'Connor, 1994, 30).

Similarly Eavan Boland points out that 'a woman's life was not honored' in literary circles and that she herself 'began writing in a country where the word *woman* and the word *poet* were almost magnetically opposed' (Boland, 1996, x).

In the context of O'Brien's early work, perceptions such as those of Mantel and Peggy O'Brien constituted a further 'obstacle' to those identified by Boland and O'Connor, failing either to acknowledge the subtext of *The Country Girl's* perceived 'ebullience' or to recognise the naivety of the adolescent Kate and Baba as a necessary component of O'Brien's construction of 'negative romance'.

I use the term 'negative romance' to define fiction which conforms superficially to 'romance' whilst subverting the genre to expose the position of women under patriarchy. As Rebecca Pelan has argued: 'Stories such as ... *The Country Girls* trilogy, capture the sadness and disillusionment of women in Irish society while, at the same time, they explore the reasons for such disillusionment' (Pelan, 1996, 53). Read in this context, *The Country Girls* can be assessed not as the 'promising' debut novel of a writer who subsequently failed to live up to expectations, but as the departure point for a sustained and coherent

literary output. Significantly *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) has been identified as ‘both a fairy tale and a bleak portrait’ of contemporary Ireland, ‘an extraordinary concoction of realism and romanticism’ (Abrams, 1994, 11).

Janice Radway points out that ‘romances provide a utopian vision in which female individuality and a sense of self are shown to be compatible with nurturance and care by another’ (Radway, 1987, 55). O’Brien’s novels, notwithstanding their ‘relegation ... to the realm of popular fiction’, repeatedly negate such ‘utopian vision’ (Pelan, 1993, 75). In the words of Lynette Carpenter, ‘Edna O’Brien’s subject is not love but the failure of love’ (Carpenter, 1986, 263). Bruce Arnold questions even the notion of ‘love’, asserting that ‘[O’Brien’s] novels deal almost exclusively with sexual failure’ (MacMahon, 1967, 83). In the light of Radway’s identification of the illusion of ‘nurturance and care by another’ as an essential component of romance fiction the ‘love/sex’ responses of respectively female and male critics are significant.

Radway’s arguments are of further relevance to the sexual and emotional ‘failures’ identifiable in O’Brien’s narratives. Radway suggests that these ‘might inadvertently activate unconscious fears and resentments about current patriarchal arrangements’, ‘tak[ing] as their principal subject the myriad problems that must be overcome if mere sexual attraction is not to deteriorate into violence, indifference, or abandonment’ (Radway, 1987, 157). O’Brien examines throughout her literary output the question of whether ‘romance’ is merely a patriarchal imposition. The culminating point of O’Brien’s investigation occurs in *The High Road* in which she explores the possibilities of lesbian

romance and whether this can offer alternative models to the 'butch-femme' pairings which are seen to imitate heterosexual relationships.

The Country Girls certainly qualifies as 'failed' or negative romance in Radway's terms but was not initially read as such. Hutcheon has identified 'the paradox of art forms that want to (or feel they have to) speak to a culture from inside it and make it question its values and its self-constructing representations' (Hutcheon, 1989, 13). There is always the danger that pastiche may not be immediately identifiable as such, and O'Brien's subversion of the romance genre from within was missed by reviewers and critics alike. For example, the intertextuality of *The Country Girls* was taken, like its perceived 'ebullience', at face value. Grace Eckley has identified the early influence on O'Brien of romance fiction, revealing that 'the home village of Scarriff ... prompted an interest in literature through three books, *Gone with the Wind*, *Rebecca*, and *How Green Was My Valley*' (Eckley, 1974, 25). Assigning *Rebecca* to romance fiction Eckley misses the point that du Maurier too subverts the genre.

O'Brien's principal male characters -- Mr Gentleman, or de Maurier, in *The Country Girls* and Eugene Gaillard in *Girl with Green Eyes* and *Girls in their Married Bliss* -- do conform to some extent to conventional representations of the romantic hero. Each is older than Caithleen, each is sexually experienced and professional, and each is rendered in some way 'mysterious' by the inaccessibility of his past life. In her discussion of romance fiction, Rosalind Coward argues that 'in the fantasies represented by these novels, the power of men is adored, the qualities desired are age, power, detachment, the control of other people's welfare. And the novels rarely admit any criticism of this power' (Mary

Eagleton, 1986, 145-148). Tamsin Hargreaves has identified the attraction for Caitheleen of what Coward terms 'the power of men':

Because Eugene Gaillard ... has all the detachment and strength she admires, she yearns for a complete identification with him. Seeing him both as a father figure and a God figure, Caitheleen takes over his ways and gives her whole being into his care and direction. She longs to please him and, in return, to be protected and shielded from her fears (Hargreaves, 1988, 293).

Though Hargreaves' argument is convincing in itself, she misses the point that O'Brien does subvert romance by allowing 'criticism of masculine power'. In *Girl with Green Eyes* Kate reveals that 'life with [Eugene] carried many rules which [she] resented slightly' (156).

'Criticism of masculine power' is, however, most clearly discernible in the final part of the trilogy, *Girls in their Married Bliss*. Grace Eckley points out that 'this novel ... with its bitter and ironic title, does not sustain the common "happy ever after" fiction and instead reflects disappointment, upheaval, and the dissolution of marriage' (Eckley, 1974, 28-29). As Janice Radway has noted, 'to qualify [for readers] as a romance, the story must chronicle not merely the events of a courtship but *what it feels like* to be the *object* of one' (Radway, 1987, 64). *Girls in their Married Bliss* does tend to 'chronicle events' rather than to encourage reader identification. Kate and Baba are posited as the 'objects', not of 'courtship', but of male contempt and even violence. This anticipates *August is a Wicked Month* and *Casualties of Peace*. The narrative voice is no longer exclusively Kate's; in confirmation of the elision of identity effected by her marriage, she is relegated to the third

person. The first person narrative is transferred to Baba, allowing her consciousness of the patriarchally constructed nature of 'femininity' and romance, demonstrated in the convent fiasco of *The Country Girls*, to transcend the naive idealism of Kate.

A further effect of this narrative shift is to highlight the interchangeability of Kate and Baba. Again, critics such as Peggy O'Brien, who have persistently 'read' Kate and Baba as projections of a single persona, neglected to acknowledge the possibility that O'Brien is purposely revealing the fragility of female subjectivity under patriarchy (Peggy O'Brien, 1987, 484). Similarly, Peter Wolfe, reviewing O'Brien in *New Yorker*, laments the 'inwardness' of her heroines, asking whether 'social institutions and ties matter as little as Miss O'Brien suggests?' (Cited in Eckley, 1974, 9). Wolfe misses the point that O'Brien's examination of the splitting, for women, of inner life from 'social institutions' -- one of her recurrent themes -- exposes the differences between social constructions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. Within social and symbolic frameworks constructed according to the masculine, women's subjectivity is always going to be 'split'.

Katie Gramich comes closer to identifying O'Brien's position, arguing that:

Sexual liberation was of course an important motif of the 1960s when the trilogy first appeared, but sex appears to offer Cait Brady not liberation or true *jouissance* but a series of bondages to authoritarian and usually married men (Gramich, 1994, 235).

Yet Gramich fails to acknowledge either that the trilogy is *set* pre-1960s, or that O'Brien's analysis of the effects of 'sexual liberation' upon women such as Cait and Baba may have been carefully considered.

Rebecca Pelan argues somewhat more astutely that '*The Country Girls* can be seen to trace not only an entertaining tale of two young Irish girls but the loss of female identity', and that this 'was consistently passed over in favour of an emphasis on the humour and the freshness and clarity of the style [which] accorded to some notion of lighthearted whimsy which was also perceived as typically Irish' (Pelan, 1993, 73-74). Explaining why O'Brien has not been significantly taken up by feminist critics, Pelan suggests that '[her] writing ... fails to qualify [as 'feminist'] through its representation of women's oppression and powerlessness with no apparent attempt to analyse those conditions' (75).

'Apparent' is crucial; Pelan goes on to point out that '... writers like O'Brien write from marginalised social positions about women in similar positions' (76). Pelan is interested largely in the 'Irishness' of O'Brien's 'marginalisation', but the treatment of 'loss of female identity' or compromised female subjectivity in *The Country Girls* and beyond does manage to transcend cultural context.

It is possible, however, to identify parallels between O'Brien's exploration of relationships between men and women and her treatment of nationality, since political allusions in *The Country Girls* tend to serve as expressions of the protagonist's sexual displacement. The quest for an Irish identity with which it is possible to be comfortable is analogous with the search for a heterosexual relationship which avoids 'sell-out' in terms of female identity. O'Brien's novels can be seen to be caught in both struggles. Darcy O'Brien has asked whether her heroines 'reflect Edna O'Brien's sense of herself in relation not only to men but to the professional world which she inhabits and they control', an argument which, bearing in mind *The Country Girls*' reception and the comments of

Ailbhe Smyth, seems tenable (Darcy O'Brien, 1982, 185). In her article 'The Erotics of Irishness', Cheryl Herr observes that 'various forms of doubling are frequently put forward as somehow intrinsic to Irishness', and that 'most writers on Ireland sooner or later put forward one trait that they see as definitive of the Irish mind' (Herr, 1990, 6). Herr goes on to point out that 'how to read these efforts at self-definition without falling prey to essentialism or oversimplification is a critical question' (6). Contradictions or 'doubling' identifiable in O'Brien's work have been attributed or connected to her nationality. Peggy O'Brien asks: 'Does O'Brien present herself as an individual ...or as a type of her sex and nationality?' going on to argue that 'sometimes she puts herself forward as the essential woman and other times as the voice of Ireland' (Peggy O'Brien, 1987, 475). Elements of essentialism can be traced in O'Brien's representations of nationality as well as of gender. In the conclusion to *Mother Ireland*, she reflects that 'Irish ... is a state of mind as well as an actual country' (O'Brien, 1976, 144). As I shall argue in Chapter 4, *Mother Ireland* does reveal an awareness of perceived national traits as cultural and colonial patriarchal constructs, but this does not mean that O'Brien's novels are entirely free of them. Herr makes connections between the essentializing of gender and national identities, arguing that 'one feature that almost no-one mentions is the relationship between the Irish mind and any kind of Irish body'. This she sees as 'social[ly] repress[ed] ... on a grand scale' (Herr, 1990, 6). Herr identifies exile from auto-eroticism as intrinsic to Irishness, referring to 'the neutralization of the body in this island culture' and asking 'what keeps Ireland keyed into the photographic dimension in most of its cultural registers?' (5). She goes on to explain that 'the body has frequently been

associated [in traditional as well as colonial and post-colonial Ireland] with danger and has been scrutinized with an intensity that *stills* (photographically)' (7). This is relevant not only to the stasis of much of O'Brien's fiction, reflected in titles such as *Returning* (1982) and *Lantern Slides* (1990), but also to the grainy black and white photographs by Fergus Bourke which illustrate *Mother Ireland*. Significantly Linda Hutcheon identifies 'fiction and photography' as 'the two forms whose histories are firmly rooted in realist representation but which, since their reinterpretation in modern formalist terms, are now in a position to confront both their documentary and formal impulses'. Hutcheon goes on to explain that 'this is the confrontation that [she calls] postmodernist: where documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody' (Hutcheon, 1989, 7). In *Mother Ireland* as in *The Country Girls*, O'Brien is reinventing 'Ireland', but from a distance.

However, it is in O'Brien's accounts of relationships between men and women that static intensity is most readily identifiable. Kiera O'Hara remarks that 'critics have puzzled about why O'Brien's characters are obsessed with unattainable love objects'. O'Hara goes on to argue that this is attributable to O'Brien's own Irish childhood: 'It is a sad fact that sometimes the unattainability of love in childhood causes a person to seek, in fact to eroticize, the same kind of unattainability in later life' (O'Hara, 1993, 324). This tendency is not, of course, exclusive to Ireland in terms of empiricism or its expression in literature, and I do not wish to fall into the trap identified by Grogan of reading O'Brien's fiction as 'veiled autobiography' (Grogan, 1996, 10). Connections between the elisions of female and national identities can, however, be identified in much of O'Brien's fiction.

Throughout *The Country Girls* trilogy, Caithleen Brady struggles to formulate her own Irish, as well as her own female identity in the face of societal -- for which read 'patriarchal' -- constructs of what this should be. Caithleen's Nationalist background is referred to early in *The Country Girls*, when we learn that her impoverished family have not been able to live in 'the big house' since it was burnt by the Protestant Black and Tans. Her mother, Mrs Brady, reinforces her own position as political victim, maintaining that 'Protestants were cleaner [than Catholics] and more honest' (25). This is concurrent with her subservient relationship to her husband. Significantly, references to nationalism within a family context crop up like ill omens at points in the text where Caithleen is trying to assert herself. The boundaries between national and sexual colonization are blurred. Dragged home after her father hears of her relationship with the married, foreign and Protestant Eugene, she hears of the death of her aunt's lover at the hands of the Black and Tans (86) and passes on the road 'crosses ... where someone had been killed for Ireland' (96). Leaving Eugene at the end of *Girl with Green Eyes*, Kate notices graffiti saying 'UP THE IRA' whilst her father praises her 'for being so loyal to [her] family and to [her] religion' (197). Even when Kate and Baba 'escape' to Liverpool it is on a ship ominously 'named Hibernia' (211). Kate herself is posited as Irish heroine. In *The Country Girls* Jack constructs her as an 'Irish colleen' (101) and later -- after her elopement with Eugene -- as 'Lord Ullin's Daughter' (107).² Eugene himself is aligned with the English as Holland

² In *The Country Girls* Cait and Baba recite this poem together on their way home from their first night out in Dublin. The poem itself is a lament for lost innocence:

From a Munster vale they brought her
 From the pure and balmy air,
 An Ormond Ullin's daughter
 With blue eyes and golden hair.
 They brought her to the city

invokes “the tragic history of our fair land” (130), whilst Cousin Andy asserts that “it’s our country now” (132). Eugene turns his initial response -- “God help Ireland” -- into a nominal plea for Caithleen’s independence, arguing that “you can’t force her ... not even in Ireland”. Once the family has left, Eugene’s contempt for Ireland -- exemplified by his anglicising of Caithleen’s name and by his remark that the incident with the Bradys “was ... ridiculous. Like this country” -- is transferred to Caithleen herself. She sadly reflects that ‘some of their conduct had rubbed off on [her]’ (135). Eugene’s scorn for Ireland and appropriation of Englishness can be read as a necessary defence for his own Jewishness, identified by Cousin Andy: “Look at the nose on him -- you know what he is? They’ll be running this bloody country soon” (131). Eugene begins openly to insult Caithleen’s Irishness, referring to ‘Stone age ignorance and religious savagery’, and taunting her after their marriage by aligning her with her ‘lying, lackeying ancestors’ (O’Brien, 1964 [1967], 36). Kate’s corresponding tendency to align Englishness with a mania for ‘facts and statistics’ (96) posits Eugene’s criticisms as male colonial constructs. These are more fully examined in *Mother Ireland* (1976) and its successors. In her discussion of projection, Rosalind Minsky makes connections between racism and ‘mutual dependency’ in relationships which, like that between Kate and Eugene, are reliant on one partner’s compliance as victim. Minsky argues that ‘feelings of anxiety or inferiority are projected or externalised onto others so that these hated parts of the self are experienced as hostile elements contained in the external rather than internal world, which therefore has to be

And she faded slowly there,
For consumption has no pity
For blue eyes and golden hair.

Baba herself later becomes consumptive (p. 142).

controlled' (Minsky, 1996, 5). Kate is victimised on the dual grounds of femininity and Irishness. Her position is reinforced by Baba's comment that 'if you say potato famine she'll say love' (103) and by the assumptions revealed by the party guest who asks her whether she is 'an Irish nurse, or an Irish barmaid, or an Irish whore?' (140).³

The Anglo-American contexts of the publication and production of O'Brien's work are, however, as crucial as the Irish context to the popularity of *The Country Girls*. Kate's quest for a national as well as for a gender identity must have seemed relevant to a readership conscious of the pressures of, as Liz Heron puts it, 'a period when industrial expansion and technological development led to a substantial degree of geographical and social mobility, so that the bonds of community were loosening' (Heron, 1985, 3). Throughout her trilogy, O'Brien shifts the boundaries of geography, class and culture, yet her theme of compromised female subjectivity remains constant. Mary Salmon points out that 'Ireland between the late thirties and early fifties is the early world of Edna O'Brien's fiction; her later world is London or elegant Mediterranean holiday resorts' but that 'the difference between these worlds is slight' since 'to pass from one to the other is often just a matter of changing clothes' (Salmon, 1990, 143). Salmon goes on to argue convincingly that 'the impossibility of woman living as her authentic self in worlds ruled by men is the theme of Edna O'Brien's fiction' (143). Though Salmon does not argue directly that the concept of 'authentic self' is elusive and problematic, her identification of 'worlds ruled by men' highlights O'Brien's exposition of cultural and social contexts in which 'the self' -- particularly for women -- can never be regarded as fixed and stable, for as Linda

³ I cannot resist adding at this point Janice Radway's reference to the participant in her reader survey who 'volunteered the information that she disliked historical romances set in Ireland, "because they always mention the potato famine" and "I tend to get depressed about that"' (Radway, 1987, p. 99).

Hutcheon argues subjectivity in postmodernist representation 'is represented as something in process, never as fixed and never as autonomous, outside history. It is always a gendered subjectivity, rooted also in class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation' (Hutcheon, 1989, 39).

O'Brien shows women in the process of 'becoming', Kate and Baba, 'sprawl[ing] on [their] hard beds, drinking [gin] and pretending to be fast', and Kate being 'terrified' but contemptuous of Eugene's friends: 'The man was a lecturer in history and wrote poems on Sundays, and he had a pudding of a wife who thought she knew everything' (O'Brien, 1962 [1964], 8 & 166).

The question of 'subjectivity' needs to be addressed in the context of the marketability of O'Brien's work. Reviewers concentrating on the 'freshness' and 'honesty' of *The Country Girls* seem unwittingly to have identified the issue of compromised female subjectivity as the key to the trilogy's appeal, responding to the narrative voice of the adolescent Caithleen as 'authentic'. *The Times Literary Supplement's* review of *Girls in their Married Bliss* argued for example that 'Baba and Kate have already, for [O'Brien's] growing number of admirers, become as intimate as the oldest girlfriend' (November 12, 1964). Only five years after the publication of *The Country Girls*, and one year after *Girls in their Married Bliss* Betty Friedan identified 'the problem that has no name', arguing that 'the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity' (Friedan, 1965, 68). Friedan went on to point out that 'a woman who is herself only a sexual object, lives finally in a world of objects, unable to touch in others the individual identity she lacks herself' (293). In this condition, women are likely to enjoy reading

fiction which itself explores 'loss of female identity' (Pelan, 1993, 73). Caithleen's own status as 'sexual object' ensures her ongoing susceptibility to romance.

The dangers of romance are suggested in *The Country Girls* long before the development of Caithleen's relationship with her first 'lover-father' Mr. Gentleman (Whitford, 1991a, 36). O'Brien deploys the language and accoutrements of fairytale to reveal the extent to which Caithleen herself constructs 'romance'. Mr. Gentleman is introduced as 'a beautiful man who lived in the white house on the hill' with 'turret windows' and churchlike 'oak door'. His own fairytale qualities have been identified by Grace Eckley, who notes his facility for appearing 'at just the right moment' 'like a Sir Galahad on wheels' (Eckley, 1974, 42). His role as romantic hero is established through the revelation that 'his real name was Mr de Maurier'. His social status and 'distinguished' appearance do recall Maxim de Winter and 'Gentleman' hints at romantic hero whilst suggesting insidiously that he is 'everyman' and that Caithleen is doomed to eternal disappointment in romantic love. The use of 'Mr Gentleman' -- he even 'sign[s] his letters J.W. Gentleman' -- casts doubt upon his authenticity as 'squire' as well as romantic hero. He appears as a stereotypical 'country squire' complete with red setters, 'a trout in a glass case' and a 'condescending' smile (16). But O'Brien, having constructed her stereotype, proceeds rapidly to undermine it. Mr Gentleman is revealed to be French -- rather than Anglo-Irish as the accoutrements of 'big house' lifestyle initially suggest -- with an 'affect[ed]' manner of speaking. There is more than a hint of paedophilia in the way in which he offers Caithleen an orange with a 'sly' smile. In Chapter 12, Mr Gentleman takes Caithleen rowing on his lake:

It was a happy time and he often kissed my hand and said I was his freckle-faced daughter.

‘Are you my father?’ I asked wistfully, because it was nice playing make-believe with Mr Gentleman.

‘Yes, I’m your father,’ he said as he kissed the length of my arm, and he promised me that when I went to Dublin later on he would be a very attentive father (110).

Mr Gentleman as ‘attentive father’ anticipates James Macnamara, who in *Down by the River* (1996) rapes and impregnates his fourteen year old daughter Mary. In *The Country Girls*, the gap between the adolescent romanticism of Caithleen’s perceptions and the reality of ‘Mr Gentleman’ is made heavily explicit. Even when Caithleen’s position changes from ‘daughter’ to ‘mistress’, a metamorphosis anticipated by the progress of Mr Gentleman’s kisses from hand to arm, she is still ‘playing make-believe’. As Modleski points out ‘the most typical plot of female Gothics ... is one in which the lover plays the “father”’ (Modleski, 1982, 76). O’Brien recognises patronage and ‘make believe’ as inevitable conditions of women under patriarchy.

O’Brien’s subversion of romance is not confined to caveats about the love object himself. Grace Eckley has argued that ‘the audience who applauded the innocence of *The Country Girls* failed to observe the relationship between Caithleen’s parents, which acts as a forewarning that the child who is loved by many people will not be loved for the same reasons when her body matures or her mind develops’ (Eckley, 1974, 28). Similarly, Mary Salmon points out that ‘Kate’’s relationship with Eugene in *Girls in their Married Bliss* is ‘a tragic repetition of her mother’s penal servitude to James Brady’ (Salmon, 1990, 145).

The delineation of this relationship can be read further as a 'forewarning' of the inevitable disintegration of romantic love. Indeed the death of Mrs Brady can be read as the cultural 'matricide' on which Irigaray argues that 'the whole of our society' is founded. Irigaray argues that in the current symbolic order the mother is 'murdered' in the interests of patriarchal domination:

Desire for her, her desire, that is what is forbidden by the law of the father, of all fathers: fathers of families, fathers of nations, religious fathers, professor-fathers doctor-fathers, lover-fathers, etc. (Whitford, 1991a, 36).

Irigaray goes on to argue that 'the murder of the mother results in ... the burial of the madness of women ... and the advent of the image of the virgin goddess, born of the father and obedient to his law in forsaking the mother' (37-38). This is clearly relevant to O'Brien's exposition of the psychic damage effected by the compromising of female subjectivity under patriarchy and to her ongoing analysis of the Virgin Mary as a highly influential construct of maternity. Whitford argues that one of Irigaray's principal aims in engaging with Western philosophy is 'to uncover the buried mother' (Whitford, 1991b, 34). This purpose is also attributable to O'Brien in the light of her recurrent deconstructions of prescriptive ideals of 'femininity' in general and maternity in particular. In *The Country Girls* the death of Mrs Brady signifies O'Brien's ongoing examination of constructs of maternity under patriarchy and the trilogy ends with 'Kate's' voluntary sterilization. As early as Chapter 1 the mother's youth is contrasted directly with her present situation:

In her brown dress she looked sad, the further I went the sadder she looked. Like a sparrow in the snow, brown and anxious and lonesome. It was hard to think that she got married one sunny morning in a lace dress and a floppy buttercup hat, and that her eyes were moist with pleasure when now they were watery with tears (12).

Lynette Carpenter has identified this passage as signalling 'the tragic betrayal of romantic expectations' (Carpenter, 1986, 264). The fluidity of Mrs Brady's tears anticipates her death by drowning whilst signifying the feminine symbolic -- based on 'intra-uterine life' and therefore on amniotic fluid -- which Irigaray argues has been 'abandoned' (Whitford, 1991a, 39). The necessity of Mrs Brady's death to Caithleen's entry into the phallic symbolic order is identified by Baba, who reflects in *Girls in their Married Bliss* that 'it was the mercy of God her mother got drowned or she'd still be going around tacked on to her mother's navel' (41).

In Chapter 2 of *The Country Girls* the position of women under patriarchy is clearly delineated as Mrs Brady is shown as reduced to tacitly acknowledged sexual bargaining. As a neighbour's visit to the family home is described, it is revealed that 'Jack had his hand on Mama's knee under the table' and that 'Mama didn't protest, because Jack was decent to her, with presents of candied peel and chocolate and samples of jam that he got from commercial travellers' (17). The persistence of the romance myth in the face of sexual commerce is suggested by O'Brien's juxtapositioning in her descriptions of the mother's possessions, of realism and romance. Mrs Brady, who 'always cough[s] when she [lies] down', '[keeps] old rags that served as handkerchiefs in a velvet purse that was

... tied to one of the posts of the brass bed' (8). In the kitchen, 'Mama's wellingtons were in the middle of the floor and there were two cans of milk on the kitchen table; so was the stationery box. It was in it she kept her powder and lipstick and things'. She has attempted to enliven the 'dark and sad and dusty' breakfast-room with 'knick-knacks' -- 'chocolate-box lids and statues and artificial flowers'. This anticipates Caithleen's Dublin bedsit, in which there is an orange box which serves as a table and which the landlady 'had covered with a strip of cretonne that matched the curtains but no matter how it was covered it was still only an orange box' (143). Caithleen 'escapes' from the family home only to repeat the pattern set by her 'murdered' mother.⁴ Although, as Beauvoir has argued, a woman's 'relation to her knickknacks ... is much less intimate than to the [objects] she blends with her flesh', it is still the case that 'she values them the more, the less her sensuality finds satisfaction' (Beauvoir, 1949 [1993], 557). Mrs Brady, betrayed by her expectations of romantic love, attempts to re-define herself through her possessions. The uselessness of these objects, which 'look silly' without their proprietor, anticipates Caithleen's later dissatisfaction with Mr Gentleman's chocolates -- a box 'with a ribbon round it' which is seen as an appropriate gift for an adolescent girl:

I took the chaff out of the bottom row of Mr Gentleman's box of chocolates. There were only a few sweets in the bottom row, all the rest was chaff. I thought of writing to the makers to complain, because there was a slip of paper which said

⁴ Significantly when Caithleen emerges from her hiding place under the bed as Mr Brady and his posse attempt to reclaim her from Eugene, her father thinks she is her mother 'risen from her grave in the Shannon lake': 'I must have looked like a ghost; my face daubed with tears, my hair hanging in my eyes' (p. 133). This episode anticipates the appearance of Lil's ghost in *Night*.

that people should write in, if they weren't satisfied; but in the end I didn't bother (67).

Caithleen's dissatisfaction with the chocolates in turn anticipates her ultimate disappointment in romantic love, of which chocolates are an abiding symbol. Yet for Caithleen and her mother the myth endures -- Mrs Brady drowns on the Shannon lake, being rowed by her lover, as Caithleen is eating Turkish Delight and eyeing up Mr Gentleman at a performance of *East Lynne*.⁵ O'Brien's use of intertextuality is deeply significant since *East Lynne* itself is an indicator of disruption at the heart of the domestic idyll. The mother's death is once more juxtaposed with the daughter's sexual awakening in Chapter 19. Having borrowed a nightdress for the projected consummation of her relationship with Mr Gentleman, Caithleen notices a 'memorium for [her] mother' in the newspaper. Realizing that she has 'forgotten the date of her death', Caithleen feels 'that wherever she was she had stopped loving [her]' (181). Comforted after Mrs Brady's death by Baba's mother, Martha, Caithleen cries not only from bereavement, but because the 'story from a magazine' which Martha is reading is 'a sad one' (61). Significantly, it is the father figure Mr Gentleman who tells Caithleen of her mother's death. Although he has already aroused sexual feelings in Caithleen, causing her 'an odd sensation, as if someone were tickling [her] stomach from the inside' (16), it is from this point that their relationship is allowed to develop. Mr Gentleman's initial ploy is to be managingly paternal, telling Caithleen that "men prefer to kiss young girls without lipstick" and ordering wine for her when she 'would have rather'd lemonade' (62-63). Paternalism and

⁵ As well as signifying the 'murder of the mother' under patriarchy this episode anticipates the recurrence of the drowning metaphor throughout O'Brien's fiction (Whitford, 1991a, p. 36). More recently O'Brien analogises her protagonist Josie with the drowned 'Colleen Bawn' in *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994).

sexuality are perfectly combined. Mr Gentleman's eyes, 'very large and very, very wistful', 'met [Caithleen's] for as long as [she] wanted'. He holds her hand at the cinema and wipes her eyes when she cries over the film and tells her "'You're the sweetest thing that ever happened to me'" (64-65). O'Brien's writing at this point is poignant precisely *because* she is constructing negative romance whilst writing from Caithleen's point of view. The reader is encouraged not to read Mr Gentleman's words 'straight', but to interpret Caithleen's responses in the context of her impending disillusionment. Even as Mr Gentleman whispers sweet nothings farmers save hay, children sit 'on haycocks eating apples', and 'a woman wearing wellingtons [drives] cows home to be milked'. Farmyard references mark the tension between surface romance and Mr Gentleman's actual desires. Later, Caithleen's first kiss from Mr Gentleman is followed by a walk into town where 'there had been a turkey market that day' (101). The day before Caithleen and Baba leave for Dublin, where Caithleen imagines that her love affair will be consummated, there is 'a pig fair around the market house' (129). The link between animality, romance and the sexual exchange market is made graphically explicit by the 'fairy story' -- told by Harry, Caithleen's 'blind date' in Dublin:

'Once upon a time there was a cock and a fox and a pussy cat and they lived on an island far away ...'

It wasn't a long story and though I didn't understand it fully I knew that it was dirty and double-meaning and that he was a dirty, horrible, stupid man (164).

Again O'Brien is subverting genre along with Caithleen's expectations. Harry's expectations -- of sex in return for 'a good dinner' -- are not so different from those of Mr

Gentleman (162). When Caithleen comes home from school for Christmas and sees Mr Gentleman again the reader is told: 'When he walked into the room I knew that I loved him more than life itself' (96). Caithleen is borrowing the language of romance; she has already contemplated writing him 'a magnificent letter, most of which I'd copy out of *Wuthering Heights*' (71). Conversely, Mr Gentleman tells her that she has 'got plump', which reminds her unpleasantly 'of young chickens when they were being weighed for the market' (98). In the context of Irigaray's argument that 'the society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women' it is significant that the 'market' theme recurs throughout O'Brien's work (Irigaray, 1985, 170). In *The Country Girls*, Caithleen's role in the patriarchal economy changes gradually from 'daughter' to 'mistress'. Having weighed her up, as it were, Mr Gentleman gives her her first 'real kiss', during which realism is once again imposed on romanticism: '... for a few minutes my soul was lost. Then I felt a drip on the end of my nose and it bothered me' (99). Mr Gentleman's response -- "Curious" -- to Caithleen's encounter with Jack, whose sexual advances her mother has tolerated in return for groceries, further exposes the gap between romance and reality. "Please have more feeling, Mr Gentleman", Caithleen 'beg[s] of him in [her] mind' (104). His tendency to 'slip away just when things were perfect' is anticipated in his gift to Caithleen of a gold watch -- he controls time, giving it both literally and figuratively and imposing its boundaries (171). Beauvoir points out that in heterosexual relationships 'very often the man is busy, the woman idle: he gives her the time he passes with her; she takes it' (Beauvoir, 1949 [1993], 205). However, Caithleen's growing awareness of the operation of market forces is prevented from undermining her

illusions about Mr Gentleman through its transference to other men after her move to Dublin. After Caithleen's disastrous date with Harry, Mr Gentleman arrives in his timely fashion to preserve the romantic ideal (162). Significantly though, Caithleen is reconstructing the scene even as it takes place: '...though it was nice to sit there facing the sea, I thought of us as being somewhere else. In the woods, close together, beside a little stream' (167). This indicates Caithleen's subjection to the 'bodily alienation' identified by Arp who argues that this results from 'a woman's acceding to "play at being a woman"' (Simons, 1995, 167). Caithleen's 'alienat[ion]' from her body in Mr Gentleman's car anticipates O'Brien's exploration through 'bodily alienation' of constructs of maternity under patriarchy. Arp goes on to argue that 'th[e] tendency to see oneself as a sexual object, which is inculcated by society, gives rise to the desire for "affectionate possession" of oneself that can culminate in ... narcissim' (169). Narcissism arising from 'bodily alienation' is exemplified in Chapter 18 of *The Country Girls* in which narrative voices past and present are fused as Caithleen prepares for a date with Mr Gentleman:

It is the only time when I am thankful for being a woman, that time of evening, when I draw the curtains, take off my old clothes and prepare to go out. Minute by minute the excitement grows I hate being a woman. Vain and shallow and superficial But I am happy at that time of night I kissed myself in the mirror and ran out of the room, happy and hurried and suitably mad (171).

O'Brien's repetition of 'a woman' highlights 'woman' as construct. This is a role which Caithleen adopts whilst recognising its shallowness and being conscious of the extent to which she is "play[ing] at being a woman" (Simons, 1995, 167). Caithleen attempts to

achieve 'affectionate possession' of herself by 'kiss[ing her] self in the mirror' (Simons, 1995, 169). Recognising this pattern, Mary Salmon argues that 'Caithleen is at this point teetering dangerously between a self that wants to be free of the imposed role, and another self that glories in the imperative to play it' (Salmon, 1990, 145). O'Brien's polarisation of 'I' and 'a woman' suggests, not only Caithleen's role playing, signified by her appropriation of the language and accoutrements of romance and in the Cinderella-like transformation of her 'old, tired shoes', but also her efforts 'to realize the union with [her] own body'. This passage anticipates the second person narrative of *A Pagan Place* (1970) and its protagonist's own process of becoming. Dressing for Mr Gentleman, Caithleen becomes for the first time consciously detached from herself, experiencing what Beauvoir identifies as 'opposition' in the adolescent ... between love of herself and the erotic urge that sends her towards the object to be possessed' (356). Developing Beauvoir's argument Benjamin argues that '[in erotic union] the sense of losing oneself creatively, of becoming absorbed in the other is often only a hairsbreadth away from self-absorption' (Benjamin, 1990, 74, 146 & 147).

O'Brien's exposition of narcissism accounts partly for the perceived 'freshness' of *The Country Girls*. Alison Light, identifying the reasons why women read romance fiction, argues that 'far from being 'inward-looking' in the dismissive sense of being somehow separate from the realities of the state or marketplace, subjectivity can be recognized as the place where the operations of power and the possibilities of resistance are played out' (Mary Eagleton, 1986, 140-145). O'Brien's focus seems ultimately to be on 'bodily alienation'. As Caithleen goes home with Mr Gentleman, 'the tiny remaining sober part of

[her] watched the rest of [her] being happy and listened to the happy, foolish things that [she] said' (172). This split prefigures the shift from the first person narrative of *The Country Girls* and *The Lonely Girl* to the third person narrative of *Girls in their Married Bliss*, a shift which signifies 'Kate's' compromised subjectivity. This is not to deny the more obvious function of the split narrative, which is to allow Baba's more cynical 'voice' to undermine Caithleen's ongoing susceptibility to 'romance'. In *The Country Girls* Caithleen's split self parallels the split between realism and romance which is in turn exemplified by the difference in male and female expectation. While Caithleen asserts 'I loved him more than I would ever love a man again', Mr Gentleman says "'We have to get this out of our systems'" (173). Though Mr Gentleman objects to being asked if he will always love her, he capitalises on her commitment by asking her to undress: "'You know I don't like you to talk like that," he said, playing with the top button of my cardigan' (174).

Romance is finally undermined by O'Brien's analogy of Mr Gentleman's penis with 'a little black man on top of a collecting box that shook his head every time you put a coin in the box' (175). This image manages simultaneously to suggest otherness and transaction. By the end of *The Country Girls* Caithleen, despite an ongoing susceptibility to the ideal of romantic love, has begun to be miserably conscious of its effects. Putting off a meeting with her old friend Hickey for her abortive trip to Vienna with Mr Gentleman, Caithleen reflects 'that [she] was foolish and disloyal ... to all the real people in [her] life', admitting: 'Mr Gentleman was but a shadow and yet it was this shadow I craved' (183). In this respect, as well as in terms of age and physical appearance, this anticipates O'Brien's construction of Eugene Gaillard as 'shadow male' (Modleski, 1982, 79).

In Chapter 1 of *Girl with Green Eyes* Caitheleen reflects that '[Mr Gentleman] was only a shadow now and I remembered him the way one remembers a nice dress that one has grown out of' (7). A lover, like a 'nice dress', is a necessary component of romance. Yet despite the self-awareness suggested by the connection of first romantic love with its accoutrements Caitheleen continues, in the face of further disappointment, to pursue its 'shadow'⁶. Her continuing faith in the romantic ideal is revealed by her admission that 'some mornings I used to get up, convinced that I would meet a new, wonderful man' (9). For Caitheleen the discourse of romance is important. Putting on perfume to go to 'a wine-tasting reception' she reflects: 'the very name ashes-of-roses made me feel alluring' (10). It is significant that the name 'ashes of roses' is a corruption of 'attar of roses'; this subtly suggests that romance will quickly burn itself out. Interestingly, Caitheleen and Baba gatecrash the reception under the pretext of representing a made-up magazine -- "'*Woman's Night*", Baba said' (11). This is a subversive act on more than one level. Alison Light, arguing for 'romance reading' as 'a technique for survival', points out that 'women's magazines ... do at least prioritize women and their lives in a culture where they are usually absent or given second place' (Mary Eagleton, 1986, 143). As if in response to the construction of multiple fictions, Eugene Gaillard turns up, his face recalling Mr Gentleman's in reminding Caitheleen of 'a saint's face carved out of grey stone which I saw in the church every Sunday' (13). This posits him as yet another 'father' (Whitford, 1991a, 36). Later, Caitheleen decides that a 'black pullover suited him. It gave him a thin, religious look' (37). Here, O'Brien's construction of Eugene conforms to conventional

⁶ Separated from Eugene Caitheleen later cries 'loudly as [she] cried when [she] was small, and was not allowed to wear one of mama's georgette dresses, for fun' (p. 90).

representation in romance fiction of the male 'other'. Ann Barr Snitow argues that 'in a sense the usual relationship is reversed: woman is subject, man, object. There are more descriptions of his body than hers' (Mary Eagleton, 1986, 134-140). However, Caithleen's vulnerability is emphasised. Her response to Eugene -- that of experiencing 'a paralysing sensation in [her] legs' -- recalls the 'odd sensation' evoked by Mr Gentleman in *The Country Girls* (15). Once again, the man's superior professional status is emphasised from a romantic point of view, so that Caithleen 'imagine[s] a brown leather-topped desk, with numerous pens and pencils, and two colours of ink in special glass bottles' (19). Significantly, Caithleen's daydream, on meeting Eugene in the street, is 'that there would be a deluge and that we would have to stay there for ever ... all other life cut off from us' (25). Although ostensibly a fantasy of exclusive union, Caithleen's vision of 'water rising inch by inch' does suggest that she is out of her depth with, and overwhelmed by, Eugene; Mrs Brady has, after all, drowned during a romantic tryst. The location of this encounter - - outside a bookshop where Caithleen has been indulging in her weekly 'free read' -- reinforces the constructed nature of the relationship. With her head full of fiction, Caithleen attempts in vain to engage with Eugene on equal terms:

'The rain sparkles on the brown pavement', I said in a false fit of eloquence.

'Sparkles?' he said, and smiled curiously.

'Yes, it's a nice word.'

'Indeed.' He nodded. I felt that he was bored ...

Telling him that she reads Chekhov and Joyce, she becomes anxious 'in case he should think that [she] was showing off'. Each constructs an image of the other; whilst Caithleen

'love[s] his long, sad face and his strong hands', he says 'I often wonder what young girls like you think' (26). When Eugene first meets Caithleen, he tells her 'that [she has] a face like the girl on the Irish pound note'. This constructs her as 'essential' Irish currency (16). As Mary Salmon points out, Eugene 'is in the process of exchanging his perfect image of a cosmopolitan wife (Laura) for that of a country wife' (Salmon, 1990, 145). Eugene is clearly in control; he 'look[s] at his watch and inevitably he ha[s] to go' (26). This episode anticipates Chapter Two of *Girls in their Married Bliss*, in which Caithleen uses Eugene's watch as an excuse to gauge his emotions whilst waiting for a bus: 'She timed it on his watch, touching his wrist each time, to feel his regard for her. Nothing' (23). By Chapter Four of *Girl with Green Eyes*, the second part of the trilogy, Eugene has, as Lynette Carpenter has noted, renamed and thereby redefined Caithleen, with neither her permission nor her understanding: 'He called me Kate, as he said that Caithleen was too 'Kiltartan' for his liking -- whatever that meant' (32) (Carpenter, 1986, 266). In *Girls in their Married Bliss*, Baba reveals that Eugene has written to Kate:

... that she was the genuine Kate in ten thousand Kates, because of her alarmingly beautiful face, and disposition, her tender solicitude and worth; and she'd written back to him -- he was only in the other room, for God's sake -- that he was her buoy, her teacher, the good god from whose emanations she gained all (41).

This recalls Petruchio's response in *The Taming of the Shrew* to Kate's assertion that 'They call [her] Katherine':

You lie, in faith, for you are called plain Kate,
And bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the curst.

But, Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom,
Kate of Kate Hall, my super-dainty Kate,
For dainties are all Kates, and, therefore, Kate,
Take this of me, Kate of my consolation (Act II. i 185-190).

O'Brien's intertextuality suggests the indebtedness of the women writer to the literary father and reiterates the power of naming as an aspect of patriarchal law (Whitford, 1991a, 39). O'Brien clarifies the extent to which 'Kate' is constructed by Eugene as archetypal 'country girl', constructs him as mentor in return. In *Girl with Green Eyes* Eugene revokes the name when displeased with her for hiding from his friends:

He called my name, 'Kate, Kate, Katie.' And then he whistled. I did not answer.
Finally I heard their car door bang and the engine start up. At last they were gone.
He came into the house calling me and went to the kitchen to ask Anna [the servant], 'I wonder where Caithleen is?' (192).

In the presence of 'Simon the poet' and others the construct is maintained. Addressing the Irish Catholic servant girl, Eugene feels free to express his frustration. In playing with Caithleen's name, Eugene is claiming the privilege of paternal law. Escaping from her father to return to Eugene, Kate significantly sees 'a black-coated tall figure coming towards [her]': 'It's a priest, I thought, or a policeman ...' (117). The 'figure' turns out to be Eugene, but Kate's initial assumptions posit him firmly as 'father'. As Irigaray points out in 'The bodily encounter with the mother' the patriarchal power to name is a contributory factor in cultural matricide:

According to this [patriarchal] order, when a child is given a proper name, it already replaces the most irreducible mark of birth: the *navel*. A proper name, even a forename, is always late in terms of this most irreducible trace of identity: the scar left when the cord was cut. A proper name, even a forename, is slipped on to the body like a coating -- an extra-corporeal identity card (Whitford, 1991a, 39).

Renaming Caithleen, and thereby removing her in Irigarayan terms one step further from the maternal economy, Eugene is compounding the sense of 'bodily alienation' which will ultimately result in her voluntary sterilization -- Caithleen alienates herself from the patriarchal subject position of 'mother' through bodily disfigurement. In the light of Cheryl Herr's work on the alienation of 'the Irish mind' from 'any kind of Irish body' it is significant that Caithleen's name is anglicized (Herr, 1990, 6). 'Kate' does her best to identify with him or, as Benjamin puts it, to be 'like the exciting father' rather than the rejected or 'murdered' mother (Benjamin, 1990, 105). In this process she takes to drinking water with her meals because 'it was nice to do something that he did' (27). However since 'difference is only established when it exists in tension with likeness, when we are able to recognise the other in ourselves' -- a position made impossible by a symbolic order in which sexual difference is negated -- Kate and Eugene are doomed to mutual disappointment (Benjamin, 1990, 169). Each is at worst reconstructing, and at best imitating, the other. 'Best' is furthermore one-sided, since Kate's influence on Eugene is negligible.

Kate struggles between realism and romance. Though she affirms: 'I believed everything he said', part of her remains critically detached and attuned to danger signals: 'I

thought it odd that no other people occurred in his reminiscences' (30). Her reluctance to confront her doubts is exemplified by her later refusal to take a closer look at the view from Eugene's house: 'I did not want to go and spoil a beautiful illusion'(49). The doubts themselves are externalised through the *Rebecca* dimension of the novel. As Ann Barr Snitow argues, 'it is pleasing to think that appearances are deceptive, that male coldness, absence, boredom, are not what they seem' (Mary Eagleton, 1986, 136). The housekeeper talks incessantly about Laura, Eugene's absent wife, whilst Eugene 'rarely call[s] Laura by name', thereby ascribing mystery to himself and to their relationship. Kate tries on Laura's wellingtons and finds that they do not fit. This is an unsubtle but effective forewarning of her inability to adapt to Eugene's way of life, and she is later humiliated by his and Laura's friends.⁷ A direct forewarning of Eugene's 'dark' side is present in the form of a portrait of him which looks 'sinister' (55). Tania Modleski identifies the process, in Gothic, through which 'the transformation [of feelings] is from love into fear'. She goes on to cite Russ's identification of 'the Shadow-Male ... usually a kind, considerate, gentle male who turns out to be vicious, insane and/or murderous' (Modleski, 1982, 60 & 79). In Chapter 9 of *Girls in their Married Bliss* it is revealed that 'what [Kate] knew as love was 'fear [and] sexual necessity' and that '[Eugene's] little dictatorship demanded a woman like her -- weak, apologetic, agreeable'(97).

⁷ This recalls the episode in *Rebecca* in which the second Mrs de Winter borrows Rebecca's mackintosh and finds a monogrammed handkerchief inside the pocket:

I must have been the first person to put on that mackintosh since the handkerchief was used. She who had worn the coat then was tall, slim, broader than me about the shoulders, for I had found it big and overlong, and the sleeves had come below my wrist (Du Maurier, 1992 [1938], p. 125)

Although there is a comic element to O'Brien's pastiche of romance fiction, employed more playfully in dialogue than in plot and description -- Eugene 'holler[s] with laughter' when told by Kate "'You have a look of mystique on your face'" (53) -- Kate's desperate clinging to romance accelerates in direct proportion to her reluctant self awareness, her dread of Eugene's disapproval and, related to these, her fear of sexuality. Having been 'brought up to think of [sex] as something unmentionable, which a woman had to pretend to like, to please a *husband*', she finds that 'kissing ... suited [her] nicely, but [she] could not tell him that' (57), and that she wants, for her first experience of sex, 'to go to sleep and waken up, finding that it was all over, the way you waken after an operation' (60). This anticipates the prominent role of 'doctor-fathers' in later texts such as *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Down by the River* (Whitford, 1991a, 36). Eugene's response to Kate's state of mind indicates that he is quite capable of romantic behaviour when this is expedient; he indulges her in tender baby talk and worries about the effect of cheap earrings upon her skin (58).

It is after their separation, during which Kate shows herself to have wised up to Mr Gentleman -- 'I thought of how I used to think he was God. I wished I had some way of hurting him, because of his falseness ...' (94) -- that their differences are most uncompromisingly exposed. Whilst away from Eugene, Kate remembers an occasion on which, looking at timber on his land, she 'could see planks of fine white wood with beautiful knots of deep colour, and golden heaps of sawdust on a floor, while he fumed about the profit which one man made' (98). Jack Holland, hearing of Kate's relationship with Eugene, accords them romantic status by reciting the ballad 'Lord Ullin's Daughter'

but is later instrumental in her family's attempt to reclaim her from him. Irigaray argues in 'Women on the Market' that:

The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men (when a man buys a girl, he "pays" the father or the brother, not the mother ...), and they always pass from one man to another, from one group of men to another (Irigaray, 1985, 171).

Jack is himself a potential 'lover-father'. Early in *The Country Girls*, Kate agrees to walk with him, feeling: 'At least he would protect me if we met my father' (16). But as a grocer and dealer in commodities he understands that Eugene has not 'paid' Mr Brady for 'Kate' and aligns himself ultimately with the 'group of men' who 'own' her. Significantly one of this 'group of men', Cousin Andy, is 'a cattle dealer' whom Kate recalls 'bullying [cows and bullocks] along the road to country fairs' (127-128). The 'market' imagery of *The Country Girls* is redeployed both in this episode and in the tendency of Eugene's friend 'Simon the poet' to 'call all women cows -- 'a fat cow', 'a thin cow', 'a frigid cow', 'a nice cow''. The contrast between uncouth Andy and educated Simon reinforces O'Brien's suggestion of the universality of patriarchal domination and the commodification of women. Simon even plagiarises Joyce in an attempt to chat Kate up: "'Well, here you are, shining quietly behind a bushel of Wicklow bran'" (166). Kate's identification of this plagiarism does not undermine the authority of the 'literary father', or prevent Simon from causing trouble between herself and Eugene; he subsequently writes about her to Laura.

Related to Simon's plagiarism of Joyce is the intertextuality which functions subversively throughout *Girl with Green Eyes*. Jack's 'Lord Ullin' construct of the

relationship between Kate and Eugene is undermined by implicit reference to commerce, and the irony of Simon's 'Old Heathcliff' quip is anticipated by Baba's observation that "he's thirty-five and he's going bald" (115). Eugene himself begins to mock Kate's romantic expectations: "Love!" he said, as if it were a meaningless word' (135). Resenting Eugene's imposition of rules, despising the 'cold, inhuman' mentality which renders him capable of washing his own half of a shared floor, and 'scent[ing] trouble and difficulties' 'from afar' (163), Kate is nonetheless unable to 'arm [her]self against him', and persists in 'lov[ing] him too much'. As Janice Radway has argued, this tendency is legitimized by romance fiction and by the romance myth itself, which 'suggest[s] that the cruelty and indifference that the hero exhibits towards the heroine ... are really of no consequence because they *actually* originated in love and affection ...' (Radway, 1987, 151). In these terms, 'loving too much' is projected as a worthwhile investment which will eventually pay off. O'Brien exposes the pointlessness of this exercise by identifying the gap between realism and romance. This is revealed by comments such as Eugene's on 'the difference between fantasy and reality'. He has assumed Kate to be "a simple, uncomplicated girl", "delighted when you pass her a second cake" (174), and resents her perceived need for 'ownership ... signed and sealed', feeling that 'one hour in bed shall be paid for by a life sentence' (177). The man behind the 'saint's face' is revealed as a 'mad martyr nailed to his chair' (185), 'too articulate, too sure of his own rightness' (193). Eugene's 'public rationality', to use Benjamin's term, 'necessitates that woman's [Kate's] different voice be split off and institutionalized in the private sphere' (Benjamin, 1990, 197). Though he has enjoyed 'teaching' Kate, he has never permitted her a sense of

self -- looking around his room, Kate realises that she has 'contributed nothing ... not even a cushion' (189). His parting message to Kate -- sent via Baba -- is that 'old men and young girls are all right in books but not anywhere else' (200), yet Kate continues to cling to her ideal, admiring his 'lonely strength' and reproaching herself for 'not [being] the girl he had imagined [her] to be' (207).

In the final part of the trilogy, *Girls in their Married Bliss* (1964 [1967]), the splitting of Kate's subjectivity between how she is and 'the girl [Eugene] imagined her to be' is highlighted, as I have already argued, by the commentary of Baba. Baba is identified by Peggy O'Brien as 'crass' and by Eckley as 'giv[ing] Miss O'Brien as "feminist" label' (Peggy O'Brien, 1987, 476; Eckley, 1974, 29). Eckley's comment is attributable within a nineteen sixties context to reflections by Baba such as 'The vote, I thought, means nothing to women, we should be armed' (78). In Chapter 1 Baba posits herself and Kate as 'married [and] dissatisfied', revealing that Kate has married 'a crank called Eugene Gaillard' and offering an account of the wedding which leaves the reader in little doubt that 'bliss' will not be on the agenda (7).

At the beginning of *Girls in their Married Bliss* Kate herself is still open to the idea of romantic love, but her affections have been transferred to a politician with whom she has an unconsummated affair. Beauvoir suggests that adultery is 'the form that love will assume as long as the institution of marriage lasts', and that woman 'is fated for infidelity: it is the sole concrete form her liberty can assume ... by virtue of the fact that she is regarded as an object, she is offered to any subjectivity who chooses to take possession of her' (Beauvoir, 1949 [1993], 199). Beauvoir later argues that 'her decision to deceive her

husband is often born of resentment' (576). In *Girls in their Married Bliss*, Kate's affair with Duncan is defined by what is lacking in her marriage, and Baba's narrative anticipates disappointment: 'She'd met someone else, she was in love, the old, old story. She began to rave until I thought I'd puke. He turned out to be prize. They came here in the afternoons for cups of tea, and to talk, I even went out to give them a chance, but they never got past the front room' (14-15). The 'inauthenticity' of the affair is further exposed by Kate's admission that 'phrases were like melodies, they went on appealing long after one had stopped listening to them' and that 'they'd already worn it out, with talk' (26). The inherent disillusionment of these reflections can be traced to the breakdown of Kate's relationship with Eugene. Leaving her politician Kate remembers how 'she had prayed into [Eugene's] mauve tongue that such a miracle would last forever', admitting to herself that she has 'prayed one thing and done another' (29). Baba's comment on Kate's marriage is 'If this is how true love ends I'm glad I've never had the experience' (53). Kate's deception of and bad faith towards Eugene are attributable to her own shaky sense of self. Deprived of romantic love, Kate seeks to 'expiate all by sinking into domesticity', planning how she will 'put her lily hand down into sewerages and save him the trouble of lifting up the ooze, and hairs, and grey slime that resulted from their daily lives' (31).⁸

In *Girls in their Married Bliss*, Kate's 'schizophrenia' is triggered by loss of self and compounded by Eugene's refusal to communicate. He deals with Kate 'as a judge would

⁸ This is concurrent with O'Brien's own comments on the tensions experienced by a woman with a family who wants to write. In an interview with Julia Carlson O'Brien expresses this dilemma within an Irish context. Asked by Carlson whether she 'think[s] that the position of women in Ireland makes it that bit more difficult for the woman writer', she replies: 'It does because she's not supposed to write. (A) she's supposed to keep her thoughts to herself. And (B) she's supposed to be doing maternal, useful things; not things that are the provenance of a man' (Carlson, 1990, p. 75).

have done', engaging with her only to hit her and leaving her with the sense that 'the scene they had just had was *her* scene, not *theirs*' (37). Reading his diary, Kate experiences 'some intimation of the enormity of his buried hatred for her, for women, for human follies' (39).

Yet after leaving Eugene Kate continues to mourn 'his strong face', a romanticism which is offset by Baba's description of him 'looking like an advertisement for hemlock' (41). The perceptions of Kate and Baba are not as irreconcilable as they seem; the reference to poison finally exposes Eugene as the 'vicious, insane and/or murderous' 'hero' identified by Modleski (Modleski, 1982, 79). Still holding on to the necessity of romantic love, Kate refuses to be financially dependent on Eugene, feeling that 'to be maintained by a man who did not love her was depraved' (82). Her own notions of love have been modified rather than abandoned. At the beginning of Chapter 9 Kate is waiting to talk to Eugene, having blackmailed him into meeting:

She went over what she must say to him: that he sack Maura [the *au pair* who conveniently becomes his mistress], take Kate herself back and move them into the country She would grow good, and protective, and cling to him, like the ivy he'd once planted on the gable wall of one of the many houses he'd owned.... It would be their last home, their stronghold, their coffin (95).

As Mary Salmon points out, this passage identifies marriage as 'imprisonment', 'a kind of madness or death' (Salmon, 1990, 146). Salmon goes on to argue that Kate 'sees in [the house] confirmation of her alienation which in [*Girls in their Married Bliss*] is part of a

pattern of repetition ...' (147).⁹ In this context, Kate's dream of 'grow[ing] good' is as clearly unrealistic as her desire to clean sinks. This is signified by O'Brien's deployment of the language of romance fiction; Kate's vow to 'cling to [Eugene] like ivy' recalls Jane Eyre's ultimate promise to the blind and crippled Rochester. Not that I am identifying *Jane Eyre* as 'romance fiction'; rather, the intertextuality of *The Country Girls* trilogy points to Kate's own naive and unquestioning reading of texts such as *Wuthering Heights*. Kate herself is impervious to their elements of 'negative romance'. Furthermore, Kate and Eugene have not undergone the levelling processes crucial to *Jane Eyre*. Eugene's position of power is emphasised not only by Kate's abject 'clinging', but by the very specific reference to 'the many houses he'd owned'. Even the romantically-inclined Kate recognises that the 'figmented' country cottage of her cliched dream will inevitably become 'their coffin', but she still needs to hold on to the external trappings of happy coupledness.

Having been exchanged between groups of men, Kate has no choice but to 'acquiesce', even though Eugene's house constitutes only an interim grave. Chapter 9 recounts Kate's cataclysmic realisation that acquiescence will no longer buy protection. Eugene has no wish to communicate with Kate; he offers her only a reiteration of 'facts' ("It's eight degrees below freezing").¹⁰ Eugene treats Kate with sufficient contempt for her to realise that 'he had renounced her in his mind, and through his body'. Despite having 'talked incessantly about wars, money, injustice, but [having] sat at home stewing in his private

⁹ Salmon identifies continuity between Kate's projected 'coffin' and Baba's suffering at the hands of her gynecologist, who tortures her with 'poking and probing and hurt' (p. 118).

¹⁰ In the context of Kate's 'bodily alienation' as an Irish woman it is interesting that Eugene's mania for facts is associated with his Englishness and with his inability to nurture: 'England was screaming with facts and statistics and not one person to supervise soup machines' (p. 96).

pain', he berates Kate for crying for herself, 'sound[ing] superior' the while (97). Kate has been unable to cry for anyone else because her own subjectivity has been so heavily compromised, but Eugene cannot recognise this. As Andrea Dworkin puts it, 'men are able to be objective, an exalted capacity, precisely because they are not objects' (Dworkin, 1981, 108). At the same time, though, 'it is impossible to remember as real the suffering of someone who by definition has no legitimate claim to dignity or freedom, someone who is in fact viewed as some thing, an object or an absence' (21).¹¹ At this point in the narrative, Kate '[knows] danger as she had never known it'. After Eugene's departure she suffers a breakdown triggered finally by the sight of a father and daughter -- the little girl is significantly held 'at arm's length as if she were a dog' -- and by a talking weighing machine. The machine speaks -- and it is likely that Kate imagines this -- with an Irish accent:

'Eight stone, seven pounds', a rich, Irish country accent told her. She talked back to him. He was probably shy, thinking she was making fun of him, as no doubt many people did. A grey cloth map on the school wall, long forgotten, rose before her eyes Ordinary places that she'd never visited and never wanted to visit but were now part of a fable summoned up by this now familiar voice (99-100).

Kate finds temporary solace in the reconstruction of her childhood Ireland, identifying with a fantasised and disembodied Irishman who has, like her, become an object of mockery and scorn. The implications of this passage are complex. The disembodiment of

¹¹ In *Pornography* Dworkin explains that 'in male reality, women cannot enter male consciousness without violating it. The male is contaminated and distressed by any contact with woman not-as-object' (Dworkin, 1981, p. 64). In this context Eugene's refusal to acknowledge Kate as a subject is directly attributable to fear.

the male voice suggests O'Brien's awareness of the constructedness of male identities -- with particular reference to colonised males such as Baba's husband Frank -- but Kate is still being 'weighed up' by the male.¹² This recalls Mr Gentleman 'weighing up' her commodity status in *The Country Girls* and highlights the dual colonisation of women. The disembodied Irish male is still able to pass judgement on Kate as a female body. In a desperate attempt to overcome disembodiment, Kate evokes memories of childhood food: 'She thought that maybe he had goose [for Christmas dinner] with soft, oozy potato stuffing to which sweetbreads had been added' (100). Yet O'Brien makes it clear that Kate is clinging to a 'fable', an inaccurate version of 'long forgotten' people, places and events which -- to paraphrase Dworkin -- were simply part of an inevitable progression 'from father's house to husband's house'. Like the little girl at the railway station, Kate has been dragged limping through life 'at arm's length'. Wondering why she has forgotten her father, and realising that 'Eugene sucked every thought and breath of her waking moments', she fails to make the vital connection that one patriarch has simply replaced the other.

The weighing machine's inevitable lack of response to her questions comes as one denial too many:

Possibly twenty seconds went by. Then something broke loose inside her and she started to scream and bang the glass that covered the numbered face. She hurled

¹² Frank is shown like Kate and Baba in a variety of contexts, whereas Eugene is seen only in domestic situations. This points to his social constructedness. Visiting him at work, Baba reveals: 'I could not believe that he was my husband and that I sometimes slept near him and had seen him sick and drunk and in all sorts of conditions. He was another man in that outfit' (pp. 111-112). Similarly Frank is revealed as being, like Baba, ultimately 'alone'; he and his brothers are 'allies in nothing but making money ... There was just us, him and me' (p. 117). O'Brien will not really engage again with the issues of male subjectivity and 'masculinity' until *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Down by the River*.

insults at it and poured into it all the thoughts that had been in her brain for months. She lashed out with words and with her fists and heard glass break ... (100).

Kate's attempt to effect her own 'talking cure' leads her eventually to 'desperateness by instalment' with a (male) psychiatrist in Chapter 11. Once again she finds herself under patriarchal control which is ultimately destructive. Under the terms of the sessions 'she had nothing to say, or had so much that it was useless to cramp it into the time allotted and then stop and retain it until the next week' (121). Having unlocked in Kate the recognition that she 'destroy[s people], with weakness', the psychiatrist gives her a tissue -- crying for herself again! -- and tells her to "pull [her]self together"(123). As Andrea Dworkin points out, 'the tradition of regarding sensate beings as objects is now particularly honored, even enforced, in psychiatry and psychology' (Dworkin, 1981, 103). Irigaray sees this tendency as especially pertinent to women analysands. In 'The poverty of psychoanalysis' she identifies the practice as 'phallo-narcissis[tic]' (Whitford, 1991a, 79). In *Girls in their Married Bliss*, Kate avoids subsequent visits to her analyst, making 'the excuse to herself' that she has to sort out the practicalities of life without Eugene.

In apparent contrast to the doomed romanticism of Kate, Baba's decision to marry Frank has been a commercial one. In this context, is interesting that Frank's identity is revealed as socially constructed. Their exchange seems more clear-sighted than that of Kate and Eugene, since Eugene is constructed only through the perspectives of Kate and Baba. Baba freely admits that '... the only times [she] found marriage at all pleasing [were] when [she] was handing out his money' (56). The commercial nature of this marriage is

clear from their first meeting; Baba reveals that 'he drove me home and offered me money' (9). Unlike the marriage of Kate and Eugene, which operates in terms of exchange whilst being constructed as 'love', this relationship is stripped to its basics. When Frank buys Baba flowers, she sells them to a neighbour (10). Recognising Frank as 'a merchant at heart', Baba recognises also his suitability as a marriage partner in a society founded on 'the market'. Baba sees love not as an isolated experience but as part of a continuum of relationships:

I know that people liking you or not liking you is an accident and is to do with them and not you. That goes for love too, only more so (11-12).

But Baba's awareness of 'the market' heightens, rather than detracts from, the pathos of her position. Baba has been 'exchanged' not directly by her father, but by her mother, who lacks money of her own and longs to enjoy the benefits offered by Frank: 'That's how he really hooked us -- financing us all' (13). Identifying herself as 'the bloody, sacrificial lamb', Baba reveals that she and her house have been featured in 'a fashion magazine'. Her ingenious fabrication of *Woman's Night* has led only to her own commodification.

Baba harbours her own romantic daydreams; in Chapter 10, through the first person narrative which has been transferred to her, 'longings, for songs, cigarettes, dark bars, telegrams, cactuses, combs in your hair, the circus, nights out, life' are revealed. Baba is unable to communicate these 'longings' to her husband Frank. Like Kate, she has paid with her 'life' for her marriage, but she is more level headed about keeping nominally to her side of the marital bargain, maintaining that 'a man's home is his castle' and denying to Frank that she has received her lover in any place other than Hyde Park. Romance is

juxtaposed with the reality of marriage to Frank, but even the lover brings only sexual disappointment and unwanted pregnancy. Baba's visit to an offensively paternal gynaecologist, who tells her that "God has fructified [her] womb", precipitates a diatribe against man and God:

I was thinking of women and all they have to put up with All this poking and probing and hurt. And not only when they go to the doctors but when they go to bed as brides with the men that love them. Oh God, who does not exist, you hate women And Jesus, who snubbed your mother, you hate them more. Roaming around all that time with a bunch of men Abandoning women (118-119).

Here, there is a recognition not only that equal civil rights would be of limited use to women -- who even if they *could* become 'high court judges' would still have to put up with 'all this' -- but that women are trapped by the patriarchal construct of a God who 'does not exist' for their interests. In this context the passage anticipates O'Brien's ongoing deconstruction of myths of femininity under Irish Catholic patriarchy. Significantly Andrea Dworkin discusses the ways in which women are fobbed off with religion 'to redeem the cruel inadequacies of mortal men'. Though Dworkin overstates her case somewhat by asserting that 'women never, no matter how deluded or needy or desperate, worship Jesus as the perfect son' since: 'No faith is that blind. There is no religious or cultural palliative to deaden the raw pain of the son's betrayal of his mother' her argument does parallel Baba's (Dworkin, 1983, 23). In Baba's terms, even 'the men who love [women]' hurt them in the very name of love, and she refuses to glamorise her affair with the term. Kate recognises the dangers of 'her own compulsion to love on an

octave note from one daybreak to the next' but still assumes that 'love' -- rather than unplanned pregnancy -- is the cause of Baba's distress (88).

It is after her 'one night stand' with Roger that Kate, unable as Baba puts it to 'persecute him until she had loaded him with the love trophy', is finally forced to review her notions of love. Baba's observation recalls Beauvoir's argument that women 'make trophies' of 'extorted' demands for love (Beauvoir, 1949 [1993], 693). Kate, invited to the party at which she meets Roger, feels that 'the word 'party' still [has] evocations, like the word 'myrrh', or 'Eucharist', or 'rose-water', or 'pearl-barley'' (136). Kate's preparations reinforce both her sense of ritual and her still reverential attitude to romance: 'She dressed herself in blue (Mary, star of the heavens) and put on blue beads that 'like a rosary' reached down to her navel'. In the words of Beauvoir, Kate is 'tak[ing] possession of her person ...; her ego then seems chosen and re-created by herself' (Beauvoir, 1949 [1993], 556). I have already cited Arp's argument that 'narcissism is the attempt to realize the union with one's own body ... that has been denied through the process of bodily alienation' (Simons, 1995, 169). By the time that party has ended, the word has acquired new and unwelcome connotations: 'Evermore when she thought of the word party she would think of the wilful internment that came after' (145). For the first time, Kate is honest with herself about the nature of sexual exchange:

Sweet Jesus, she thought, I despise him. If there was a way of making him suffer now, I would do it.... It was the first heartless admission she'd ever made to herself. The first time she realised that her interest in people was generated solely by her needs ... (149).

Denied sexual satisfaction, she feels ‘What a cheat. Especially when one had set out to get something for oneself’ (150). She becomes self-parodying about her quest for ‘the De-Luxe Love Affair’(152) and, after an unproductive phone call to Roger, is juxtaposed -- ‘facing, but not looking at’ -- with a ‘sign of multi-coloured lettering which at that moment was still but would soon be flashing on and off guaranteeing bargains, perfection and total satisfaction’ (152). This is, of course, deeply ironic, since in terms of sexual exchange ‘perfection and total satisfaction’ are not on the agenda. Janice Radway has pointed out that:

The concealed message [of advertisements] ... legitimates through assertion the notion that commodity consumption is an adequate and effective way to negate the “pain” produced by the disappointments ... that are an inevitable part of human life. It is worth observing, however, that advertising’s offer of happiness is nothing but a promise of vicarious experience (Radway, 1987, 117).

The imagery of advertising highlights Kate’s dissatisfaction and commodity status, recalling her disappointment with Mr Gentleman’s chocolates in *The Country Girls*. It also points to her continuing restriction to ‘vicarious experience’.

Romance fiction, that most vicarious of pleasures, has been described by Alison Light as ‘consumerist, yes; a hopeless rebellion, yes; but still, in our society, a forbidden pleasure -- like cream cakes’ (Mary Eagleton, 1986, 143). It might be added that cream cakes and romance are ultimately unsustainable. O’Brien implicitly makes this point through her account in *The Country Girls* of Baba’s married ‘date’, Reginald, who reveals: “‘I’m a confectioner ... I sweeten life’” (159).

In her interview with Nell Dunn, O'Brien calls for a rethinking of the romantic ideal and its attendant disappointments:

... far from protecting ourselves [from being left by men] we ought to learn to believe and know that this is going to happen. I don't mean that one should be bitter and say 'Oh, he's going to leave me in 1966' but this is what blights friendships and marriage and everything -- is this little Cinderella dream that you get one man and one woman and that it lasts, you know, they live happily ever after (Dunn, 1966, 71).

This seems more to do with acceptance than autonomy -- being left rather than doing the leaving. The difficulties encountered by women in exchanging the 'Cinderella dream' for sexual freedom are explored in *August is a Wicked Month* (1965), which will be examined in Chapter 2. By the end of *Girls in their Married Bliss* Kate has been forced to accept the disintegration of her 'dream'. As she 'fores[ees] the day', fragmented 'Cinderella' images of 'single shoes', 'men's contraceptives' and 'relegated semen' washed up by the Thames (152-153) signal that her future is reduced to bare survival. This is concurrent with O'Brien's own suggestion of the necessity for resignation to 'trees and sewerages, and advertisements, and cigarettes' in place of the 'Cinderella dream' (Dunn, 1966, 70).

Kate's ultimate strategy for survival is to 'eliminate the risk of making the same mistake again'. When Eugene takes her son Cash to Fiji without her permission, she senses that: 'The conspiracy was too enormous, the whole machinery too thorough' (155). This realisation prompts her to undergo voluntary sterilization in an attempt to escape

from patriarchy and its constructions of femininity and especially of maternity. Kate is like her mother a victim of matricide (Whitford, 1991a, 36).

O'Brien has exposed throughout *The Country Girls* trilogy the mendacity of the romance myth. Alison Light argues that 'romances may pretend that the path to marriage is effortless (obstacles are there to be removed) but they may have to cry off when the action really starts -- after marriage. The reader is left in a permanent state of foreplay ...' (Mary Eagleton, 1986, 143). O'Brien's construction throughout *The Country Girls* trilogy of 'negative romance' suggests that the outcome of the trilogy's 'foreplay' was always going to be brutal. This anticipates the 'nihilism' of *August is a Wicked Month* (1965) and *Casualties of Peace* (1966).

Chapter 2

‘Glacial Nihilism’: *August is a Wicked Month* (1965) and *Casualties of Peace* (1966)

When *August is a Wicked Month* was published the *Punch* review referred to the novel’s ‘marvellous Tom Jones type of zest’ whilst *The Guardian* identified ‘brilliant passages of grotesque sexual comedy’. Reviewing *Casualties of Peace* *Punch* was even more exuberant claiming that ‘for laying, loving, sheer high spirits -- and for a sweet vulnerability -- ... there hasn’t been a book like this one since the last Edna O’Brien’. It seems strange that two novels encompassing between them the death of a child, venereal disease, sado-masochism and murder should have elicited such gleeful responses. As Peggy O’Brien suggests lovers of ‘the ebullient *Country Girls*’ may simply have gone into denial, ignoring the ‘darker face’ of the ‘anti-romantic author’, the ‘endearing rogue who endorses in her characters a rude capacity for survival’ (Peggy O’Brien, 1987, 484). In works preceding *Casualties of Peace* O’Brien’s favoured dichotomy has been that of ‘fairy tale’ and ‘reality’. Though fairy tale and death are briefly aligned in *August is a Wicked Month* (58-59) *Casualties*’ added ingredient of nightmare exposes more ruthlessly the dangers of romantic love.

In Chapter 1 I referred to Peggy O’Brien’s identification of ‘the glacial nihilism of [Edna O’Brien’s] middle novels’ (Peggy O’Brien, 1987, 484). In this chapter, I wish to examine O’Brien’s exposition of the ‘permissive society’ of the nineteen sixties, focusing on ‘nihilism’ in *August is a Wicked Month* and *Casualties of Peace* through Irigaray’s

identification of 'between-men culture' in *Je, Tu, Nous*, which is helpful in showing how equal rights, including non-legislated rights of sexual freedom, are inadequate to the realisation of a female symbolic (Irigaray, 1993, 81). In this context O'Brien's 'glacial nihilism' constitutes a logical development from the 'negative romance' of *The Country Girls* trilogy.

I refer to 'nihilism' in its sense of a philosophical term for 'death drive' as identified by Whitford (Whitford, 1991a, 72). As I explained in the introduction 'the question of woman's identity in the symbolic order, and the question of the organization and violence of the death drives' are crucial for O'Brien as well as for Irigaray (Whitford, 1991b, 123). Mary Salmon identifies O'Brien's concern throughout *Casualties of Peace* with 'the organization and violence of the death drives', referring to her representation of 'the pattern of woman's life as a living death because of her dependence on men' (Salmon, 1990, 147). In the context of O'Brien's fiction, Irigaray's identification of phallogentrism as a 'nihilistic religion' is also resonant (Whitford, 1991a, 92).

It is not my intention in this chapter to contest Peggy O'Brien's identification of 'nihilism' in these novels. This would be difficult, given episodes such as this from *August is a Wicked Month* :

'Don't leave me,' he said. He was also saying, 'I am an old man and a sad one and nothing much quickens me any more and for some illogical reason you do, so stay'.

'Where would I sleep?' she said.

‘You would just lie beside me,’ he said. She shivered. There was something in his proposal that made her think of lying next to the dead (O’Brien, 1965, 113-4).

In *Casualties of Peace* the protagonist, Willa, is a designer of stained glass who considers replying thus to a letter from a ‘male admirer’:

‘Thank you, but I would like you to appreciate the fact that glass is cold and chilling to the touch. Glass is not human ... glass is monstrous to sleep with.

Handling and holding glass you yearn for flesh’ (O’Brien, 1966 [1968], 29).

As Mary Salmon argues: ‘[Willa’s] working life as a glass sculptor is a world of unbridgeable gulfs and unheard voices from the grim universe of nightmares of loss and alienation’ (Salmon, 1990, 147). In terms of O’Brien’s literary output Willa’s situation can be read as an extension of the ‘bodily alienation’ experienced by Caitheleen in *The Country Girls* trilogy, for which glass is an appropriate metaphor. When Willa reflects that: ‘Handling and holding glass you yearn for flesh’ she is expressing her own sense of ‘bodily alienation’ and fear. The question which I intend to address in this chapter is not whether *August is a Wicked Month* and *Casualties of Peace* are nihilistic, but why.

Both novels explore the ways in which the new-found sexual freedom of the nineteen sixties commodified women. Dorothy Leland has clearly outlined Irigaray’s arguments on the commodification of women, identifying four ways in which, according to Irigaray, ‘so-called femininity ... resembles a commodity’ (Fraser & Bartky, 1992, 118). Firstly, ‘feminine sexuality’ is commodified through the subjection of women to the ‘forms and laws’ of ‘masculine activity’. Leland does not offer a precise definition of ‘masculine activity’, but for the purposes of this argument I interpret this as the exchange system

identified by Irigaray and discussed in Chapter 1. Secondly, 'just as exchange functions override the natural utility of things when they become commodities, so the natural properties of women's bodies are suppressed and subordinated when they are made into objects of circulation among men'. In *August is a Wicked Month* Ellen is reduced by the violinist with whom she thinks that she is taking the sexual initiative to 'a half-naked, shivering picture of herself on film'. The 'natural properties' of her body are rendered inadequate and pathetic (68). Thirdly, 'just as a commodity is incapable of imaging or mirroring itself, so women's self-image becomes an image of and for men'. Even as Ellen chooses her holiday clothes, dancing with herself and revelling in what she imagines to be her new-found independence, she is anticipating 'some stranger' who will complete her life (37). Finally, Irigaray argues that within this market economy women are given a 'value' by being 'submitted to the extrinsic standard of male sexual desire'. Displayed on the beach alongside her fellow 'commodities', Ellen quickly realises that she is not one of the 'perfection people' and that she might have to market herself accordingly (51). Her seduction of Bobby, the film star, apparently allows her to sell herself above 'her own category', but his 'value' is considerably reduced by the later revelation that VD has formed a part of their exchange. Interestingly, Irigaray identifies 'the more or less cancerous diseases of our age' -- along with 'the consumer society' and 'religious despair' -- as an 'existing value' of the current social and symbolic order (Whitford, 1991a, 158). In *August*, Bobby's VD and Ellen's inability to enter a church and pray are symptomatic of 'existing values', though Ellen's 'religious despair' can also be read as an attempt to evade

Irish Catholic constructs of femininity and motherhood, to which as the mother of a dead son she is especially vulnerable.

O'Brien's challenging of 'existing values' in *August is a Wicked Month* is not without precedent. Mary Salmon identifies a 'nihilistic' element in *Girls in their Married Bliss*. In Chapter 1, I cited Salmon's argument that 'Kate's marriage, or imprisonment, is represented as a kind of death'. Interpreted in this way, the relationship between Kate and Eugene can be seen to anticipate the unconsummated but sado-masochistic marriage of Willa and Herod in *Casualties of Peace*. Certainly Salmon sees a continuity between *The Country Girls* trilogy and its immediate successors, arguing that 'separation, despair and death wish are also the themes of *August is a Wicked Month*' (Salmon, 1990, 147). Peggy O'Brien also sees *Girls in their Married Bliss* as the precursor of the 'casual sex and philistinism' of *August is a Wicked Month* and *Casualties of Peace* (Peggy O'Brien, 1987, 484). Her psychoanalytic reading of the texts leads her to argue that post-*Country Girls* trilogy there is a 'radical split between Kate and Baba types, with a preference for the latter', and that 'the appropriation of first-person narrating space to Baba in *Married Bliss* ... heralds [a] phase of [O'Brien's protagonists] emulating paternal callousness rather than exquisite maternal suffering' (484-485). Certainly Kate's 'emulat[ion]' of Eugene and subsequent determination to 'get something for [her]self' from sex with Roger suggest a need to be, as Benjamin puts it, '*like ... the exciting father*' (Benjamin, 1990, 105). Yet, as Irigaray argues in 'The power of discourse and the subordination of the feminine':

It seems that two possible roles are available to [woman], roles that are occasionally or frequently contradictory. Woman could be *man's equal*. In this

case, she would enjoy ... the same economic, social, political rights as men. She would be a potential man. But on the exchange market -- especially, or exemplarily, the market of sexual exchange -- women would also have to preserve and maintain what is called *femininity* (Whitford, 1991a, 130).

So the option of becoming 'like the exciting father' under patriarchy is an illusory one. 'Equality' is attainable only through the elimination of 'the market'. Meanwhile, 'women', as O'Brien demonstrates, are confined to the roles of 'commodity' or 'potential man', which amount in the end only to different types of 'commodity'. Kate and Ellen as 'potential men' continue to be sexually exploited.

The perceived 'nihilism' of *Casualties of Peace* and *Girls in their Married Bliss* is further reinforced by the displacement of their Irish protagonists. The cultural dislocation which throughout *The Country Girls* trilogy is increasingly Caitheleen/Kate's lot as she moves from the West of Ireland to Dublin and thence to London, similarly affects Ellen and Willa, the respective protagonists of *August is a Wicked Month* and *Casualties of Peace*. Peggy O'Brien argues that O'Brien repeats 'the same characters in only slightly different guises' so that, for example, 'Kate and Baba ... become Willa and Patsy in *Casualties of Peace*' (Peggy O'Brien, 1987, 483). Though this argument is both ungenerous and simplistic, ignoring O'Brien's identification of the interchangeability of women under patriarchy, it is useful to regard Ellen's London lifestyle and anglicised name as part of a continuing exploration of the theme of displacement. Willa and Patsy intensify O'Brien's move from 'negative romance' to 'glacial nihilism' by being similar to Kate and Baba whilst suffering even grimmer fates.

In *August is a Wicked Month*, Ellen tells an American doctor that she is English:

‘You come from?’

‘England,’ she said. She was tired of saying it and anyway it wasn’t true. But saying one came from Ireland resulted in tedious stories about fairies and grandmothers (53-54).

The underlying reasons for Ellen’s avoidance strategy are more complex than this exchange would appear to suggest. Deciding to holiday abroad Ellen chooses a pair of ‘fast’ blue trousers to take with her and reflects that ‘Our Lady could blush to her follicles’ (36). Yet, as Mary Salmon explains, ‘these costumes for a rite of passage turn out to be masks for a phantasmagoria of sad sexual encounters’ (Salmon, 1990, 147). It is not so easy for Ellen to reject her cultural conditioning. As she ‘instigate[s] a little welcome for herself’ to celebrate her supposed freedom at her Mediterranean hotel she finds herself remembering ‘white frost on a road in Ireland’ in contrast to the ‘shattering’ new light which does not suit her (45). By the end of the novel, Ellen has moved from despising the ‘oily Irish-American gusto’ of a movie star’s understudy to longing:

... to go home, not to London to the pipes of light but home to the race to which she belonged: and then she shivered uncontrollably, knowing that their thoughts were no longer hers (94).

In *Casualties of Peace*, Willa is seen in relation to her native landscape:

Solitary love, solitary passion, her desires gone underground like the streams and rivers in the limestone country around part of Ireland and part of Yugoslavia (36).

O'Brien's analogy of repressed female subjectivity with Irish landscape is significant in the light of Irigaray's assertion -- in the words of Whitford -- that: 'Woman has always been for man his space, or rather his *place*, but has no place of her own' and that 'this deprives her of identity for-herself' (Whitford, 1991a, 158). In *Casualties of Peace*, the colonisation of Willa's body is echoed by expressions of unease about what is happening in, and to, Ireland at the hands of the English. The very title of the novel may refer to the price of escape from a country where, as Willa points out to Tom and Patsy, people are 'still dying':

Bulletins of drastic death often reached them -- men hanging from trees by courtesy of their own piece of horse rope, inferior Jesuses as Patsy once put it, found by anyone and everyone, but mostly by the poor postman, because foul deeds were done late at night and found first thing in the morning by the postman (51).

The 'nihilism' of conflict within Ireland will be directly addressed in *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) in which O'Brien presents terrorism as part of a continuum of patriarchal nihilism. In *Casualties of Peace*, Willa's own violent, 'late at night' death seems inextricably bound to the conflicts of her country, which will ultimately shelter her murderer:

A scarf to put over his face. Then Ireland. His mother would stand by him. That's what your mother was for. All her genius hiding blokes during the time of the black and tans would come in useful. His mother kept a man for a week in a pit of potatoes. She could get that pit open (111).

Ireland, for Tom, means male supremacy, a martyred mother who, in contrast to the Englishwomen who frequent 'shops' and 'shoe sales ... the milk going sour in their emancipated glands' (34), would 'cut [a toffee] in six' to share it (110). His real fate -- prison -- and the fact that he intends to kill not Willa, but Patsy, seem irrelevant. Ireland, as perceived by Tom, protects her men, and Willa, 'a person who does not love her [patriarchally constructed?] country, a person who cannot love a man' (60), is punished.¹

Escaping one patriarchal culture, O'Brien's protagonists suffer under another; 'social imperialism', embodied by Tom, is the death of Willa in the end. Mary Salmon argues that throughout O'Brien's fiction:

A sharp contrast is drawn between these worlds ['Ireland between the late thirties and late fifties' and 'London or elegant Mediterranean holiday places'] ... the postcolonial, mainly rural, Roman Catholicized society that is often perceived as shapeless, and frequently as out of control, and the metropolis or anonymous cosmopolitan suntrap where people may be free-thinking, and life appears well-ordered (Salmon, 1990, 143).

But the 'well-ordered' nature of Mediterranean society is only another manifestation of patriarchal order. Irigaray, calling for a new social and symbolic order acknowledging both sexes', argues that:

In the absence of such an order, many people are nowadays looking for an identity-space other than the human one. A man defines himself in relation to his

¹ The construction of Tom's mother as adherent to what Peggy O'Brien terms 'exquisite martyrdom' and Tom's own construction of Ireland as protecting mother are of course, problematic in colouring his expectations of Willa and Patsy, both of whom are Irishwomen trying in their different ways to elude patriarchal constructs (Peggy O'Brien, 1987, 485).

house or his neighbour's, his car or any other means of transport, the number of miles he's covered, the number of matches he's played, his favorite animals, his unique Gods in whose name he kills others and looks down on women, and so on (Irigaray, 1993, 83).

The 'identity-spaces' of Ireland, London and the Mediterranean are all represented in *August* as 'other than the human'. Salmon points out that 'the difference between these worlds is slight: to pass from one to the other is often just a matter of changing clothes' (143). This may seem contradictory given the sharply-defined 'contrast' between worlds, yet Salmon's argument is that 'the characters wearing [the clothes] know they are only theatrical substitutes for secure self-acceptance' (143). In 'The power of discourse', Irigaray identifies the necessity, despite 'equal rights', for woman to 'preserve and maintain what is called *femininity*' to preserve her value 'on the [sexual] exchange market'. Furthermore, Irigaray argues that '... this masquerade requires an *effort* on her part for which she is not compensated. Unless her pleasure comes simply from being chosen as an object of consumption or of desire by masculine 'subjects'' (Whitford, 1991a, 130-131). Ellen cannot be other than 'an object of consumption or of desire'. The male-dominated worlds represented in O'Brien's fiction may be superficially different, but women's experiences within them are not. Ireland, London and the Mediterranean are all 'between-men culture[s]'.

In the light of O'Brien's representations of these 'cultures' Germaine Greer's overview of the effects on women of sexual freedom is pertinent. Greer observes that 'in [the] palmy days of the permissive society' it was 'not uncommon for a girl seeking 'popularity' or

approbation from boys to allow boys to take extraordinary liberties with her, while neither seeking nor deriving anything for herself' (Greer, 1970, 102). Similarly, Sheila Macleod reflects that:

Love had been largely a matter of sex: as much sex as you could get with as many people as possible. Now it seemed no more than a greedy male fantasy of omnipotence ... Now the sixties looked very much like a male invention based in power, promiscuity and self-abuse (Maitland, 1988, 181-182).

It is not difficult to identify male dominance in the early nineteen-sixties society represented in *August is a Wicked Month*. At the opening of the novel, Ellen reflects upon how her estranged husband '... was invariably undercharged' in shops 'because of his contemptuous face ... because he frightened shop girls ... and possibly one or two of them would think him attractive' (11). This recalls Eugene's 'sinister' aspect in *Girl with Green Eyes* and Russ's identification of 'the Shadow-Male' (Modleski, 1982, 79). Ellen reveals her ongoing fear of her nameless and 'shadowy' husband by lying about her domestic skills. As he leaves for a camping holiday with their son, she gives him a tin of shortbread, 'assur[ing] him untruthfully that it was home-made' (12). This incident reveals also Ellen's lingering desire to be the perfect wife and mother, recalling Kate's avowal, in *Girls in their Married Bliss*, to 'expiate all by sinking into domesticity'. For Ellen the shortbread is the only thing 'left for her to contribute'; post-separation she and her husband have 'settled down to a sort of sullen peace', 'talk[ing] now as she always feared they might, like strangers who had never been in love at all' (12). Remembering how 'for the last year of their marriage he avoided her in bed', Ellen decides against going on the camping

holiday because there would be 'no music, no telephone, no floor to sweep, nothing to fill in the hours of treachery between them' (13). The death of the relationship is emphasised after the departure of husband and son by images of desolation which serve also to prefigure Ellen's 'sad sexual encounters' at home and abroad. Ellen 'feel[s], out of habit, for the missing prong' of her child's discarded sandal, and notices that 'the silverfish that had got in with the grocery order were darting over the floor in search of crumbs and spilt sugar' (14). In contrast, Ellen imagines her husband 'sitting outside' the tent while the child sleeps, 'breathing and gratified, a tarpaulin spread on the grass, because of the dew'. The husband assumes what Irigaray identifies as the male right to appropriate space and nature (Irigaray, 1985, 173).

Ellen is herself homeless in the social and symbolic orders; she has borrowed a friend's house in London. Deprived of her own symbolic and temporal space she remains susceptible to the idea of 'high love', despite having experienced in her marriage 'how quickly [it] wanes' (21). Standing in the garden with a prospective lover, Ellen looks 'at the lights reflected in the River Thames':

There were many other things to be seen that night, Bovril signs and a moon and the bulky outline of a round gasometer, but they chose to look only at the pipes of light that swooped in a half-circle from left to right at that point where the river curved and went on towards distant Battersea and possibly created other images for other intending lovers (17).

Here, the essentials of life -- food, culture and power -- are commodified along with Ellen herself. O'Brien's juxtaposition of commerce and romance --Bovril signs and the moon --

indicates forcibly that Ellen is being 'sold' a myth, a 'culture that is not [her] own' based on 'an identity-space other than the human one'(Irigaray, 1993, 83-85). The couple's 'choice' in disregarding the 'real' moon in favour of reflected 'pipes of light' signifies Ellen's status as 'an image of and for men'. Unable to 'mirror' or reflect herself, but continuing, like the river, to 'creat[e] images', she lives vicariously through her constructs of the men she meets. When Hugh asks her 'what she did' 'she said that she worked for a little theatre magazine and had been married once and didn't approve of it and had a son' (22). Her work, presumably a defining aspect of her life, is barely mentioned again; instead, 'they g[et] on to marriage'. Ellen is only good to herself in relation to a man, cooking 'a nice dinner' for Hugh whereas 'alone, she ate standing up, so as not to make a ceremony of it' (23). Yet Hugh has 'some interest in her' only 'in so far as a man with four children, a deserted wife, and a mistress can have the luxury of giving a thought to another woman' (22-23). Furthermore he is devoid of a sense of humour; his wit is confined to offering 'to bring [Ellen] to bed and teach [her] all [his] wicked ways' (23). Ellen is, however, determined to make their relationship unique, 'open[ing] wide' as Hugh 'love[s] her as no man had ever done' (24). Calling him 'foxglove', Ellen displays the 'feeling of wonder ... in the face of the unknowable' which Irigaray argues should be deployed in 'the realm of sexual difference' towards the creation of a new symbolic order (Whitford, 1991a, 171). Yet Ellen's passive 'opening' indicates the extent to which she is trapped in a symbolic order constructed upon the phallus. Indeed, O'Brien's use of the 'foxglove' symbol in *Down by the River*, in which foxgloves as phallic signifiers are the 'lordliest' aspect of the setting for the protagonist's rape by her father, suggests that she is

ultimately sceptical about the possibility of a new order (O'Brien, 1996, 1). This position is anticipated by Ellen's incomplete response to Hugh. Despite her physically 'openness' she is not 'open' in communication:

There was so much that Ellen wished to say and so much that she wanted to ask but she said nothing for fear of jeopardizing her chances with him. She hid all her meannesses sometimes one or other of them hummed a song that was very popular at that time, called 'Anyone who had a heart', and the words were especially nice because of the way they were feeling (25-26).

The 'feelings' of Hugh and Ellen are measured in terms of the manufactured sentiment of popular song, yet Ellen dignifies the relationship by 'hid[ing] ... meannesses' and faking altruism: 'She wanted to do something lovely and loving for him' (26). Hugh, however, sees 'jail written all over her face'(p. 34). Ellen's own impulses are contradictory; she 'long[s] to be free and young and naked with all the men in the world making love to her, all at once', yet her responses to sex remain bound up with concepts of sin and punishment. As 'a great believer in punishment', she feels that she deserves Hugh's predictable indifference (34). Later in the novel Ellen reflects that:

The great brainwash began in childhood. Slipped in between the catechism advocating chastity for women was the secret message that a man and a man's body was the true and absolute propitiation (136).

Woman as commodity or 'thing' is valued for being 'chaste', but also for being man's 'envelope'. As Irigaray argues, woman 'cannot use the envelope that she *is* [since this has

been appropriated], and so must create artificial ones' using 'clothes, make-up and jewellery' (Whitford, 1991a, 169-170).²

In Chapter 3 Ellen's necklace -- which may be intended to evoke a rosary -- is broken as she runs to answer the phone:

It was important to find every bead, not just to repair the necklace but because she took it as an omen. When she had retrieved a pile she held them between her palms, tossing them from one hand to another, killing time, and every so often she put her hand down and in the dark found another in a corner or under a weed. it was funny how you could go on finding them (30).

Ellen's necklace is a part of her 'envelope', of her fragmented 'self-image'; its destruction prefigures the disillusionment which she will 'go on finding'.³ Because Ellen's 'time' is not her own -- like Kate, she waits for men like Hugh and Eugene to 'give' time' -- she 'kills' it, booking a holiday in France and buying what she perceives as 'freedom clothes' to take with her. The night before her flight, she 'dance[s] in the new green outfit to wireless music':

Dancing alone now, but by the same time next day she would be walking down a path to the sea ... and she would stand and throw something in the water and know that there was some stranger behind ... She was happy and breathed deeply, deeply (37).

² In 'Women on the Market' Irigaray argues that: 'The ritualized passage from woman to mother is accomplished by the *violation of an envelope*: the hymen, which has taken on the value of *taboo*, the taboo of virginity. Once deflowered, woman is relegated to the status of use value, to her entrapment in private property; she is removed from exchange among men' (Irigaray, 1985, 186).

³ The broken necklace is a potent symbol of (female) sexual disappointment in O'Brien's fiction; this scene recalls the 'bead from a broken necklace' which Kate hides for cash in *Girls in their Married Bliss*, and anticipates Portia's broken pearls in *The High Road*.

Able to 'breathe deeply' -- to live -- only through the idea of a man, Ellen projects her desires onto the first man she meets on the aeroplane, having deliberately 'sat in the outside seat across the aisle from him because he was the best looking' (38). Ellen reflects that 'she could make love to him then and there, lie down and love this total stranger', and that furthermore 'she was going to make overtures to every good-looking man she met. This trip was her jaunt into iniquity' (39). Striving for sexual freedom, Ellen is unaware of the extent to which she is still constrained. As Irigaray argues in 'The Power of Discourse', in attaining 'social rights' (among others) equal to those enjoyed by men, woman can 'be a potential man', but is still 'valued' in terms of 'femininity'. The 'fact that 'femininity' is a role, an image, a value, imposed on women by male systems of representation' wholly undermines the 'freedom' generated by notions of 'equality' (Whitford, 1991a, 130).

Leaving behind one 'between-men culture' and heading, as she thinks, towards a new beginning, Ellen begins to reassess her childhood conditioning and perceptions of her parents' marriage. Remembering praying with her sister whilst being 'conscious of her father 'forcing her mother to submit' she begins to feel, not empathy for her mother's 'resistance', but rather that 'her mother should not have been mean' (41-42). Ellen's dream is of 'making love' rather than being 'forc[ed] to submit'. O'Brien undermines the fantasy of unconditional lovemaking in the description of Ellen's hotel, which appears as 'a fairy tale house to which she was returning as in a dream' (44). The fairytale, dreamlike aspect of the hotel signifies that Ellen's 'muslin-light nightdress' and incantatory evocation of 'the word 'honeymoon'' prefigure only 'sad sexual encounters'. The 'fairy-tale

prettiness of the towns' is juxtaposed with imagery of death and violence, anticipating the nightmare world of *Casualties of Peace*. The mattresses on the beach, or 'market-place', appear 'like corpses', ironically underscoring Ellen's bid for freedom in getting rid of her wedding ring, 'the last unwitnessed act of flinging her husband away' (58-59).

O'Brien employs the language as well as the accoutrements of fairytale. Though Ellen is astute enough to reject Irishness on the grounds of 'stories about fairies and grandmothers' she continues to deceive herself in the context of romance (53-54). Ellen tells the hotel violinist that she has been married 'once upon a time' (57), and later the man who will infect her with venereal disease likens her to 'Cinderella or something' (145). Ellen's fantasy of sex with strangers is undermined by the appearance of the beach boy whose approach she experiences as 'an attack' (46) -- 'force' is not, after all, so very far removed from 'love'. On the beach, 'the sun, the opponent of dreams' quickly reveals the true state of sexual exchange. Under its glare the beach becomes:

A cauldron of honesty. Only the perfection people triumphed. The fat, the lame, the slobs, even the slightly blemished like Ellen would find it hard to pass as eligible. Unless of course she settled for the people in her own category. But who is willing to? (51).

Ellen's fantasy of free love is undermined by O'Brien's exposition of a strictly regulated market economy in which women are 'submitted to the extrinsic standard of male sexual desire'. Fearful of rejection Ellen eschews the hotel dance but agrees to an afternoon rendezvous with a resident violinist whom she perceives largely in terms of his jacket: 'It

lay over a chair with the sleeves hanging down empty of arms. She longed to touch it because it was a dark velvet, the colour of plums in autumn (55-56)⁴.

The jacket evokes childhood memories of 'Christmas, one of the few nice times'; its 'smell of tobacco recall[s] being in the fierce embrace of a man', and Ellen 'stroke[s] it slowly, the way she would stroke a curtain or a cat'. The interchangeability of the animate and the inanimate indicates Ellen's inability to distinguish between the respective characteristics of the jacket and its owner, who, despite his infantile smile, turns out effectively to be a prostitute, exchanging sex with foreigners for items for his 'bottom drawer'. Ellen's sense that 'she ought to be seeing [the beach] with someone'(59) has led her all too quickly into involvement with *anyone*, and her efforts to 'be a potential man' in seeking sex are profoundly unsuccessful. As she enters the violinist's stuffy attic room, the jacket serves as a disembodied reminder of her ill judgement:

His clothes were hung in an alcove and she saw the jacket that had first introduced her to him. Not sumptuous now but a best jacket carefully hung up so that it would be perfect for its evening's outing (61).

Ellen's 'practised' casual response -- 'Bonjour' -- comes out 'badly', forewarning her that calculated casual sex is similarly doomed to failure. She and the violinist -- who is never given a name -- are 'like people from different orbits'. His well-rehearsed sexual gestures make Ellen feel that he is 'hurrying everything', and her sense of being in control is undermined by her glimpse of a camera, 'like an eye spying on her'. 'Murdered' by the

⁴ It is significant that Ellen envisages even rejection through the discourse of fairytale: 'She foresaw herself sitting by the wall, ignored, and the magic falling away from her like fake frosting or gold dust' (57). This underlines once more the extent to which 'glacial nihilism' and 'negative romance' form a continuum of women's experience under patriarchy.

heat, Ellen attempts to regain control through cynicism: ““Christ, I always pick the puritans”” is her response to the violinist’s refusal to give her whisky (62). Yet she is forced back into self-effacement when he demands to be allowed to take a photograph: “‘I’m not very pretty,” she said, sitting all the same’. Ellen ‘[knows] that the picture when it was developed would show an apprehensive woman, with a glass midway between her chest and her open mouth’:

He ... drew down one strap of her dress so that it fell on her arm. The white sagging top of one breast came into view ... He photographed her like that and then with both straps down so that the sag of both breasts was in view and then he brought her dress down around her waist and photographed her naked top ... From his position, stooped behind the camera, he indicated that she hold one breast, perkily, as if she enjoyed showing off (62).

Reluctant to strip further, Ellen retains some integrity only by refusing to admit to being ‘a holy woman’ ‘although it would have been simpler to say yes’. Her attempt to redeem the situation by ‘get[ting] on another plane of friendship with him’ (64) exposes the true nature of their ‘exchange’, eliciting his description of previous encounters with tourists in terms of ‘juice’ and gifts. Misunderstanding Ellen’s overtures of friendship -- he thinks it would be ‘un-natural’ to discuss his fiancée with her -- he begins to go through the motions of sex, stopping only when Ellen says she is ‘going to bleed’ (66).⁵ Ellen proceeds to teach him new sexual terms to write in his phrase book. Her reduction by the encounter is encapsulated in her reflection that ‘if her husband ever needed evidence of her infidelity

⁵ In ‘Women on the Market’ Irigaray identifies the relegation of ‘*red blood*’ to ‘the mother’s side’, and its consequent exclusion from ‘the social order’ (Irigaray, 1985, 186). In this context it is unsurprising that Ellen’s menstrual blood is perceived by the violinist as threatening and repulsive.

there was a half-naked, shivering picture of her on film and a word in her handwriting in his home-made phrase book'. Getting her revenge by assuring him that "'a woman is a cunt'" (68), Ellen is powerlessly reinforcing her own metonymic degradation.

Ellen begins to reassert herself by rejecting the waiter in Chapter 8, but feels nonetheless that 'he must have seen something licentious in her smile or the offer of a cigarette earlier on' (69). She wonders 'if the entire staff were not a network of vice passing on the names of the loose women', participating in what Irigaray terms 'the culture of men-amongst-themselves' in which:

The feminine is apprehended not in relation to itself, but from the point of view of man, and through a purely erotic strategy, a strategy moreover which is dictated by masculine pleasure, even if man does not recognise to what limited degree his own erotic intentions and gestures are ethical (Whitford, 1991a, 178).

Ellen responds, perhaps vengefully, by viewing the waiter metonymically:

Even his hands repelled her. Up to then they had been hands doing work, toiling, buttering beans, bearing tea, but they had been planning other uses all along. Deceiver.

But whilst Ellen's reduction to a 'cunt' objectifies her and renders her powerless, the reduction of the waiter to his hands emphasises his strength and emotional detachment; the hands which carry out domestic duties are potentially threatening.

In response to these experiences, Ellen does not revise her hopes for a romantic encounter; she simply 'wishe[s] that she were meeting the violinist for the first time and that he were a different sort of person' (74). She is more than willing to transfer her

desires onto the sexually predatory movie actor, whose 'striking presence' ensures that 'Ellen registered no face except his' (77). The actor's machismo, revealed by his reference to 'fairy niggers' (84), is simultaneously reinforced and offset by the recurrent image of the white peach:

'Are there white peaches?' she asked, shaking her head with surprise, with pleasure.

'You can say that again.' He described how they grew in New England and with his hands suggested how they squelched as they touched the ground. Because of a fatal softness (83).

The peaches prefigure the 'fatal softness' of Ellen's son, killed in a road accident, whose death Ellen connects with "'peaches ... falling apart'" (172)⁶. Later Ellen tells Bobby that she wants the impossible: "'white peaches that are imperishable'" (184). Feeling guilty about retaining a core of self, she finally realises why 'she clung to the parable about white peaches' (217). 'Parable' posits 'white peaches' alongside the narratives of fairytale and romance which O'Brien self-consciously manipulates in her exposition of women's place in 'between-men' culture.

Ellen's ability to transform her outer self for men is mirrored by the transvestite dancer at the hotel. Bobby has to tell Ellen that the dancer is a man, 'pressing his thumb on to his palm and hiding it there to show that the man had likewise hidden part of himself':

Then the music got very fast and the dancer discarded the fox tail and hung the rubber breasts on either bed post and stood naked except for a triangle of black

⁶ Ellen's maternal role of course falls apart at the same time. Her attempt to be a potential man cancels out her motherhood, which is the socially acceptable face of 'femininity'.

sequins above the thighs. It was a man who had perfectly mimicked all the coquette of a woman. People clapped, but some must have felt cheated as Ellen did. She also felt a little sick (87).

Ellen's recognition of the dancer's 'mimicry' elicits her disgust. The drag act is a painful reminder of the fragility of her own self-image; Ellen, too, is ultimately a male-constructed woman.⁷ As Judith Butler points out, 'the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts' (Butler, 1997, 403). Butler argues that:

... if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief (402).

Ellen's 'acts' -- for example, her suppression of 'meannesses' with Hugh and her posing for the violinist -- are seen throughout *August is a Wicked Month* as 'discontinuous'. The drag act is an uncomfortable reminder that she, too, is performing to an audience. Furthermore, the transvestite's act is convincing; when 'she' throws 'her' petticoat to a member of the audience, who significantly is also an actor by profession, he 'smel[ls] it' and says "'A nursing mother'" (85). Whether or not the actor believes this, Ellen does,

⁷ In the context of Ellen's response to the drag act, Angela Carter's alignment of O'Brien with Jean Rhys is significant. Carter argues that both are 'woman writers [who] pretend to be female impersonators ... [and] whose scars glorify the sex that wounded them' (Carter, 1998, 499). Carter is writing primarily about *Story of O* and her identification of O'Brien as a 'female impersonator' suggests not only that she is aware of O'Brien's engagement with the issue of social and cultural constructions of 'femininity', but that she credits O'Brien with highlighting the connection between 'femininity' and patriarchal nihilism.

and the 'act' therefore threatens not only her own 'mimicry', but her already compromised maternal role.

Ellen manages however to suppress her 'disgust'. Nurtured by Bobby's offerings of anecdotal and actual food she 'make[s] a story' of her experience with the room-boy, successfully playing down her fears -- though as Bobby tells her about the peaches, she is 'thinking really of little white berries that grew along hedges in Ireland' and perhaps of a time before she fully learned 'femininity' (102). Clinging to her identity as 'derivative copy', she flirts with him 'in her lovely girl's phase' (103). She is rewarded not by Bobby but by Sidney, who has 'trained himself to listen' (106). "'I'm a doll'" she says to Sidney; attempting to convince him that she is no more special than his other 'girls'. Identifying her own reduction, she points out that it is Sidney's 'costly creams and his mauve talc that put the false softness and the false dew upon her' (116). The name of Bobby, the man she really wants, becomes a mantra. Ellen 'want[s] to utter his name so that ... she could decently ask where he was likely to be'; through repetition of his name, she also makes him 'hers' (110-111). Her encounter with Sidney reminds her of her husband: 'If he punished her now with black looks it was because he knew she had not matched an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth in the deep, exacting algebra of love' (121). Ellen is able to reverse their roles only by blaming her husband for their son's death. She pays for 'equality' with compromised maternity (157). Acknowledging at last the economy which underlies romance Ellen is able also to recognise the paradox of her girlhood conditioning, 'the great brainwash[ing which] began in childhood' (136). The fragility of her 'little-girl' dream of Bobby is exposed, as is the 'pathetic' nature of her 'struggles towards

wickedness' which have led only to the marketing of her femininity (138). Seeing this, Ellen is able to tell Denise her name: "Ellen. Ellen Sage. Sage means wise or something like that" (139). Yet Ellen's newly-developed wisdom and perception do not prompt her to agree with Denise that 'marriage ...louses everything up'; she still feels that "it's us". 'Weary of generalities', she nonetheless continues to generalise to the detriment of herself and other women. Reflecting on the ways in which 'other women no better looking than herself made a better impression', Ellen fails to work out that her 'unfinished' quality may owe something to her continuing inability to see herself other than 'in a mirror' or 'through the pool of a loving man's eyes' (143). Ellen exemplifies Irigaray's argument that 'a commodity is incapable of imaging or mirroring itself'. When Bobby expresses his wish to go to bed with Ellen and Denise together, Ellen's disgust is focused not on Bobby, but on Denise: 'Ellen looked at Denise with distaste. There was black blood in that girl somewhere'. The women are driven not to solidarity but to competition: 'Their eyes met, they did not smile, but gleamed, the bare gleam of rivalry in their big eyes, her green eyes and Denise's brown ones' (147). Irigaray has pointed out that 'if [women]... become rivals, it is often because the mystery of their personal status remains imperceptible to them' (Whitford, 1991a, 192).

After her son's death, Ellen 'want[s] to die in' Bobby, hoping to get pregnant and thereby retrieve her 'femininity' (185). But his double-edged threat -- "*I might plague you*" -- presages only the venereal disease with which she is left. Identifying the disease as 'the perfect circuit of revenge' Ellen finds herself unable to enter a church and pray, but continues to think in religious terms, saying that the disease is "only vinegar and gall"

compared to the loss of Mark. On her return to London, Ellen phones Hugh, but 'not to start up anything romantic' (213). Unmoved at the sight of his face, she feels that she has 'become another person' only in that she would like to enjoy sex with Hugh 'for its own sake rather than as a life investment' (215-216). What Irigaray terms 'recognition of another who will never be mine' depends after all on reciprocity (Whitford, 1991a, 158). Refusing his offer to 'make love' to her rather than 'rape' her she lies about her sexual conquests in France⁸. Given Hugh's failure to reciprocate Ellen's desire to 'love someone or something ... and to ask for nothing in return' Ellen is cast back on and limited to an ongoing need for self-immersion in romantic love (218). This is despite her own recognition of the 'between-men' economy in which 'there [are] as many lovely girls in the world as there are stars in the December sky' (219) and the novel's ultimate promise of 'a cool and lovely autumn' independent of this economy (221).

In *Casualties of Peace* O'Brien develops her theme of female subjectivity compromised by patriarchal 'nihilism', 'repeat[ing]' in the words of Mary Salmon 'the pattern of woman's life as a living death because of her dependence on men' (Salmon, 1990, 147). Nihilism is much more readily identifiable than in *August is a Wicked Month*, since *Casualties* deals with sado-masochism and the murder of women.

The novel opens with its protagonist, Willa, dreaming of men whose purpose is 'to kill her' (8). It is not apparent that Willa is dreaming until it is revealed that 'up to that moment her killer had always come alone', and later that her house has been 'cunningly

⁸ This invites the question of whether Ellen is able to differentiate between 'rape' and 'mak[ing] love'.

altered' and street numbers changed. Much later, the reader will discover the origins and prophetic nature of Willa's nightmare; the novel 'ends in [what Salmon terms] the earlier living nightmare of her marriage'. Willa has cause to fear more than one man; her house *is* 'altered' by being taken over and made unsafe by her servant Tom after the departure of Patsy, his wife. Willa is to be murdered by Tom outside her own home; only then is the nature of her relationship with the sadistic Herod revealed through her letters. The blurring of boundaries between dream and reality legitimizes Willa's fear of men. The following passage occurs before the reader has been alerted to Willa's dreaming state:

[The car] stopped as it got to her, stopped with a weird facility. There were two men in it. One of them wound the window down She recognized them not by their faces but by their intention; which was to kill her. The one who spoke looked at her, around the belly region He smiled, the merest leak of pleasure in his indecent face. The horror he would do to her (p. 8).

These nightmare men epitomize the 'shadow-male' and his association of sex with death. Their 'faces' do not signify; they are men, and so Willa, 'recogniz[ing] ... their intention', is right to be afraid; she is to be exonerated by the subsequent events of the novel. As Willa's 'shadow-males', especially the one who 'look[s] at her, around the belly region', 'the merest leak of pleasure on his indecent face', are plotting her death, violence and eroticism are inextricably linked. It is my intention to show that *Casualties of Peace* suggests the proximity of sado-masochism to romantic love, and in doing so constitutes a logical development from O'Brien's subversion of the romance genre in *The Country Girls*.

In terms of female subjectivity, *Casualties of Peace* is the story of Willa's attempts to construct a core of self in the face of threatened annihilation -- physical as well as psychological -- by Herod, Tom and, differently, Auro. Willa's fear of loss of self is expressed in her dream when she '[finds] herself without a key'. This generates a sense of passivity, of something having slipped away from her without her knowledge or control. The key is to *her place*; faced with the men, she is 'afraid of betraying herself'(8). Between sleep and wakening, Willa fears the 'vault' in which she has 'just been slit in multiple places' (p. 10), and she is terrified of being 'sucked back' in (11). Fully awake, she 'upbraid[s] herself for such an illogical dream', trying to hold onto 'the steady things' -- the spare key, Tom and Patsy -- and wondering why her body should 'desert her so' (12). Yet Tom and Patsy are to be the instruments of her death, and we are to realise that she was for a long time unable to run from Herod, responding to him sexually whilst being mortally afraid of him; in this sense, her body has 'desert[ed] her'. Willa attempts to dissociate dream from reality whilst simultaneously reconciling mind and body. Her adherence to virginity may be read as an attempt to construct a sense of self. As Irigaray argues:

Th[e] dimensions [of virginity and maternity] have been colonized by masculine culture: virginity has become the object of commerce ... It has to be rethought as a woman's possession, a natural and spiritual possession to which she has a right and for which she holds responsibilities (Irigaray, 1993, 116-117).

Willa's affinity with the 'spiritual' is affirmed by her choice of profession. She works with stained glass by which she is recurrently defined, sometimes by herself. Her 'figures,

windows, birds, crucifixes, mermaids, numerals, saints [and] martyrs [are] all made of glass with glass expressions to denote emotion' (29). Yet glass signifies not just sexual coldness -- as Willa herself suggests -- but fragility. Willa's things of beauty are, like herself, breakable. This is significant in the light of Salmon's argument that Willa's 'working life' signifies 'loss and alienation' (Salmon, 1990, 147). In *Casualties of Peace*, however, the 'gulf' between nightmare and reality is not 'unbridgeable'. Willa's glass martyrs anticipate her own 'martyrdom', the sacrifice of her virginity, and her death through mistaken identity, which saves Patsy. This anticipates the conclusion of *The High Road* (1988) in which Catalina is murdered in place of her lover Anna, the intended victim. The recurrence of this theme suggests not only that these pairs of women are interchangeable as commodities under patriarchy, but that the compromised subjectivity engendered by the incompleteness of women's entry into the symbolic order is itself a form of death.

Willa's ultimate destiny as Patsy-substitute is ironic given that Patsy is, in her own words, 'always the one to be sacrificed' (47) not only to men, but to Willa's idiosyncrasies. Patsy and Tom make Willa feel -- falsely -- secure:

Since Tom and Patsy came, her life had a new order, a solid peace. She felt happy as she thought of the day ahead: it was going to be sunny, she and Patsy would drink a little wine at lunch, find some reason for celebration. Forget about work, the past, the present, the whole foolish ramification of real or dreaded woe (13).

O'Brien's extensive use of interior monologue in constructing Patsy conveys the sense of her 'solidity' experienced by Willa. Patsy's fantasies are interspersed with reflections on

material goods and sex; she wants more than the 'four pound ten sparkle' eked out of the ring which Tom buys for her (17). Yet Patsy's apparent strength of character is undermined by the inescapable fact of her marriage to Tom. The pages which first introduce her thoughts begin 'His wife Patsy ...' (13-21). Defined by this role and by the goods which they share -- she begins by reflecting on whether or not to 'split' her coffee set, and concludes that 'goods are a torment' -- Patsy exemplifies the condition of the wife under 'patriarchal regime' outlined by Irigaray (Whitford, 1991a, 165-177 & 198-203). Tom 'envelops himself and his things in her flesh' whilst forcing her to accept him as 'male child' (Whitford, 1991a, 170 & 199). Patsy reflects that Tom, 'lov[ing] to cut a dash', is 'A kid! But kids had to be with other kids'. Patsy does eventually subvert the 'patriarchal regime' by presenting Tom with a child of uncertain paternity. In the first 'chapter' Patsy's rebellion is anticipated by her fantasies of escape⁹. Her desire to find a space of her own is expressed through her reflections on place names. 'Beautiful beautiful Peckham Rye' is, for example, a place transfigured for Patsy by a sexual encounter with her lover Ron. As in *The Country Girls* trilogy and *August is a Wicked Month* O'Brien severely undercuts romance. The encounter takes place 'up an alley' and Patsy has 'to go in after and dry in the ladies' with a wad of toilet paper, then a splash of perfume from the machine' (18-19). Furthermore, 'Peckam' is later exposed by Ron as, functionally, 'a night out like going to the dogs or getting drunk' (56). Patsy is forced to compromise her dreams of 'Zanzibar', a place with an evocative name, because Ron is going to Liverpool: 'Liverpool to be Zanzibar'. She is later forced to acknowledge Liverpool as a 'black city' (73). O'Brien's

⁹ Throughout *Casualties of Peace* O'Brien indicates chapters by spacing rather than by numbering.

suggestion of Patsy's need for 'space' anticipates *Mother Ireland, A Pagan Place* and *The High Road*, as does her use of second person narrative for the expression of Patsy's memories:

The thought of this [headlice] made your skin creepy, and you itched and itched until you tore your scalp and never knew whether the speck of blood on your thumbnail was your own blood or that of a louse (25).

It is as though Patsy is addressing a *gestalt*, which as Bristow explains 'grants the 'I' its identity', providing 'an image of coherence' and 'permit[ting] the 'I' to come together from fragmentary points, to gain some stability' (Bristow, 1997, 85-86). Patsy is regressing to the 'mirror stage' to try to reconcile 'fragmentary points'. Her childhood self -- a figure brought up by her mother and therefore to some extent outside the 'patriarchal regime' -- her socially-constructed 'self', and the 'self' she dreams of being. Willa similarly addresses her self in the second person when examining her relationship with Auro (74-75). Patsy is significantly unable to see further than her projected 'Liverpool-Zanzibar' state:

Although she was going and knew she was going and had nearly packed she couldn't see herself getting out at Liverpool and being met by him. She could see it up to that point but it was too glorious to envisage beyond that! (21).

Bearing in mind Alison Light's argument that romance fiction keeps the reader 'in a permanent state of foreplay', Patsy's inability to 'envisage beyond' the train journey indicates the fictional nature of her dreams (Mary Eagleton, 1986, 140-145). The fragility of her imagined self is indicated by her reflection that Ron, addressing his letters to

'Josephine O'Dea', 'could have called her anything'. In the light of Eugene's anglicizing of Caithleen in *Girl with Green Eyes* it is, however, significant that Ron, himself a 'Kerry Tiger', chooses to give Patsy an *Irish* alias. As a colonised male, Ron is clearly interested in preserving Irish identities. In her relationship with Ron Patsy is effecting, not her own escape, but definition by one more man.

In the context of Patsy's fractured identity, Willa's perception of her as relatively 'solid' seems somewhat awry. As Irigaray writes in 'Creating a woman-to-woman sociality':

There are indeed almost no symbolic forms of love of the same in the feminine. Which is in keeping with our social order. Two or more women who meet therefore look for the secret of their identity in one another. If they merge into one another or become rivals, it is often because the mystery of their personal status remains imperceptible to them (Whitford, 1991a, 192).

In contrast to Ellen and Denise in *August is a Wicked Month*, Willa and Patsy 'merge' rather than 'becom[ing] rivals'. Each is dependent on and constrained by the other's perception of her, so that Willa must be for herself as well as Patsy '...a youngish woman but a wreck ... All ready for the business of suffering' (23), and Patsy must be 'the mother without child, the worker, the worrier' and also 'the server' (23-26). Willa's death is the ultimate expression of the women's interchangeability. In asserting that Willa and Patsy are mere extensions of Kate and Baba, who are in turn projections of a single, though split, personality, Peggy O'Brien gives their author little credit for recognising the dilemmas peculiar to female friendships under patriarchy. The confessions which Willa

'g[ets] out of' Patsy -- exemplified by Patsy's sharing of her 'horse-mushroom dream', which becomes a password to intimacy between the two women -- indicate the class imbalance in the relationship. Patsy, reflecting that 'in one way Willa knew her better than ... any other living person', is not party to the undercurrent of lesbianism revealed by Willa's 'unseemly flush', and by her reflections on her cousin Pauline (25-29)¹⁰. Speaking 'harmlessly' to Patsy, she fails to acknowledge her as a subject.¹¹ Instead, she continues to see her as the 'mother' despite the 'horse-mushroom dream's' revelation of vulnerability. She has similarly failed to acknowledge Pauline, remaining 'passive' and 'mean'hearted' because her own subjectivity is compromised. Patsy has no idea that Willa's 'harmless' question about beards is associated with speculation on whether '...Patsy crept in too, to the madness of the woods' for a lesbian encounter (28). As Willa later reflects, she herself 'always sen[ds] people home' (60).

It is significant that Willa eventually loses her virginity to Auro, who as a black man is an apparently less threatening 'other' than Herod or Tom. Willa can relate to his colour in terms of her glasswork, through which they meet:

He had the palest Negro skin she had ever seen. Skin with a touch of blue in it.

Roads newly tarred came to her mind, the tar not dry, the colour neither blue nor black but something in between. Nice to get that colour in glass (30).

O'Brien's attempts to describe Auro are initially confusing and could be dismissed simply as bad writing -- newly-tarred roads are not, for example, pale. Yet if we read Auro as

¹⁰ Willa recalls being masturbated by Pauline in the woods when her pubic hair had 'just started to grow'. In the context of Willa's relationships with men it is significant that she remembers her relationship with Pauline as 'safe' (27).

¹¹ The significance of 'harmlessness' in the context of O'Brien's lesbian writing will be discussed in Chapter 5.

'colour' to Willa's 'glass' -- by which she defines herself -- such ambiguities underscore Willa's own confused responses. Auro's very name is 'in direct contradiction to the pigment of his skin' whilst suggesting his potential as sexual enlightener (34). Willa is later to reflect that 'there are as many kinds of cruelty as there are colours in the rainbow' and her inability to gauge Auro's exact 'colour' mirrors her uncertainty about his intentions (46). She 'smel[ls] a resemblance' to Herod -- suggesting instinctive fear -- in that both men suppress anger. Significantly, each man's anger is race-related; Auro's because he reasonably objects to Willa's remark about his nose, and Herod's because he is unable to accept his identity as a German gentile. Each responds by asserting his own rectitude. Willa's response to Auro is, like her response to Herod, an abject one; she feels guilty for 'declining him' (34). Her guilt derives partly from his revelation that he has been abandoned by his mother. Unable, as Irigaray puts it, to 'colonize' his own mother, he has 'colonized' maternity in Beryl as far as he is able is determined to 'colonize' Willa's body (Irigaray, 1993, 116).

When Willa tells Auro that he is a 'woman-hater', reflecting that 'men were or were not but at first you could not discern because of little tricks of behaviour', she is justified (34). Auro claims that he wants to 'give, give, give', and that it is his 'duty' to 'deflower her', 'like going to war or putting out a forest fire'. It is significant that Auro should express his 'altruism' in violent terms.

Auro's intentions towards Willa are nihilistic: 'She was new, so was her weight, so was her nervousness, he wanted to pass through and decompose her' (36). 'Decompose' suggests Auro's intention not only to disturb Willa's composure, but to deconstruct, and

even to destroy her. Eroticism becomes a means to death. Willa's acquiescence will set in motion the death of her 'own bodily and spiritual possession' and -- circumstantially -- her actual death (Irigaray, 1993, 117). Willa's fear of Auro's encroachment on her 'spiritual possession' is expressed through her glass work, in which 'her saints and sinners' are juxtaposed with badly-executed clouds which look like 'ovaries floating in a sea of trouble.' Patsy's response to Auro -- "I didn't like it ... the way he ate your steak after clearing his own" (39) -- is astute, though focused what is apparently a triviality. Auro is a consumer masquerading as a saviour, picking up the 'sad little tatty' "Airfix" Cinderella', telling her that 'when she got rich she would have pink sheets and hundreds of pairs of shoes', and passing the incident off to Beryl as 'the most innocent thing in God's world' (40-41). When he later returns to Willa, he fails to tell her that this is largely because 'Beryl wouldn't talk, Beryl wouldn't cook, Beryl wouldn't screw' (65). Auro, like Eugene and Bobby, is not above employing the languages of religion and romance for his own ends. As in *The Country Girls* O'Brien juxtaposes fairy tale and commerce in the term 'Airfix Cinderella' to clarify the 'deal'. It is significant that Auro attempts to pacify Beryl with the coat, 'got for next to nothing on the set' in which Willa will be murdered because Tom is 'waiting ...for [its] appearance' (124). Both Beryl and Patsy refuse the coat and live.¹²

O'Brien's device of the murder story on the radio serves not only to heighten the novel's sense of menace and to emphasise the dangerous positions of Willa and Patsy, but

¹² *Casualties of Peace* is dedicated to 'Rita Tushingham whose coat it is' and that Auro is a cameraman who 'frames' women. This is significant, given that Tushingham played Kate in the film version of *Girl with Green Eyes*. In the context of Elaine Aston's argument about 'the female performer as potential creator of an 'alternative' text to the male-authored picture stage [or screen] in which she is 'framed'" the coat reference may prefigure the death of Kate in O'Brien's 1986 epilogue (Aston, 1995, 32).

to draw together the main protagonists through their various responses. The victim is a wife and presumed adulteress. Tom 's[ays] she deserved it', and laughs with 'the lads' over 'the vibrations of the pneumatic drill' (40). Auro is preoccupied with his story of the 'Airfix Cinderella', but Beryl, who has just rejected the coat, 'rejoice[s] when she hear[s] the story of the passionate murder'. Willa 'trie[s] to pity the murderer, but c[an']t' (41). Not surprisingly, Patsy hears the story 'louder and more menacingly' than any of them, imagining how the story of her own escape might be reported, and (later) how she might herself become 'another murder for next day's news' (47). The effect of the story in generating a sense of universal menace is reinforced by Willa's 'grave' observation that "there's madness in love" (42). It may be significant that the murderer gives himself up in the Natural History Museum. The Darwinist connotations of this particular institution suggest that brutality is intrinsic to the male. Certainly what passes for love is inextricably linked with violence in *Casualties of Peace*, but there is also a sense of danger from men in general. Patsy finds herself put 'on edge' not only by news stories, but by chance remarks of men such as 'the man in the paint shop' (44). Willa, busy not only 'with glass' but with the insidiously demanding Auro, has not noticed Patsy's abstraction. After Patsy's revelation of her affair, and Willa's interference with her plans, the women drink 'kn[owing] that the friendship had come to an end' (47). As Irigaray points out, 'mutual destruction' is likely among women so long as they remain 'without subjective status' (Whitford, 1991a, 191-192). Patsy and Willa, deprived of subjectivity in a social order constituted by 'male violence', destroy each other. As they make futile arrangements for Patsy to join Ron 'next week', 'the name of Portugal' stands out on the wine bottle, a

reminder, like 'Zanzibar', of the need for, and unlikelihood of, escape to a new 'order'. 'Portugal' and 'Zanzibar' anticipate O'Brien's shift of location, and exploration of the possibility of a new order, in *The High Road*.

The struggles of both women to construct their subjectivity in the face of masculine deconstruction are graphically represented in the passage recounting their meal with Tom (48-53). 'Home from demolition' and about to embark on other forms of destruction, Tom 'walk[s] with a swagger', gloats over the 'breach' between Patsy and Willa, and makes offensive assumptions about 'darkies' based on the crudely Darwinist assumption that "they lack brain". Willa worries that he might become 'violent' if he finds out about Ron, and is reminded of 'wretched scenes' in Ireland to the extent of feeling 'that she had been in the exact same situation once before'. Willa's sense of the inescapability of history is underscored by the newspaper report of 'molluscs that came with Napoleon's army soiling the lakes and jetties of Europe'; she gives voice to her unease in remarking that "They're still dying in Ireland". Tom is preoccupied only with the form of death -- 'rope or sheep dip' -- and Willa's attempt to divert him with the story of a 'charmed death' fails; he goes on to comment that there are "forty ways alone of killing a man". As Willa sees it, Tom is aligning himself with an 'illustrious list' of men -- Hitler, Shakespeare and Stalin. Tom is unintentionally aligned with Herod, who has annihilated his own identity to become 'a nothing' just as his uncle -- 'a fiddler by profession' -- 'sawed his right hand off rather than serve the cause of nationalism'. O'Brien's juxtapositioning of Irish, German and Jewish history through Tom and Herod ^{highlights} a universality of 'male violence' from which not even Shakespeare is exempt. It is significant that Tom has read and attempted to

practise sections of the Kinsey report (16), which Dworkin argues attempts to 'justify force against women' (Dworkin, 1981, 180). Dworkin goes on to point out the extent to which Kinsey's report was based on the study of gall wasps. The irrelevance of such a report to human -- especially female -- sexuality is suggested by Patsy's reflection that 'she and Ron could knock spots off any Kinsey report'. Talking sex to Willa, Tom reads out 'like a child' an account of the hazardous breeding pattern of the salmon, going on to refer to 'the fish course' (76-77). In the light of O'Brien's reference to the Natural History Museum, Tom's assumption that sex 'naturally' entails danger and consumption is significant. His own consumer mentality is exposed by his pet name for Patsy: 'Baggie', which suggests a throwaway receptacle (61). Later, and similarly, Willa imagines herself ending up like an empty brown-paper parcel, an 'envelope' for men (73). Even Willa, who unlike Kate and Ellen owns her house, cannot escape this condition. Home ownership for women is not proof against homelessness in the symbolic order. When Patsy leaves, Tom claims the place as 'his' territory, just as he 'put[s] love on a leash' (79). Submitting, Patsy condemns herself to 'shitsville', Liverpool becomes a 'black city' for her, and Willa's desires are driven 'underground'. Even at this stage of the narrative, before the unravelling of the Willa-Herod enigma, it does not seem surprising that Willa should consider love a 'jail' (p. 71), or that she should wonder: 'Why can't women walk alone at night?' (74). Again, O'Brien uses second person narrative to signify Willa's attempts to bring together the 'fragmentary points' of her fractured self:

You can't, she said You may put a dream of frost in glass. You may induce orgasm with the heel.... You may lose weight by declining ... all the mother foods that your soft, weak, unchewing nature craves for.... (74-75).

This passage reveals the extent to which Willa has, as Irigaray puts it, been constructed as 'inseparable from the work of man, notably in so far as he defines her, and creates his own identity through her or, correlatively, through this determination of her being' (Whitford, 1991a, 169). Herod, Tom and Auro are consumers for whom sexuality is the expression of power. Willa sees herself as less than animal, as foodstuff preserved. Like Ellen in *August is a Wicked Month* she has been 'submitted to the extrinsic standard of male sexual desire' and found lacking (Fraser & Bartky, 1992, 118). The root of her anorexia is implicitly revealed as being Herod's mockery of her 'fat' (136). The self which performs household tasks and finds expression and financial independence in stained glass is only surface, though Willa's glass work may be symptomatic of a structuralist desire for unity and cohesion.

Reading Patsy's letters to Ron, Willa comes to realise that Patsy, too, is comprised of 'fragmentary points': 'The Patsy she thought she knew was only a fraction of the person' (83). 'The same Patsy in an apron that scrubbed and on Sunday night took it off and played cards, the same Patsy that got red when she drank port wine' could write 'lines that hit [Willa] with their honesty, their love'. Reproaching herself as 'the great soloist about love' who has 'meddled' in Patsy's affair, Willa cannot work out recognition between women is rendered impossible by the same social order which makes it unsafe for them to 'walk alone at night'.

Willa's desire 'to be safe with a good man' is as futile as her idea of Patsy, 'safe in her man's arms', is illusory (90). Once Patsy has left, she finds herself trapped in her own home by Tom, who 'take[s] advantage' of her as a woman (101), forcing her to smoke a cigar -- 'He put one in her mouth so she accepted it' (91) -- just as he has forced Patsy into oral sex (70). Like Herod, he forces her to fall so that he can catch her (91 & 126). It is only later that Tom's psychological imprisonment of Willa can be assessed in relation to Herod's actual incarceration of her. Tom's capacity to terrify, manifested in his 'hard, forced, frightening laugh' (92), causes Willa to reflect that she 'do[es]n't know how to handle any other role' than that of 'victim' (93). Once Tom's parallels with Herod are revealed, it becomes clear that Willa has never been offered any other role. Escaping briefly from her prison/home, Willa feels that 'she would have been happy to stay in that little [record] booth, protected from all'; she is reassured by its 'signals from the outside world' (100). In one of her letters to Auro Willa recounts how the 'other world' apparently deserted her (130).

Escaping Tom, Willa is subjected to a different kind of servitude by Auro. Though their stay at a hotel for the elderly derives from a practical joke on the part of Auro's friend, it serves Auro well. He is able to 'unsettle the old [female] bodies that smelt of pee' and therefore to 'make the men angry' (108). The women themselves appear 'the stencils of [Willa's] future self' (118), precipitating her into sex though she feels as if 'her whole being was being sundered apart' (116). Her body becomes, in the words of Irigaray, 'colonized by masculine culture' (Irigaray, 1993, 116). Despite Willa's repeated 'nos', she is forced to 'secur[e] what her voice said it wanted to keep out' (119). O'Brien's images

of mortality and narrative switches -- hotel scenes are alternated with Tom's plotting -- prefigure Willa's own death. 'Colonized' by Auro she is ready to be knifed by Tom. As she returns home her fear that Auro will leave her -- 'what man loves a tormented woman for long?' -- gives way to speculation that 'on dark nights in the city of London women were raped but she was not going to think about that' (123-124)¹³. Reflecting that 'she had no fear of [Auro]', she is murdered by Tom.

Willa's self-conception and isolation from the 'other world' are echoed in her obituary and in her neighbours' responses to her death. Individuals who have been 'callous strangers to her as she had been callous stranger to them' take note of her only in death, whilst the obituary 'claim[s] that the loss to a dying art was considerable' (124-125). It is only in the posthumously-discovered letters to Auro that Willa begins to define herself other than in relation to her 'art'.

It is through the letters that the 'living nightmare of [Willa's] marriage' is finally recounted (Salmon, 1990, 147). Salmon has identified *Casualties of Peace* as a novel in which 'Sadism, the Gothic vice, dominates the plot'. In Willa's account of her relationship with Herod, her earlier nightmares are given credence. *Casualties* abounds with what Sontag, in her discussion of Reage's *Story of 'O'*, terms 'some of the creakiest items in the repertoire of pornography' (Sontag, 1967, in Batailles, 1979, 83-118). Salmon identifies as Gothic and Sadeian 'the dungeon where [Willa] was kept by [Herod] ... [and] the desolate Swiss countryside, with its abandoned sanatorium, where they take their desolate walks' (147-148). In *Casualties of Peace* there is a narrative -- though not a

¹³ Again Willa's fears are justified; Auro 'automatically' goes to telephone Beryl after leaving her.

chronological -- progression of male cruelty, from Auro through to Tom and Herod. O'Brien's use of flashback has the shock value of legitimising Willa's fears and of exposing the common brutality of the men in Willa's life. O'Brien is using the trappings of Gothic to accentuate the fragility of the boundaries between sado-masochism and romantic love, in the name of which Caithleen, Ellen and Willa have all suffered. As Dworkin suggests, the Sadeian concept of romance is that 'the only way to a woman's heart is along the path of torment' (Dworkin, 1981, 100). It is in *Casualties* that O'Brien really confronts and admits the universality of male 'nihilism'.

Willa allows herself to be subjected to atrocities in the name of her 'love' for Herod. Her second letter recounts Herod's insistence that she should climb a cliff so that he could 'save [her] from falling':

He would set a destination each time, a point to which I must scramble. I said I would do anything else, dust the piano, make bread, saw wood, but he said 'You will do this' (125).

Willa attempts frantically to cling to the domestic tasks by which she has hitherto been defined. Interestingly, Ann Barr Snitow argues, in the context of romance fiction, that 'Harlequins [romances] revitalize daily routines by insisting that a woman combing her hair, a woman reaching up to put a plate on a high shelf ... a woman doing what women do all day, is in a state of potential sexuality' (Mary Eagleton, 1986, 134-140). In offering to 'dust the piano [or] make bread', Willa is expressing her need to shift from sadism to romance. Later, Herod appropriates her 'return ticket', 'passport' and 'private parts'; she is deprived, not only of the 'artificial envelope' which she has become, but of 'the

envelope that she *is*' (Whitford, 1991a, 170). In *Casualties*, as in *O*, Gothic imagery -- the abandoned sanatorium, withered vine leaves and funeral procession, all of which recall Kate's fantasy of a coffin-house to share with Eugene -- is offset by fragments of everyday life such as 'a patch quilt flapping on a clothes-line', Willa's 'clean shirt' and a hair ribbon (127). O'Brien's juxtapositioning of extremes is further complicated by characteristic reference to 'fairy tale' in Herod's story of his family. This includes elements of Gothic which highlight the dangers to Willa inherent in their relationship:

He had a mother and a father and a sister. They had lived in a walled town with a castle, outside mountains, lakes. In the winter they went on sleighs and ate kohlrabi (126).

Despite Herod's eloquence in telling tales and discoursing on the 'weeping' of trees, he remains indifferent to Willa. Dworkin suggests that:

The poet, the mystic, the prophet, the so-called sensitive man of any stripe, will still hear the wind whisper and the trees cry. But to him, women will be mute. He will have learned to be deaf to [their] sounds, sighs, whispers and screams ... (Dworkin, 1981, 49).

Herod's cruelty, like Eugene's, is suggested by O'Brien's subversion of romance and its accoutrements; Willa reveals that their 'marriage ceremony was grim'. Yet she goes to the ceremony, and later to Switzerland, voluntarily and in the name of love. 'You ask why I ever went. Not unreasonable', she writes to Auro. Her answer appears in the previous letter, in which she admits to having been 'in love with Herod and with death at the same instant' (131). This recalls Ellen's reflection that 'fear and hatred were what motivated her

passions' in *August is a Wicked Month* (30). Irigaray's identification of phallogentrism as a 'nihilistic religion' is significant in the context of Herod's baking (Whitford, 1991a, 92). Perverting domestic creativity he makes loaves with crosses on them, using 'a piece of fresh dough' to obliterate Willa's communication with the outside world (131). Herod convinces Willa that her function is one of isolated victim: "What a lot of tears you need. And what a lot of punishment" (127). 'He said I ought to be thankful that he had volunteered to be my keeper' (131). Willa succumbs from a need to be loved, staying despite her recognition that 'the slow poisoner in [Herod] win[s]' (135), and continuing to insist that: '...somewhere somewhere Herod loved me. A sunken love, a bitter love, but true' (138). "Judge to what degree I love you", he sa[ys] as he dr[aws] the bolt of the door, and like a fool [Willa] smile[s], thankfully' (131). Herod even controls Willa's emissions, 'mov[ing] the commode in' while she is sick and saying 'how unfair that all monster things should be female' (133). Willa is further dehumanised by being forced to wear a mask as Herod stages her 'trial' in the ruin (136). After the trial, Herod says "You are free to go now"; she is 'numb, rooted, will[a?]-less'. O'Brien's choice of name is revealed as deeply ironic since her protagonist has no will.

Yet Willa does at last manage to leave Herod, feeling that he 'will have to kill [her]' if he is to retain his power. But by this point in the narrative, she has been shown to have 'escaped' only into what Salmon shows to be a 'surreal' and 'distorted' existence 'as a divorced woman who is terrified of sexual intercourse' (Salmon, 1990, 148). Writing with admirable clarity on Willa's 'fear and hatred of self', Salmon nonetheless omits to acknowledge the *validity* of her fear of men. Willa evades death by Herod only to be killed

by his surrogate Tom. As Willa's nightmare comes full circle, O'Brien's deconstruction of romantic love is made complete. Auro, initially reluctant to discover Willa's 'darkest side' through her letters (125), feels having read them that he is 'ready to love' (141). Yet Auro like Herod consumed the living woman and ultimately consigns the dead one to the past. The 'glacial nihilism' of *Casualties of Peace* and *August is a Wicked Month* represents in the words of Salmon 'woman's life as living death because of her dependence on men' (484; Salmon, 1990, 147). In this context O'Brien's subsequent experiments with *écriture féminine* in *A Pagan Place* (1970) and *Night* (1972) can be read as explorations of possible alternatives to nihilism and 'living death'.

Chapter 3

‘Woman must write herself’: *A Pagan Place* (1970) and *Night* (1972)

In ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ Hélène Cixous argues that ‘Woman must write her self’, ‘put[ting] herself into the text -- as into the world and into history -- by her own movement’ (Marks and de Courtivron, 1981, 245). Bonnie Lynn Davies has identified O’Brien with Cixous, arguing that both ‘identif[y] language as gendered and ... describe[] women as imprisoned and disadvantaged by patriarchal discourse’ (Davies, 1996, 73).¹ In *A Pagan Place* and *Night* O’Brien compounds her departure from the romance genre to continue with the experiments in structure and narrative which began with *Casualties of Peace*, ‘put[ting] herself’ not only ‘into the text’ but into a revisited and redefined Irish landscape and ‘history’.²

O’Brien’s narrative experiments are significant in the light of C.L. Innes’ argument that through being ‘locked into confrontation with Britain and contestation over the motherland, Irish literature and Irish history have created males as national subjects, women as the site of contestation’ (Innes, 1993, 3). Because of this ‘women writers and critics have often been marginalized in this contestation and struggle for authority’ (4). *A Pagan Place* and *Night* can be read as O’Brien’s attempts to adapt ‘marginalization’ to

¹ Cixous does seem to carry a certain resonance for Irish women writers; in *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* Eavan Boland admits to being ‘haunted’ by ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (Boland, 1996, 125).

² As I argued in Chapter 1 *The Country Girls* trilogy has been persistently read ‘straight’, despite its construction as ‘negative romance’.

her own agenda, continuing to explore 'women as the site of contestation' through her exposition of the 'between-men' cultures of Britain and Ireland, and seeking to realise a concept of 'maternity' which is not constructed by the masculine (Irigaray, 1993, 81).

Innes points out that:

[Not much attention has] been given to how the mythicization of Ireland herself as female may have influenced male writers in their choices of subjects, their perception and portrayal of Irish women, of male-female relations, and of the interaction between the writer and his audience. How did women themselves respond to those images and that rhetoric? Did they endorse and adapt to them? Did they seek to modify them and use them in their own ways? (4)

Although Innes is working on a timescale of 1880-1935 her observations are telling in the light of O'Brien's reclaimings of masculinized landscape and religious ritual and in her experiments in *Night with écriture féminine* which aims to celebrate rather than to resign itself to 'marginalization'. Eavan Boland argues that male writers' 'perception and portrayal of Irish women' is still problematic for Irish women writers, revealing that she herself 'began reading and writing poetry in a world where a woman's body was at a safe distance, was a motif and not a menace' (Boland, 1996, 26). Boland goes on to point out that:

In [The Poem] women -- their bodies, their existences -- had been for thousands of years observed through the active lens of the poem. They had been metaphors and invocations, similes and muses Custom, convention, language, inherited image: they had all led to the intense passivity of the feminine within the poem (27).

O'Brien's attempts to rescue women's 'bodies' and 'existences' are not unproblematic. As I indicated in Chapter 1 there is a difficulty with O'Brien's use of *écriture féminine* in that Joyce has been identified as 'the English-language writer who perhaps most strikingly exemplifies Kristeva's theories [of the semiotic]' (Terry Eagleton, 1986, 214-215). This 'throws into confusion all tight divisions between masculine and feminine', being a pre-Oedipal 'bisexual form of writing'. In the context of *Night*, 'bisexual form' is an appropriate form of expression for a narrator who is herself bisexual. At the same time however the identification of Joyce as the principal exponent of *écriture féminine* means in practice that for the woman writer there is no style which is immune from colonisation by the masculine.

Nonetheless Cixous' alignment of the female 'imaginary' with the act of masturbation and Irigaray's call for a 'syntax that would make feminine self-affection possible' are particularly resonant when applied to O'Brien's experimental works. Irigaray points out that 'masculine' syntax, governed as it is by a symbolic order constructed around the phallus, is wholly inappropriate for the woman writer (Whitford, 1991a, 134-135). Similarly Cixous reveals that:

I have been amazed more than once by a description a woman gave me of a world all her own A world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity. This practice ... in particular as concerns masturbation, is prolonged or accompanied by a production of forms ... (Marks and de Courtivron, 1981, 246).

The issue of masturbation as an expression of female sexuality is first introduced in *Girls in their Married Bliss*, in which Baba reveals: 'There's lots of words like frustrate and masturbate that [Frank] doesn't understand' (113). In *A Pagan Place* masturbation becomes, for the narrator, a way of claiming space, of making a room in the father's house 'hers' (O'Brien, 1970, 39 & 46). In *Night*, suppression of masturbation is linked to deprivation of language and also to market economy. Remembering a particularly soul-destroying sexual encounter, the narrator Mary reveals that:

I thought I would go home and masturbate, that was what I would do, but it was early, it was so early, so early, so bright. The sales were on and there was fifty per cent off everything (O'Brien, 1972 [1974], 71).

Mary's decision to substitute shopping for masturbation suggests the compromised nature of her subjectivity by emphasising her own status as a (reduced) 'commodity' and by showing her conforming to patriarchal expectation. Women are supposed to express themselves through shopping rather than through masturbation. Back in the narrative present Mary goes on to reflect that:

I wouldn't mind a visit from the Holy Ghost, the paraclete with his tongues of fire. I can't master languages, and for a very simple reason, too thick a tongue, the words curdle (71).

Mary's association of the freedom to masturbate with freedom of speech is clear.

Given that *Night* was dismissed by one reviewer as 'one long act of public literary masturbation' O'Brien seems to have succeeded at least according to Cixous' criteria, in

going back to, describing, and reclaiming her own childhood 'world' (*Times Literary Supplement*, 6 October 1972). Though Rebecca Pelan has argued that the 'experimental technique [of *Night*] is identifiably Joycean' O'Brien's mode of *écriture féminine* seems closer to Cixous', if only in the light of the distinction made by Margaret Whitford between 'speaking *like* a woman and speaking *as* a woman' (Pelan, 1996, 58; Whitford, 1991b, 49). This distinction takes into account 'not simply psychosexual positioning, but social positioning' (49). Whitford's argument is crucial in the context of the dual colonisation of Southern Irish women, of whom Mary Hooligan in *Night* is a representative voice.

In her interview with Julia Carlson O'Brien argued persuasively that 'women's lot is harder anywhere, but an Irishwoman's lot is ten times harder', partly because 'many Irish women are still in fear and trembling of their men' (Carlson, 1990, 75-76). In 'The Erotics of Irishness' Cheryl Herr argues that 'the oppressions of invading forces' have 'led [ultimately] to a certain neutralizing of sexuality [and] of *écriture féminine* in Ireland' (Herr, 1990, 33).³ But the efforts of Joyce to reverse such 'neutralizing' cannot speak for Irish women.⁴ In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* Andrea Dworkin cites Norman O. Brown's argument that: 'Freedom is poetry, taking liberties with words, breaking the rules of normal speech, violating common sense. Freedom is violence' (Dworkin, 1981, 52). In this context Joycean *écriture féminine* appropriates female space, becoming

³ As I pointed out in the Introduction O'Brien herself identifies the extent to which the church in Ireland has kept women 'frozen -- mute' (Carlson, 1990, 75). The issues raised by Herr will be addressed more closely in Chapter 4.

⁴ In Chapter 4, I refer to Frank Tuohy's argument that "'the world of Nora Barnacle" had to wait for the fiction of Edna O'Brien' (Pelan, 1996, 49).

analogous with the sexual nihilism exposed in *August is a Wicked Month* and *Casualties of Peace*. Rebecca Pelan confronts Joyce's *écriture féminine* with the argument that:

"The world of Nora Barnacle" becomes symbolic of a post-independence Ireland in which women are material possessions, whose ambitions are rarely allowed to go beyond getting a husband and making a home and whose identity is formed entirely by an enforced domestic role as wife and mother (Pelan, 1996, 51).

In *A Pagan Place* and *Night*, O'Brien does try to redress the balance in attempting, to paraphrase Cixous, to put 'woman' 'into the text' (Marks & de Courtivron, 1981, 245). The second person narrator of *A Pagan Place*, recalling her mother anointing her after a beating from her father, reflects that 'Your body, like your brain, was crammed with incidents. It had to its credit a seduction and a flaying in one day' (O'Brien, 1970, 202). 'Writing', 'history' and 'the (female) body' are semiotically linked by the discovery of sister Emma's sanitary towel and diary under her pillow and mattress (112).⁵

As well as 'writing the body' *A Pagan Place* attempts to rewrite Ireland, to reclaim a female space within a landscape historically defined by the masculine. Innes points out that the 'linking of Celtic culture and sensibility to the feminine' is 'a characterization which recurs frequently in nineteenth-century journalism and political discourse', but that this 'characterization' is a largely masculine construct, shaped by critics such as Arnold (Innes, 1993, 9). Innes goes on to argue that more recent writers such as Heaney 'continue the traditional gender distinction between England as male and Ireland as female' (10). The

⁵ The possibility that Emma *wants* her diary to be seen must be acknowledged; her account of 'men, what they did to her, what she did to them, [and] how hot they were' can be read as an act of resistance to the 'Virgin Mary' construct of Irish femininity (113).

narrators of *A Pagan Place* and *Night* have to contend, in shaping their stories, not only with English and Irish literary 'fathers' and their constructs of femininity, but with their blood fathers and with a patriarchal society in which male excesses are permitted, even admired. The *Pagan Place* narrator is caught in the tensions between 'fathers'. Reciting 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', she is told 'For Christ's sake shut up' (68)⁶. The narrator later thinks 'of William Wordsworth who had gazed at daffodils' as she contemplates a rather more utilitarian box of oranges (p. 160). Wordsworth gets the freedom and the daffodils; O'Brien's narrator is expected to shop and to nurture. As Cixous explains, '...a woman is never far from 'mother' ... as nonname and as a source of goods' (Marks and de Courtivron, 1981, 251).

O'Brien's narrator remains significantly nameless throughout the text. The narrator's sister has a name of her own -- Emma -- but is still constructed principally by the masculine. The intertextuality of Emma's diary reveals some of the literary influences by which she has been constructed. Emma cites '*East Lynne*, *Dracula* [and] *Murder in the Red Barn*' as her antecedents. The female authored *East Lynne* suggests as I pointed out in the context of *The Country Girls* disruption of the domestic idyll. The *Dracula* reference anticipates *Mother Ireland* in which O'Brien analogises Stoker's tale of the vampiric absentee landlord with colonisation of the female body (O'Brien, 1976, 45). Like Maria Marten Emma is ultimately betrayed by her lover. The intertextuality of the diary

⁶ The narrator's blood father has but a slight command of language, though he still assumes the right to control his daughter's. He is disproportionately 'delighted at being able to describe' the cloches which he sees at the monastery (87).

highlights the cultural entrapment of Emma who is caught in the dilemma identified by Cixous:

...writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great -- that is for 'great' men; and it's 'silly'. Besides, you've written a little And it wasn't good, because it was in secret ... as we would masturbate in secret, not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just to take the edge off (Marks and de Courtivron, 1981 246-7).

Emma's concealed and furtively written diary, which reads according to her mother 'like an extract from the annals of a white-slave trafficker' (116), is inextricably associated with sexuality and guilt. Though Emma adds the postscript 'Living at Last' to her catalogue of sexual encounters it is evident that like Patsy, Willa and their predecessors she has been duped into collusion in her own commodification. Yet although extracts from the diary figure only briefly in the text these do recall O'Brien's use in *Casualties of Peace* of the epistolary form to allow Patsy and Willa their 'voice' (113). As Cixous also argues, '...writing is precisely the *very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures' (Marks and de Courtivron, 1981, 249).

In *A Pagan Place* O'Brien's exclusive use of second person narrative recalls Patsy's attempts at self-realisation, indicating the narrator's motives in shaping her recollections and avoiding what Mary Daly has termed 'the "I" of phallographic language' (Mary Eagleton, 1986, 221). The narrative may distance the narrator from her *gestalt* but it does

suggest the presence of 'the 'two lips' of the female sex in a female language, constantly moving and plural' (Mary Eagleton, 1986, 221).

Yet the obstacles to a more positive construct of female subjectivity which pervaded *Casualties of Peace*, and which become rapidly apparent in *A Pagan Place*, cannot be evaded by means of narrative technique. On the one hand Irigaray asserts that 'the phallus -- indeed, the Phallus -- is the emblem, the signifier, and the product of a single sex' (Whitford, 1991, 79). On the other, Mary Eagleton makes it clear that:

The symbolic order of which Lacan writes is in reality the patriarchal sexual and social order of a modern class-society, structured around the 'transcendental signifier' of the phallus, dominated by the law which the father embodies (Eagleton, 1986, 214).

In *A Pagan Place* the narrator's father, though unlike Wordsworth inarticulate, is authoritarian and often menacing. He is featured early in the narrative in satanic guise, threatening his wife with a pitchfork (24). This recalls Innes' identification of Irish 'women as the site of contestation'. Though there is a comic impotence about him -- his wife responds with a cool reminder that if he carries out his threat 'there will be a place for [him]' -- he does generate fear. The narrator recalls that 'nobody's pulse was normal that particular day'. The mother is tacitly obliged 'to go across the landing to his room'; this is 'an edict' (32). 'Edict' connects paternal and religious laws. In 'Religious and Civil Myths' Irigaray argues that: 'Patriarchy, like the phallocracy that goes with it, are in part myths which, because they don't stand back to question themselves, take themselves to be the only order possible' (Irigaray, 1993, 23). But though patriarchy and religion may be

'myths' they are pervasive, endowing the father in *A Pagan Place* with the authority to lash out and swear, and to remind his wife that 'he took her out of the bog and gave her status' (67). As Irigaray points out, '... the patriarchal order is indeed the one that functions as the *organization and monopolization of private property to the benefit of the head of the family*' (Whitford, 1991a, 129). The father is dominant in social gatherings: 'The minute he finished [his story], the laughing stopped. It was like turning off the knob of the radio' (74). He invades space:

He shaved on the kitchen table and she [his wife] put saucers as protection over the milk, the butter and the sugar ... In disposing of the lather he managed to strew blobs everywhere except in the small china bowl that she had given him for the purpose (131).

The pregnant Emma fears that he is 'going to kill her' (128) whilst the narrator, 'exud[ing] fear' (154) is nonetheless beaten by him into orgasm which 'should have been [her lover's] to witness' (200). The association of paternal violence with sexuality anticipates the centrality of incest to *Down by the River*. In *A Pagan Place* the father's rage is largely attributable to the violation of his property. As Irigaray explains: 'In our social order, women are 'products' used and exchanged by men ... Commodities, as we all know, do not take themselves to market on their own ...' (Whitford, 1991a, 131). In *A Pagan Place* the daughter has, from her father's point of view, 'take[n herself] to market', subverting patriarchal exchange by *giving* herself to the 'wrong' man. The father's violent response constitutes an attempt to re-establish his 'ownership'. Yet the narrator is allowed no autonomy by the priest who attempts her seduction. In the words of Irigaray,

'commodities can only speak the language of those who produce-exchange-consume them'. Irigaray -- once more connecting religious and paternal law -- goes on to identify the phallic symbolic order as 'a nihilistic religion' and man's 'desire to rape' as a reality which women are right to fear (Whitford, 1991, 92).

The narrator's fear of men is not generated exclusively by her father. 'The Nigger' waylays girls and threatens to 'do pooly' (urinate) in them: 'The girls used to fly past and when he couldn't catch them he did pooly anyhow, that was not pooly at all but white stuff' (23). Exemplifying the notion of the phallus as a 'nihilistic religion' he offers 'a bit of the male relic' to the narrator's mother and her friends (143) (Whitford: 1991a, 92). Running away from her cousin's unwelcome advances the narrator dreads encountering 'the Nigger who might nail you down and do pooly in you' (184). It is at this point that she becomes aware of the universality of the male threat: 'Your guardian angel was a tall dark man. So was the devil. So was your cousin' (183). This sinister concept of 'guardian angel', associated with 'the devil', reinforces O'Brien's suggestion of 'nihilistic religion'. Even the ostensibly harmless Ambie is constructed as a potential menace:

His trousers were held up with a canvas belt that he had knotted. Above it was a bulge of fat, pinkish.

For a moment you were afraid, afraid that he might copulate with you (133).

The immediate fear is dispelled, but the narrator learns to recognise Ambie as a physically repellent male who nonetheless assumes the right to expect of his future wife that she

should 'string pearls [for necklaces] and at the same time be at home rearing children and cooking the dinner' (135).⁷

The boundaries of male dominance in *A Pagan Place* extend way beyond bodily presence to name and claim the landscape:

Dan Egan [the father's friend] was dead but his name lived on because there was a tree named after him, a horse chestnut. Boys shook it for conkers and if they got caught they got a hammering from your father. Dan Egan was buried over on the island... Saints and scholars had lived there ...

There were cattle on the island belonging to the butcher ... (13).

The island's history has been shaped by a comprehensive range of what Innes terms 'males as national subjects'. When a doctor killed himself by drinking and driving 'a hurleyfield g[ets] christened after him' (28). The recollection of this event is immediately followed by that of the mother gashing herself 'on the rim of the milk bucket'; the place itself is defined only by 'dark gunnels of blood in the rifts between the flagstones'.⁸

In *A Pagan Place* the father exerts his power by being proprietorial towards places as well as towards women, 'burn[ing] the house sooner than let[ting] the Black and Tans occupy it as a barracks' and hiding 'in a potato pit' (15)⁹. This functional spot becomes instrumental in defining the father's nationalism. He later boasts to a nun 'about his

⁷ In the light of O'Brien's recurrent use of the broken necklace as a metaphor for women's disappointment Ambie's vision exposes the gap between male fantasy and female reality.

⁸ In 'The Poverty of Psychoanalysis' Irigaray asks why maternal blood has no place in the symbolic order, pointing out that whilst 'it is women who go on supplying the material substratum: the body, and blood, and the life which nourishes them', these have 'no value' as long as 'power' belongs to male 'organs' (Whitford, 1991a, 95).

⁹ This recalls Tom in *Casualties of Peace*.

sojourn in the potato pit' and she responds by showing him photographs, one of which is significantly captioned 'IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER' (215). This episode effectively undermines the woman-centredness of the convent, reinforcing patriarchal authority in the contexts of politics and religion.

The Gothic description of the narrator's childhood home recalls the house fantasised about by Kate in *Girls in their Married Bliss* as a 'coffin' for herself and Eugene:

In the chimneys crows nested. Crows preferred the chimneys to the trees because the trees were prey to the wind. Around the tree trunks were plaits of ivy so thick and matted that they were like shields (16).

There is a further hint of gothic in the narrator's description of her mother's wardrobe, the door of which is 'always opening of its own accord as of there was something struggling to get out' (66). Significantly, Mary Jacobus has identified 'the wardrobe or cupboard [as] a symbol for [Freud] of his mother's inside' (Jacobus, 1995, 6-7). In this context O'Brien's recurrent references to wardrobes signify the desire to reclaim a maternal imaginary, and to return to 'the radical innocence of the moment just before birth', desires which O'Brien articulates more fully in *Mother Ireland* (O'Brien, 1976, 144). The wardrobe is also of course the repository of clothes and therefore of the 'artificial envelope' which 'woman' under patriarchy must construct for herself (Whitford, 1991a, 170). In this context it is significant that in *Night* the wardrobe is realised more specifically as the site of the *döppelgänger* when the child Mary Hooligan 'mis-sees' herself in its 'blotched' mirrors searching for unity with her mother and of her fragmented self (13).

O'Brien does attempt to redress the balance of space in *A Pagan Place*. Although female space unlike Dan Egan's tree or the doctor's hurley field is unnamed, it is claimed by association. The father marks his territory by 'ritually pee[ing]' from the 'top step' of the house -- again 'ritual' is perceived as phallogocentric -- but the mother's blood marks the flagstones. Similarly the narrator's first menstruation is indelibly associated with 'a roadside where [she] had gone to sit and see horses and caravans and animals file past as the travelling circus came to town' (103). The carnival element of this scene suggests the potential for female *jouissance*. The room in which the father shuts himself with his revolver is 'the same room where [the narrator] sat and put a doll's big soft toe between [her] legs, and tickled [her]self' (39). Her 'needles of pleasure' undermine his violence despite her ensuing guilt (46). The narrator is more assertive in claiming space than her mother, whose domestic arts are scorned and violated and must therefore be hidden. The wine for which mother and daughter have picked the berries, kept 'for happy occasions, for trifles, and for giving to visitors in secret, in the pantry' (39) is recurrently appropriated by the father, who does not discriminate between one form of alcohol and another but 'kn[ows] that wines made from berries were disguised under bits of cloth and stuck up the clefts of unused chimneys, fermenting, changing from fruit drink to wine drink, for the day when some visitor might call for hospitality' (122). In the light of Cixous' comments on women's writing and secrecy it is significant that the mother is forced to hide the products of her domestic arts, which are the only outlet for her creativity.

The mother's 'pride' in her 'home-grown tomatoes ... the patchwork quilt and her garden' is fragile and easily disregarded. The narrator's joy in her tree stump is secure:

When you passed your throne you sat because that was for good luck. Every time you passed it you had to sit. Sometimes to avoid it you made a detour. It was a tree stump, a seat of happiness with briars round it. You had a place trampled down for your feet. Elsewhere the briars flourished, were its garland (57).

The pubescent narrator is a *jouissant* Sleeping Beauty among her briars, luxuriating in her sense of inviolate space. Yet -- and this anticipates the bisexuality of Mary Hooligan in *Night* -- she is simultaneously the prince who overcomes the briars to get there, rejecting the feminine (quilting and nurturing). Her aversion to her mother's blinds suggests an awareness of the symbolic place which awaits her entry into womanhood:

They made stripes along the floor, stripes of light and stripes of shadow. You didn't like them, because you couldn't see out properly, the world outside got divided up into segments, the sky got reduced (94).

As Beauvoir points out daylight is always unnerving to the housewife, since it reveals her 'confine[ment] within the conjugal sphere'. Only night 'does away with what are not her possessions' (Beauvoir, 1949 [1993], 473). In this context it is significant that Mary Hooligan's narrative takes place during the titular 'night'.

In *A Pagan Place* as in O'Brien's earlier works the naming of places is seen as crucial in defining female identity. The teacher who in life declares herself 'already dead' (56) commits suicide, drowning in a lake the name of which 'she had often uttered ... when

pointing out the lakes, rivers and estuaries of each country' (62). Lichen on the wall where the narrator hides during the doctor's examination of Emma seems 'like the borders of countries on the school map'. As Emma's body is charted the narrator recalls the mnemonic: 'Austria was Hungary' (109).

Once in the city, she looks at the names of towns on a bundle of newspapers and attempts to define her own life in terms of place names and associations:

You said their names, you knew them off by heart, that long litany of names that charted the journey from the city to where you were conceived and born To think of such things was balderdash. Your mother would say so (171).

The narrator's sense of space and possibility -- places are not just named, but defined in terms of occupation and history -- is also signified by the newspaper's misprinted sentence: '... down at the end of the page there was a long line that had slipped away completely, a sentence that had no end' (p. 170). An item in a newspaper, 'run [in the words of Cixous] by a libidinal and cultural -- hence political, typically masculine economy' -- begins to suggest infinity. That the mother 'would' dismiss her daughter's imaginative roamings as 'balderdash' is significant. Confined to what Irigaray identifies as 'the empty gestures of an enforced everydayness' she is likely to perceive as futile her daughter's bid for 'space' (Whitford, 1991a, 107). Certainly, landscapes become unequivocally male-defined with the introduction of the priest, this time with a dimension of eroticism:

He described the tropical island where he lived He said the coconut was the indigenous tree, and waxed eloquent about its slender trunk and its big palms. He

looked at you. He said the loveliness of a tropical night could not be overrated. He asked you if you knew the latitude and longitude of his island... (188).

Here landscape is specifically analogised with the male body. The coconut palm/narrator is its product, ripe for consumption. The narrator's senses of propriety and place are overturned as the priest tells of natives bringing 'mangoes and sweet potatoes to the Virgin Mary instead of flowers and candles,' implicitly undermining the Virgin's Irish Catholic construction. He redefines the lake by taking her on 'a joyride' where 'she had only been ... attending funerals before'. When his 'joyride' is rendered funereal by his nihilistic dismissal of her femininity -- masturbating in her presence, he worships at the altar of 'nihilistic religion' identified by Irigaray. The narrator is seduced by the woman-centered alternative of the convent in Belgium, finding security in the nun's seductive incantation of place names ('Bethlehem, China, Burma, Korea, the Philippines, Africa, the pagan Orient') and sensuality in the thought of convent garden nectarines (209-211). The convent itself remains, as a female space, nameless; 'no one referred to it directly, it was just referred to as the place' (218).¹⁰ Even in the separatist environment of the convent women remain subject to what Irigaray identifies as 'exchange operations' (Whitford, 1991a, 131). To the narrator it offers a passage to 'somewhere, anywhere, maybe to Africa' (214) but in any case 'far, far away' from her home and family (213).

But as Lynette Carpenter has argued the convent is intrinsically linked with the 'pagan place' of the title. For Carpenter *A Pagan Place* shows ultimately that 'Catholicism is a

¹⁰ Significantly Innes points out that although the convent could offer a viable career structure for women 'all nuns, including the Mother Superior, were subject to the authority of any Father, or priest' (Innes, 1993, 40).

mythology ... comparable to a pagan mythology but more elaborate' (Carpenter, 1986, 272-273). The 'place' itself is a 'fort of dark trees':

It was a pagan place and circular. Druids had their rites there long before your mother and father or his mother and father or her mother and father or anyone you'd ever heard tell of ... The ground inside was shifty, a swamp where lilies bloomed (17).

Carpenter points out that this 'description recalls Ireland's ancient pagan heritage, and suggests mysterious connections between paganism, sexuality and death' (272). The 'sexuality' suggested is, despite the 'circular' shape of the fort, male, marked by the paternal laws of the druids. Significantly, a bog is the site of incestuous rape in *Down by the River*. The narrator is 'afraid of Druids', who are aligned with the living threat of her father (40).

Innes identifies the nineteenth century 'ideal of uniting ... Catholic Ireland with the Protestant class by an appeal to the Celtic heritage'. This points to a masculine appropriation of 'Celtic heritage' which leaves little scope for the realisation of a *feminine* 'pagan place' (Innes, 1993, 35). Yet still the narrator returns to the 'pagan place', claiming it as her own before departing for the convent: 'In the fort of dark trees you made a wish and felt a lily' (221). It is interesting that the lily, a symbol of sexual purity, is 'felt' in a 'dark' place; the narrator's gesture suggests an awareness of what Irigaray terms '... the need for a religious representation of conception, birth, childhood, adolescence, the female festivals' (Irigaray, 1993, 26).

The narrator's attempt to claim the Druidic site echoes her attempts to feminise Christian ritual, initially with her friend from school:

Before your first Holy Communion, Jewel and you practised receiving the Host. You received bits of paper from each other The bits of paper soaked up all your saliva but it was not a sin when they grazed your teeth whereas it would be a sin if the Host were to (18).

Irigaray, arguing for the location of 'female *jouissance*' 'in its relation to the maternal', asks: 'If God is always imagined to be a father, how can women find in Him a model of identity...?' (Whitford, 1991a, 112). For girls religious ritual is linked both to eroticism -- the narrator kisses Jewel -- and to domestic routine: 'The closets got scrubbed once a month. Girls did it in pairs, the way girls did Holy hour in pairs' (44).¹¹ The female centredness suggested by these episodes is an act of resistance to the 'law of the father'; the narrator later plays with male ritual, venturing 'inside the [communion] rails' although 'no woman was supposed to do that' (186). Emma also tries to appropriate Christian doctrine for her own ends, arguing with the elderly priest about 'free will', an issue which when raised by a woman is dismissed as 'the red herring of all heathens' (163).

The young priest 'in the South Seas' (41), associated with 'scenic beauty', 'flowers' and 'sugar cane' (188), seems detached from the law of the father. 'Everyone [is] in love with him' and even before his return home he provides a focus for the narrator's fantasies:

¹¹ This is interesting in the light of Ann Barr Snitow's identification of the role of romance fiction in 'revitaliz[ing] daily routines by insisting that ... a woman doing what women do all day, is in a constant state of potential sexuality' (Eagleton, 1986, 134-140). In *A Pagan Place* 'romance' between women not only 'revitalizes daily routines' but undermines patriarchally constructed myths of femininity.

You often invented situations where you were his sacristan, ironing his vestments and things, serving him but hardly ever encountering him (41).

The priest himself is 'very partial to Mary Magdalen' (187). His preference for the carnal rather than for the spiritual is signified by the association of his island with the body. The narrator's sexual responses are bound up with her notion of his 'place':

You thought how you would love to go to the tropics with him and see people who offered mangoes and sweet potatoes to the Virgin Mary instead of flowers or candles (189).

It is possible that her excitement is generated also by the alternative offered to 'the image of the Blessed Virgin as uniquely asexual' (Innes, 1993, 41).¹² Innes outlines Marina Warner's identification of the 'link between .. patriarchal authority and the apparent glorification of Mary, the Mother of God' whose 'myth ... is translated into moral exhortation'. The tropical Virgin, recipient of exotic fruits which are sensuous and suggestive of a carnal mother, is by implication associated with the priest's body and with sexuality. She does seem free from her more orthodox constructions. Bringing the exotic home with him, the priest takes the narrator and her family out for a meal:

There was a lemon tree and although it had no fruit it was a marvel to see. He was the one to point it out. You had cold salmon and then ice-cream. You all had the

¹² Asked by Julia Carlson: 'What kind of image of women do you think people wish to see in Ireland?' O'Brien replied: 'The pedestal image: devoid of sexual desires, maternal, devout, attractive. Quite a handful!' O'Brien is clearly aware of the links between constructs of the Virgin and what Warner terms 'patriarchal authority'.

same thing. He had half a bottle of white wine which he asked them to chill. Your father was not tempted (189).

The fruitless lemon tree signifies that sexuality constructed around coconut palms may not travel well. Certainly the narrator's one sexual encounter with the priest is a barren one. When he engineers an excursion together and presents her parents -- and her -- 'with a *fait accompli*', their attempts at communication fail to reach fruition: 'You couldn't think of anything to say. You sang dumb' (191). The inherent contradiction of 'sing[ing] dumb' signifies the narrator's contradictory responses to the priest. Whilst wishing to be 'invisible' as he flirts with Hilda, she is nonetheless conscious of heightened responses, focusing obsessively on Hilda's roses as if on her own sex: 'When you looked into them without blinking it was like getting drawn into them, it was like a spell, getting drawn into folds and folds of red' (192-193). The priest compounds the 'spell,' taking the narrator's arm:

He asked what mischief you were up to. He said how soft it was. It was nearly fleshless but the bones were weak from the way he clasped it. He said that was why a cat played with a mouse, to make her soft, to loosen the muscles (193).

The narrator's 'mischief' is the transferred contemplation of her own sexuality, which she finally confronts at the site of his: 'You could see yourself in the buckle of his belt, distorted and gulping, but nevertheless you' (195). Self-recognition can occur only within the existing symbolic order. Abjectly offering to do 'anything he asked' she is somehow made responsible for his actions: 'You brought out the seriousness in him. That was your

drawback' (195)¹³. His touch -- 'like a doctor who was looking for different responses' -- recalls the doctor's examination of Emma, 'lying with her legs apart ... as if she was waiting to be sacrificed there and then' (130). His remark that 'he could go through you like butter' suggests both violation and consumption. The buckle in which the narrator sees her *gestalt* becomes the locus of threat:

When he opened his belt and you heard it clang on the table, you strained to sit up and you tried to impede him from opening his buttons because it was nakedness that you feared above all ... He was saying no and you were saying no but you were at cross purposes (196).

The 'petrified' girl refusing to touch his penis is excluded by his act of masturbation: 'Never were you more incongruous, never were you more unnecessary'. Ann Rosalind Jones cites Madeleine Gagnon's argument that '... women, free from the self-limiting economy of male libido ('I will come once and once only, through one organ alone ...'), have a greater spontaneity and abundance in body and language both' (Mary Eagleton, 1986, 228). Certainly the *Pagan Place* narrator is *deprived* by the priest of 'spontaneity' and 'language,' 'singing dumb' and feeling 'unnecessary' despite the suggestion in the 'rose' passage of infinite *jouissance*. The roses of course belong to Hilda, the older rival who unlike the narrator has access to the discourses of adult sexuality. The narrator's transition from self-recognition to annihilation is as brief as his orgasm: 'While he yelled a great gout of stuff shot out and there was a ridiculously short span between the first cry

¹³ Because the narrator has neither a clear idea of what the priest wants nor access to the discourses of sexuality, her projected possibilities of pleasing him include 'never eat[ing] jelly' and 'danc[ing] a hornpipe' (194).

that was one of pleasure and the last that was one of shame' (196). Assuming forgiveness from God the priest makes it 'sound[] like a snowfall, snow over the land and a mantle over the shoulders of the people'. The echo of Joyce -- 'The Dead' from *Dubliners* -- acknowledges O'Brien's literary 'father' whilst the all-encompassing nature of the snow ironically underscores the pervasiveness of the priests's semen: 'The smell of it got in the back of your throat as if you had drank it which you hadn't'. The narrator's attempts to 'undo the harm' seem 'over-sweet' 'like the flowers between the pages of a book, destined for putrid'. An episode which began with the girl's joyful contemplation of the folds of a rose ends with the blighting of her sexuality.

Lynette Carpenter has argued that throughout *A Pagan Place* O'Brien 'suggests that the strongest bond between women, and between mother and daughter in particular, is the bond of their common misery, their vulnerability to the cruelty of men' (Carpenter, 1986, 273). Yet patriarchal social and symbolic orders do not permit what Irigaray terms 'sympathy between women' (Whitford, 1991a, 107). As Irigaray goes on to argue: 'The absence of an ideal maternal and female figure for women results in the fact that mimicry between women becomes the flaying of one woman by another' (Whitford, 1991a, 110). This observation is especially resonant in a social context in which, as Innes puts it, 'the image of the Virgin as uniquely asexual, denying all biological functions' is inextricably bound up with the veneration of 'motherhood as the ideal role for women' (Innes, 1993, 38).¹⁴ Irigaray points out that 'limits between women' cannot be 'articulate[d]' within a symbolic order based on the law of the father, and that relationships between women will

¹⁴ This issue will be explored in greater depth in the context of *Mother Ireland* in Chapter 4.

thus constitute 'struggle[s] for superiority between two sames' (Whitford, 1991a, 112). In *A Pagan Place* mother and daughter are both subject to the 'law of the father', and 'the strongest bond' as perceived by O'Brien seems to be the pre-Oedipal, symbiotic relationship between mother and daughter, patriarchal disruption of which results, not so much in alternative 'bonds', as in uneasy alliances. The narrator's separation from her mother is problematic; she does acknowledge her mother as a separate entity -- 'You each coughed differently' (152) -- but there is an inextricable link between them -- 'Your coughs were your signature tunes'.

The second person narrative is immediately instrumental in laying claim to the mother, referring to 'your mother' in the first paragraph of the novel. There is a sense of female bonding within patriarchy -- 'Manny Parker's sister' allows the mother credit on sweets and other items -- but it is Manny Parker himself who owns the shop and appropriates the family name. Despite the efforts of the narrator and her friend Jewel to 'feminise' religious ritual friendships between women are undermined by comparison to those between men: 'Your friends were not friends the way your father and Dan Egan were ... When your father talked of Dan Egan his eyes filled up with tears' (19). Jewel can hardly compete with a dead republican for whom a tree has been named and girls playing with pretend communion wafers are unable to match the exploits of two men in prison. 'When Dan Egan had to do number two they were still left tied together and that made them buddies for ever' (22).

The father is made uneasy by the physical bond between mother and daughter:

After she'd done her day's work you sat on her lap. You put your ear to the wall of her stomach and you could hear her insides glugging away Your father told you to get down out of there, to get down.

Anxious to reclaim his wife he:

Put[s] his hand under her chin and forced her face up, told her to smile, told her she was getting old, told her she had wrinkles, called her Mud, short for mother.

She had to go across the landing to his room. An edict (32).

The mother is 'muddied' and ridiculed, prefiguring what happens in 'his room': 'Before she went across the landing she put tissue paper in her pussy' (33).¹⁵ Even when mother and daughter share a bed in a symbiotic closeness which apparently transcends the 'need' for a goodnight kiss 'the law of the father' asserts itself: 'The crucifix sometimes slipped out of her hand and fell in the warm bed between you. The metal edges wakened you up' (34-35). The intrusion of the crucifix is linked to the inescapability of earthly paternal law: 'Her [the mother's] own father was a toper too. History repeating itself'.

The narrator's desire to return to the womb can be read as a subversion of what Irigaray terms the 'discursive mechanism' of paternal law. Desire for the mother is revealed by the narrator's attraction to her mother's flesh: 'There were spare rolls of skin on her back. They were like blancmange, cold and wet and appetizing' (154). Yet this desire is constantly foiled, not least by the mother herself. The narrator does not touch her

¹⁵ This violation of the maternal ideal is made even more explicit in *House of Splendid Isolation*, as James forces his supposedly barren wife into sex: 'He calls her muddy, short for mother and mud and says lewd things while he rises and rears within her, master of her ...' (O'Brien, 1994, 44).

mother's back and her reflections on her pre-natal state are undermined by the mother's own version of the experience:

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

Here the second person narrative -- 'In your mother you were safe' -- is addressed to an intra-uterine *gestalt*. The narrator reflects on a state of potential, anticipating the 'radical innocence of the moment just before birth' alluded to in the conclusion of *Mother Ireland* (O'Brien, 1976, 144). But this potential can never be realised in a symbolic order in which, as Irigaray argues, the mother-daughter relationship is immobilized between the options of 'consuming and being consumed' or separating into 'two dead selves distanced from each other, with no ties binding them' (Irigaray, 1981, 62-64). This condition is exemplified by the relationship between mother and daughter in *A Pagan Place*. When the mother parts from the doctor, to whom she is 'attached', the narrator takes hold of her 'familiar' hand only to find it 'weightless' (138). Against the claims of the 'doctor-father' the mother-daughter relationship is insignificant (Whitford, 1991a, 36).¹⁶ The daughter does penance for her mother, hoping that 'God would notice that suffering and put it towards easing her

¹⁶ Significantly the father appeals to the 'doctor-father' for an abortion for Emma, his 'spoiled' commodity (128).

predicament' (40) just as she later 'trie[s] standing on one foot, without wobbling ... for sixty seconds' so that the supposed father of Emma's baby will marry her (133). Seeing the mother's 'predicament', the daughter is protective towards her: 'You wished she and you could abscond to somewhere, anywhere' (66). But rituals and wishes have not the power to prevent separation. After the birth of Emma's baby, the mother gives up her own rituals of martyrdom and grows spiteful, telling the narrator 'to stop sounding like a little lady in a sonnet like Lucy Grey' (185).¹⁷ For the mother, 'womankind' is constructed only in the negative: 'Your mother gasped, said ignorance was the bane of mankind. She added womankind in case your father might think she was having a dig at him ...' (86).

The 'common bond of [women's] misery' identified by Carpenter is inextricably linked throughout *A Pagan Place* to the uncelebrated female body. Emma attempts to dismiss 'the inner paraphernalia of one' as 'a nuisance', but the narrator thinks of 'women's insides' as 'a sea with shapes sliding and colliding, their fertility juices leaking away' (110).¹⁸ Emma's 'stained, but not bloodstained' sanitary towel, found under her pillow, betrays her secret along with her diary. The sanitary towels made for the narrator by her mother are 'big and ungainly, with herring-bone stitching in other colours along the hem' (103). The 'stitching' theme is a common link between the mother and her two daughters. The narrator is defined partly by the story of her birth, which includes the account of how 'the midwife stitched your mother, made a botch of it' (32). Thinking of a woman giving birth to quins the narrator's 'heart rent for their mothers and all the stitching their mothers

¹⁷ The mother's rituals include 'using the worst toasting fork' because she is 'bent on sacrifice' (124).

¹⁸ In *The High Road*, O'Brien's most woman-centred novel, the sea is perceived as 'a great, dark, recumbent wet mother' (O'Brien, 1989, 20).

would have after such emissions'. The term 'emissions' suggests the role in conception of stable male fluids, evoking fear and revulsion. When the narrator meets Emma after the birth of the baby she wonders 'if she was bleeding. Were her stitches out', and reflects that 'she had a secret. It was sewn into her' (168).

The landing which separates the mother's and father's bedrooms, forming the boundary between woman-centredness and patriarchy, is decorated with 'an embroidered picture that said *There's a rose in the heart of New York*'.¹⁹ New York was the site of Emma's birth and of the narrator's conception, a place where the mother wore 'green georgette and dance shoes' and ate 'multi-flavoured ice-cream' (160). Just as the embroidery threads hold together the family's history and connections, the narrator's body becomes a record of events. This is most evident in the scene following the father's beating of the narrator:

It [the body] had no proven memory of when it was born, it had only hearsay, her enema beforehand, the scabrous shaving, the semi-raw goose and the way they sang *Red River Valley*. It had all the years of fondlings, and strokings, from him, from her, cramps after the Saturday morning senna, your first sanitary towel, the way she engirdled you each night ... She kissed you on the back (202).

Subjection to the law of the father has finally earned the mother's kiss. The narrator has become 'like Emma, with a secret sewn into [her]'. Departing for the convent where 'a saint's name' awaits her, she is given along with 'a cake wrapped in greaseproof paper and a pot of lemon curd' -- parting reminders of the mother's 'appetizing' body -- a 'wallet

¹⁹ O'Brien's short story of that name is perhaps her most focused exposition of the mother-daughter relationship to date (O'Brien, 1978).

with E.d.M written in gold. It stood for *Enfant de Marie*' (222). Unable to protect her daughter from paternal law, and forced to relinquish her to a spiritual mother, the blood mother has stitched this 'in secret over the weeks'. The narrator's unshed tears form 'stitches of pain under [her] ears, the worst [she] had ever had' (223). Though the relationship between mother and daughter has changed since the intrusion of the priest -- 'You were not lacking in friendliness but it was not the same, there was the breach for ever more' (209) -- the mother will not 'emerge from the house and say goodbye and have done with' her daughter. The superhuman howl -- 'a howl that would go on for as long as her life did, and his, and yours' -- which marks the narrator's departure signifies the tenacity of family bonds. O'Brien's exposition of this theme is continued in *Night*.

Night's most striking development from *A Pagan Place* is perhaps its replacement of second person narrative by the first person narrative of Mary Hooligan who seeks, through recollection, cohesion of her fractured self. O'Brien's return to first person narrative reinstates the reader identification which popularised her early works. Rebecca Pelan argues that 'although its experimental technique is identifiably Joycean, the first person narrative of *Night* implies ... the existence of a speaking voice and a listening audience' (Pelan, 1996, 58). But the 'Joycean' aspects of the text are not, as Pelan's argument would seem to suggest, incompatible with its narrative voice. In uniting the voice with the *gestalt* -- the 'you' of *A Pagan Place* -- O'Brien is attempting the union of Mary's assumed, socially constructed self with what Irigaray terms the '*elsewhere*', that which escapes the 'function' of 'mimicry' (Whitford, 1991a, 124). Whilst 'jamming the theoretical machinery' in this respect O'Brien simultaneously appropriates the literary style

of her 'father', trying to realise, as Dawn Duncan puts it, '... not a race consciousness as Joyce attempts but a feminine consciousness as crafted out of the feminine mind of O'Brien as she follows the path of Woolf' (Whitford, 1991a, 126; Duncan, 1996, 101).

Operating within the discourse of the 'literary father', Mary achieves nonetheless the '*disruptive excess*' which Irigaray sees as essential to the "style" or "writing" of women' by undermining constructs of race, gender and literature. Her 'disruptive' powers are suggested by her name; 'Mary' as 'idealized maiden' is undermined (Innes, 1993, 20). By the time Mary announces: 'I am called Mary' it has become apparent that she is, in Irish Catholic terms, no 'ideal' (51). Pelan points out that '... Hooligan ... plays not only on Cathleen ni Houlihan, the personification of Irish womanhood and nationhood, but its colloquial meaning of hoodlum or ruffian' (Pelan, 1996, 59). Commenting on *Cathleen ni Houlihan* Innes argues that though 'Yeats generally spoke of the play as if it were entirely his own creation ... Lady Gregory played a major part in its composition' (Innes, 1993, 45). 'Mary Hooligan' is the site of multiple subversions. Philip Roth's comment that 'the world of Nora Barnacle had to wait for the fiction of Edna O'Brien' is reductive unless O'Brien is read as reappropriating not only *écriture féminine* but the canon itself (Pearce, 1996, 63).

Mary's narrative is contained within the temporal framework of the titular 'night', though her reflections encompass her entire lifespan. There are occasional reminders of the narrative's 'present', for example when Mary notes a feather 'which has been irking [her] for some time' (25). The linguistically dense opening page introduces the principal themes of the text; female subjectivity, Irishness, maternity and patriarchy. The Joycean opening

sentence acknowledges O'Brien's debt to her literary 'father' whilst pointing out that life is 'lit with blood, cloth wick and old membrane'. This imagery anticipates the novel's concern with the maternal body. Mary's narrative attempts, in the words of Irigaray, to 'beget anew the maternal within her' and to speak 'as a woman', thereby reclaiming for the feminine the style adopted by Joyce (Whitford, 1991a, 109 & 49). Mary's search for her own 'voice' is suggested by the 'mirroring' introduced in the first paragraph: 'Mirrors are not for seeing by, mirrors are for wondering at, and wondering into'. Mary's equivocal statement that 'There is so little and so fucking much' is echoed in her claim to feel 'as much for the woman in the train who had the flushes, as for the woman Lil who bore me'. Here Mary points as much to the universality of female experience as to her own affected indifference, which is in any case undermined by her subsequent reflections on Lil. As in *A Pagan Place* 'one's kith, one's kin' are posited as ultimately inescapable (10). Despite Mary's protest 'I do not wish to lie with my own kith and kin', she 'do[es] not want to lie with anyone else's' (11). She remains bound by 'Lil's spittled-on speciality, the mother's-knot' (40).²⁰

Night transcends *A Pagan Place* not only by fusing first and second person narrative, but by encompassing London as well as Ireland. Like *Girls in their Married Bliss*, *August is a Wicked Month* and *Casualties of Peace*, *Night* identifies factors common to patriarchal culture in Ireland and elsewhere, this time extending the redefinitions of Ireland which began in *A Pagan Place*.

²⁰ In *The High Road*, the small boy 'Little Ernest' claims the best strawberries for himself by 'running his spittled finger over each one to proclaim his rights' (59). In this context Lil's 'spittled-on ... mother's knot' signifies an attempt to appropriate a *female* space and a maternal imaginary.

The novel's opening acknowledges 'dead men', 'blind men', 'cripples', 'priests' and 'dummies', challenging, through the illogicality of the riddle, the authority of Irish masculinity: 'That's how it is. Topsy-turvy' (7). Before subverting -- even inverting -- patriarchy -- Mary needs to identify and define its manifestations. Irish masculinity continues to be deconstructed: 'I've met them all, the cretins, the pilgrims, the scholars and the scaly-eyed bards prating and intoning for their bit of cunt' (8). Innes comments on the ways in which female mythical figures, such as the Hag of Beare, have 'often been appropriated by male poets, including Yeats' (Innes, 1993, 21). Given O'Brien's other modifications of Yeats -- 'Mary Hooligan' and the infertile swans at 'Coose', surely a corruption of 'Coole' -- her inclusion of 'bards' among what Pearce identifies as 'a host of losers' may be read as subversive (Pearce, 1996, 64). Certainly O'Brien posits 'bards' as univocally patriarchal, suggesting once more the need to reclaim *écriture féminine* from Joyce.

Mary even professes indifference to the supreme authority: 'I lie with my God, I lie without my God'. Pelan detects in this revelation 'a degree of cynicism, disillusionment and ambivalence which is absent in Joyce' (Pelan, 1996, 58). Again this suggests the significance of female-authored *écriture féminine* in the subversion of patriarchal discourse. Yet Mary's narrative is interspersed with the language of Christianity -- '*Nota bene...* Hosannah' (9) -- and it is not always clear whether she is trying to make it hers by trivialising and integrating it, or whether she is simply acknowledging its all-pervasiveness. 'Bards and knackers' -- a juxtapositioning which suggests the proximity of sex and death -

- have after all 'spun [her] many a line', and their imagery proves tenacious.²¹ Mary does manage to subvert Yeats. The swans at Coose are 'unpropagating' despite their environment of 'tombs, tumuli ... a round tower' and other accoutrements of Irish literature (10).²² In *Night* the landscape of *A Pagan Place* is sometimes used ironically.

As well as acknowledging even through subversion the influence of literary fathers, *Night* deals with Mary's intimacy with her blood father. Identities are elided as she reflects upon her conception:

The seed of my father I reach out to you, as you once did to me ... Her [the mother's] buttocks, flaunched and ordinary, the slit, the slit of absurdity into which we chose to pass. The nearest we ever were. You and I? You or I? Only you, not yet I? Already I, no longer you? A trinity of yobs (15).

In the social and linguistic absence of a maternal imaginary Mary, unable to achieve a relationship with her mother based on recognition rather than on mimicry, aligns herself with her father, ridiculing her mother's vagina in 'masculine' terms (Whitford, 1991a, 110).

In *Night* as in *A Pagan Place* the law of the father is seen to govern landscape as well as individuals. A man's bicycle, seen 'propped up against a yew tree' as Mary takes 'a short cut' to her mother's funeral, signifies that its owner may have gone 'to lie down for bucolic reasons with a woman or a travelling woman, or a married woman, or a beast, or

²¹ O'Brien's juxtapositioning of 'bards and knackers' recalls the 'cattle market' references common to the apparently disparate Cousin Andy and 'Simon the poet' in *Girl with Green Eyes*. Again, this points to the universality of patriarchal discourse and the commodification of women.

²² O'Brien's 'unpropagating' swans are anticipated by Kate's aversion to swans in *Girls in their Married Bliss*: 'She hated swans. Their greed. Their ugly bodies. Their webbed, slime-like feet' (16).

no other agent at all'. 'Woman' as 'agent' is catalogued in descending order of desirability and is ultimately dispensable. This denial of femininity prefigures Mary's account of the priest's visits to the dying Lil. The priest's impotence -- 'Poor canons, their old scrotums like dust ...' -- extends to his ministrations. Lil 'swallow[s the sacrament] with agony' and 'once he c[omes] with the chalice empty' (20).

Like the 'unpropagating' swans and Irish priests the London landscape is seen as sterile: 'It all adds up, the coupons, the pebbledash estate, the packets of cereal with cardboard clocks on them, the dolls in the window, their legs splayed, the dolls as grotesque as the children' (26). Cream is a 'commodity' in 'a blue tin', 'a hundred lids' from which 'could secure a plastic tulip for some town housewife with a yen for the forest' (28). The natural, the maternal symbolic epitomised by babies and cows, is elided: 'It seems to me that babies along with cows are passing from our lives altogether' (29). The analogy of cows with the maternal imaginary reinforces the 'cattle market' imagery of *The Country Girls*.

Inauthentic femininity is juxtaposed with fake Irishness. Mary meets the couple with whom she forms a threesome in a pub offering 'Phil the Fluter stuff' along with 'speed, lights, food, chicks, disc jockeys and table telephones' (29). It is later revealed that Mary's attempted deflowering has taken on a 'holy day of obligation' on which Irishness and commerce are similarly and ludicrously juxtaposed. 'A glut of Snow Whites' compete in the fancy dress with 'several little drummer boys, jockeys, Tessie O'Sheas, and bauld Fenian men' (36). Coose may be documented 'in the Norse books' but this is of little use to its women. The winner of the fancy dress is significantly 'a brown paper parcel' out of

which 'a very underfed [female] creature came peering through, screeching'. This recalls the likening of Willa and Patsy to empty parcels/receptacles in *Casualties of Peace*.

In the ensuing and heavily parodied 'all-night hop' Mary's see-through Snow White costume, made by Lil, attracts a falconer who fails to make it to a second coming. In stitching her daughter's costume, Lil stitches her up sexually; the *Pagan Place* narrator's seduction by the priest is turned into slapstick. The falconer repeats the priest's comment "I could go through you like butter" and his ejaculation -- over 'the limestone rocks, the town's beauty spot' -- is likewise solitary (37). The brevity of the male orgasm is once again emphasised -- 'Abrupt termination ... a brusque affair' (38). Yet farce is undercut by Mary's envisaging of the falconer's ejaculate 'getting into the fissures, either nourishing or nauseating the lichen, the sphagnum, the roots of the tree, and the various insects and night creatures that were reposing there'. Male orgasm may be pathetic but it still effects an invasion of space. Even the 'black mass' which Mary considers later, perhaps as an antidote to sex within a Christian patriarchy, is only its inversion and still male-dominated, 'entail[ing] semen on the belly' (87). The falconer severs Mary and Lil. 'Not very *au fait* with the facts of life' and fearing pregnancy, Mary '[takes] a night boat to the land across water'.

Mary's emigration proves only, as Pelan points out, 'that escape is impossible' (Pelan, 1996, 58). Like Kate in *Girls in their Married Bliss* Mary simply exchanges one patriarchy for another. Geographical exile and homelessness parallel her state of exile from the symbolic order.²³ As Irigaray argues women are 'always 'moving house' in the phallic

²³ *Night's* narrative framework is the titular night in the house borrowed by Mary.

imaginary' (Whitford, 1991a, 91). The waiter with whom Mary goes to bed in England produces an 'emission' as 'small' as the falconer's (45):

Among the foe. The Brits, the painted people. A land where the king has piles. not much resonance to it. Sportsmen, huntsmen, sportswomen abound (39).

The clouds in England 'are dull and hefty' and 'don't roam the way they did in Coose' (40). The waiter 'aid[s] and abet[s] himself in too-tight trousers' but like the waiter in *August is a Wicked Month* infects Mary with the story of 'his tatty little life' (44). Artificial fruits in her borrowed house remind Mary of 'artificial testicles' (48), contrasting with Moriarty's 'freckled balls' (40) and recalling the useless 'old scrotums' of the priests. As in *Girls in their Married Bliss* and *August is a Wicked Month* sexual 'permissiveness' is seen as empty. Mary's observation of 'bleak and bream' in the local pond recalls Kate's reflections in *Girls in their Married Bliss*:

'..., carp, bleak, bream.'

They did not sound like the names of fish at all but like a litany of moods that any woman might feel any Monday morning after she'd hung out her washing and caught a glimpse of a ravishing man going somewhere alone in a motor car (17).

Like the *Pagan Place* narrator's aversion to her mother's venetian blinds, this passage constructs domestic space in terms of emptiness and entrapment. Even when she engages in a threesome Mary discovers only 'harmless' sex (57), though for the man's regular partner, this is debatable:

Everything about him was fawn and epicurean but he was lacking in passion. Biding himself. He stuck the brass-topped poker into her and though she was refusing, she was at the same time whittling away to her pussy's delight. All of a sudden he hit her, made her sit up and eat a cardomom seed (57).

This is Herod experienced at one remove. As in the priest/seduction episode fear is displaced through slapstick and displacement. As with Mary's deflowering O'Brien is taking distressing elements of previous texts and rendering them 'safe'; violence is incongruously juxtaposed with cardomom seeds.²⁴ The 'aristocratic' Dr Flaggler similarly recalls Herod and Eugene in his clinical detachment and desire for control. His curtains 'me[e]t without a hitch' (68). Flaggler is both dehumanised and dehumanising. There is 'a lot of machinery ... purring softly' in his home and his hands on Mary's 'bum' feel 'like a shooting stick, or a walking stick, the kind toffs use at the races as seating place' (68). The penis becomes a metonym for the inaccessible man: 'He only removed trousers and underpants. On his instructions I kissed him. He was pearled. He towered above me' (69). Flaggler talks to his penis rather than to Mary:

... he had to ordain everything that he was doing, commentate, address his own valve, say 'Now, now,' time it, and then drowning his laver in his own cries, I cried too and Christ, I heard the screams of unborn mites in those two friendless siggers.

²⁴ This anticipates the scene in *Down by the River* in which the protagonist's father having raped her and made her pregnant attempts to instigate abortion by forcing a 'broken and splintered broom handle' into her vagina (O'Brien, 1996, 106).

It is telling that Flaggler's actions are self-'ordained'. The law of the father is still in operation and Mary is quick to recognise the nihilism to which she has been subjected. After sex, Flaggler tells Mary: "I don't even rate you." Like Herod Flaggler controls emissions, and projects his fear of his own, telling Mary to 'look out' lest she dribble semen on his floor, and later insisting on enemas for their son (75). The fellow tourists who dislike Doctor Flaggler 'because he had brought his own block of salt' are, like Patsy commenting on Auro, identifying a fundamental truth (85). Flaggler is inviolable and unyielding. After their first encounter Mary needs^{to} get weighed on his scales to reassure herself that 'nothing had altered' (70).

The commodification or 'weighing up' of women is seen throughout *Night* as universal. The Duke with whom Mary gets into 'a whole new itinerary of lies and foils' (95) is Caucasian and Flaggler's immediate successor, a Finn, sees 'women and girls as related to water, sedges, pools, whirls, creatures that invited him in' (98). Though the Finn is larger than life, 'expanding [into] more than one man, a clan of men, an Eisteddfod ...' (99), 'the intervals that had to be filled in' remain empty for Mary. Because her own subjectivity is compromised she is unable to achieve even vicarious fulfilment. Mary is deprived of female and national identities, and of language. Whilst in New York 'to promote Coose' she finds herself 'boggling [New Yorkers] with Kiltartan drivel', 'doling out shamrocks and doing a bit of step dancing' (104).²⁵

Unable to 'master' languages because she is a woman, Mary goes on to dream of 'faces ... more mouths than could cram in Babel'. When she does see God he appears as 'a

²⁵ Mary's professional life is significantly absent from the text so the capacity in which she is 'promot[ing] Coose' is unclear.

broth of a boy, hoarse-voiced in white of course, white broderie anglais ...' (106). Though this vision is anticlimactic the boy God is still entitled to 'part the heavens in his imperious way' to issues commands. Forced ultimately to recognise 'the law of the father' and acknowledging her blood father as the man in whom 'resided the stance, the stare, the wild umbrage prevalent in all the men that I had loved, unloved, betrayed' (116), Mary focuses once more on her ex-lover Moriarty -- 'Moriarty here I come' (121) -- 'before the all-embracing darkness descends' (122).

Mary's attraction to the 'guerilla' republicans Moriarty and McKann -- who anticipate McGreevy in *House of Splendid Isolation* -- is ambiguous, being readable not just as accession to the law of the (nationalist) father but as attempted assertion of self. Claiming that 'I might meet [Moriarty] in the woods, in Arcadia' Mary suggests 'Et in Arcadia ego'. Even -- or perhaps especially -- in the 'paradise' offered by McKann's 'fierce indignation', Mary *is*. Yet her attraction to 'men on the move' expresses the desire only for vicarious action -- Mary is not permitted to *do* (31). Robin Morgan suggests that:

Even when we [women] collaborate [in terrorism] ... we do so out of disbelief, a suspended knowledge, a longing for acceptance, a tortured love we bear for the men we have birthed and sustain. But whether we collaborate or beg, support or oppose, always it is a case of *cherchez l'homme* (Morgan, 1989, 24).

Admitting that 'the Moriartys of this world are on some bier' Mary finally reinstates the connection between sex and death established by O'Brien in *Casualties of Peace* (41).

It is significant, however, that Moriarty and Mary do not engage in penetrative sex. Their relationship is specifically analogised with that of mother and daughter:

We never consummated it. It was about the best there was, I mean the most rending apart from the blood-knots. It was more of a boneknot. Down with bloodknots, boneknots, Minoan knots, Tristram knots, Druidic knots and Lil's spittled-on speciality, the mother-knot (40).

Mary's relationship with Moriarty offers the possibility of an alternative connection between men and women based on recognition of and respect for sexual difference.

Irigaray argues that:

In the difference between the sexes, [peace and harmony] would signify acceptance and fulfilment of one's own sex, without seeking superiority over the alien or the stranger that insists in the other (Whitford, 1991a, 115).

Within a phallocratic order the only way to avoid 'seeking superiority' is to avoid penetrative sex.

In *Night* as in *A Pagan Place* O'Brien seems to be questioning and subverting patriarchal concepts of woman and Ireland and also to be reclaiming the feminine. Throughout the text, Mary's world of 'halcyon days, rings, ringlets, ashes of roses, shit, chantilly, high teas, drop scones, serge suits [and] binding attachments' (7) forms a parallel universe to the male literary Ireland of 'tombs, tumuli, vaults, boulders, a round tower, turds, toadstools and bullocks' (10). Certainly Mary is quick to define herself in terms of her biological -- as distinct from her socially constructed -- femininity:

I am a woman, at least I am led to believe so. I bleed et cetera . And those noises, and those sighs, and those murmers ... issue from me faithfully like buntings. Not

to mention the more bucolic sounds ... the choice slushings of the womb which have ogled many another by means of gurgle, nuance, melody, ditty and crass burbling supplication (9).

Mary takes the physical manifestations of womanhood -- the bleeding and 'slushings of the womb' -- as 'proof' of her femininity. The element of doubt -- 'at least I am led to believe so' -- may be attributable to her awareness of the ways in which 'femininity' is constructed in relation to the masculine. Her distancing of her own sexual performance -- '*those*', not '*my*', 'noises', 'sighs' and so on -- suggests her disengagement from and resistance to such constructs. Mary Hooligan has been constructed partly by London sexual mores as well as by the Irish notions of womanhood which her name evokes. The 'slushings of the womb' which underly her sexual performances are implicitly analogised with the London cityscape:

... I have forgotten the fact that earth and running water lie somewhere underneath the vast complex of concrete and sewerage and rubble and weed and fag-ends and grating and shit (11).

This analogy recalls the 'underground' desires of Willa in *Casualties of Peace*.

Mary's resistance to patriarchal constructs begins with her reluctance 'to lie with [her] own kith and kin', which she offers as 'another blow for King James and for the green' (11). Interestingly though she clarifies this issue further by stating: 'I do not want to lie with anyone else's kith and kin either. One for King Billy'. Mary simultaneously rejects the two patriarchal cultures by which her country is defined. Interestingly Innes uses as the frontispiece to her book a nineteenth century cartoon entitled 'How Happy Could She be

with Neither' which shows 'Erin ignor[ing] the advances of both the Home Rulers and The Devolutionaries' (Innes, 1993). Like the cartoonist O'Brien shows the interchangeability of both patriarchal positions for women caught between them. Rejecting these, Mary dreams like Patsy before her of faraway places: 'I might end up in China or Tasmania' (32). Yet even in London she is unable to escape the pull of her birth country, admitting: 'I go to gardens, to the hothouse at Kew, for aftermaths of Coose' (34). Coose is referred to as 'that old Alma Mater', 'a glorified bog' which is analogous with Mary's own 'slushing' innards.

Displaced from Coose Mary like Ellen in *August is a Wicked Month* becomes possessive about her borrowed space: 'I would like it to be mine' (51). She experiences a moment of epiphany in her anticipation of daybreak:

... I will see a lit-up pane, burnished, and say to myself all is not lost, all is not bleak, and the heavens and the earth can still spring their little surprises on me and flood the world with radiance. Towers of ivory, house of gold. And the pigeons under the eaves will coo (46).

Mary confesses to having made 'a little altar' with 'candle grease in thick splodges on the embossed cloth, various statues and icons, [and] the shawl spread out over the prayer chair' (50). She also has 'a spare key buried, in its own little clay hole', symbolising right of entry and ownership of the earth on which the house is built. Mary's need for place and ritual is similarly revealed later in *Night* when she teaches the child Conchita --the Hispanic name is significant, prefiguring the love object Catalina in *The High Road* -- and others 'the magic rites of plants and about herbs and pond life, and what gods and what

goddesses had for their emblems' (97). This suggests her recognition of the need for a less patriarchal faith than the one in which she has been brought up, one in which 'gods' and 'goddesses' are like Mary and Moriarty balanced, and which she is prepared to pass on to a substitute 'daughter'. At the point in the text where Mary befriends Conchita she has just rejected a 'junk shop' 'picture of Saint Teresa, with her June roses' in favour of an alternative purchase of a patchwork eiderdown. This choice which indicates a desire to reclaim an alternative female history. Significantly Irigaray, commenting on Lacan's analysis of Bernini's 'Saint Theresa in Ecstasy', argues that he is writing about his own pleasure rather than the saint's (Irigaray, 1985, 91). Rejecting the representation of Saint Teresa Mary rejects also the 'mystification' that goes with it.

Even the spirituality associated with domestic ritual is undercut by Mary's pragmatic revelation that 'I am here [in the house] in the capacity of a caretaker'. She may have 'appropriated the master bedroom' and made a mental 'list for stealing' but she constantly anticipates her displacement (51). Mary realises ultimately that her attempts at appropriation are useless. When the owners of the house announce their return -- their telegram is a hint for her to go -- she reflects that 'finding me here would make it my house' but acknowledges that 'they won't be seeing me on Saturday ...' (120). Pelan argues that Mary 'rejects [the house] by leaving', 'address[ing] the Big House tradition' in making her mark through the 'hooliganism' of minor damages (Pelan, 1996, 59). This is an attractive but ultimately unconvincing argument. Mary does not *choose* when to leave, and finds herself displaced once more.

Deprived of the London house Mary is drawn back to memories of Coose, of a significantly 'incomplete arc of rainbow' witnessed in the company of her father (118) and of 'the very flowers of the field' which as she admits 'get inside [her] head' (119). By dawn Mary is returning to a conventionally feminised Ireland: 'Oh my dark Rosaleen, do not sigh, do not weep. O Connemara, oh sweet mauve forgotten hills' (121). Innes identifies 'dark Rosaleen' as yet another male construct of a feminised Ireland, citing 'James Clarence Mangan's ballad' of that name (Innes, 1993, 21). Again Mary, unable to escape the confines of tradition, has to be content with reappropriating its forms.

Throughout *Night* feminised constructs of Ireland are linked to artificial constructs of femininity. Mary's compromised subjectivity is indicated in the first paragraph of *Night* by her assertion that 'mirrors are not for seeing by, mirrors are for wondering at, and wondering into' (7). Later Mary remembers from childhood 'what I saw of myself, mis-saw, when I looked into one of the many long, sad, blotched mirrors that fronted the wardrobe doors in that dark rookery that was our house, our homestead' (13). Mary's attempts throughout *Night* to assimilate herself with this smudgy childhood *döppelgänger* are hampered not only by the *döppelgänger*'s immobilized and 'mirrored' state -- 'she' has already been denied the potential of the intra-uterine state -- but by externally-imposed constructs of what she should be. These range from the 'tea-cloth which has scripted in it [her] character according to [her] astrological sign' (15) to the nanny's uniform which the Duke has her wear. Because Mary's own subjectivity is incomplete the boundaries between herself and others are fragile. Her friendship with Madge degenerates into an exchange which is 'artifice itself' (113). The women, both constructed as 'the dreg',

become too close: 'I could see her predicament. I could touch it, it was like an opening in her chest, being let look in' (111). Similarly but with a hint of the surreal Mary reflects that:

People cling on to me like sloths. How they weigh, how they prey on me. I am prepared to vouchsafe that they are attached to my scalp by means of brooches, so tenacious are they ... (27).

Once again the body is used as a point of reference.

The fragility of Mary's own subjectivity is suggested by the reference to 'different genders of people' in the city (54). This suggests, to cite Butler, that 'gender' is not 'imposed or inscribed upon the individual' and that Mary has therefore the potential to become a 'subject' (Butler, 1997, 410). Conversely though, Mary deliberately sets herself up as an *object* when she becomes an art school model. In this capacity she observes that the students 'all had sheets of white paper and I was sad to envisage any mark, any trace of charcoal going on to them'. This admission highlights her desire not to reinvent her adult 'self' but to return to the womb, to recapture her intra-uterine potential (59). Mary's decision to subject herself to the gaze of the art students is symptomatic of the extent to which she is constantly thrown back on her sexed body as proof of 'self'.

Reflecting on her unsatisfying liaison with the waiter Mary argues that 'there are times when our limbs make decisions for us' (42). Recalling yet another unsuccessful encounter in which 'the old quim went quite dead' she aligns her body with her native landscape, suggesting that 'there ought to be such a thing as a quim diviner, just as in the Barony of Coose there were water diviners' (53). It is not clear who would benefit the most from

this; 'Barony' does imply male domination. Furthermore Mary, having likened her 'dead' quim to a dry chamois leather, goes on to assert that 'nothing is nearly so revolting when it dries out' (63).²⁶ Offering her body as proof of her own existence Mary is yet aware of the possibility of rejection; witness Dr Flagglers' disgusted reaction to the sight of his own semen dripping from her cunt. Flagglers, like Eugene and Herod, his 'shadow-male' antecedents, denies woman the completion by another body which she craves. On holiday with Flagglers, Mary feels that 'I would have embraced anything at the time, a sheaf or a pillar, and my hunger was such that my arms used to lollop out of their own accord, reach blindly for some unfortunate person to hold on to' (84).

Mary's 'hunger' is at least partly attributable to the incompleteness of her separation from her mother Lil. Her attitude towards Lil vacillates between hostility and desire. Mary is as constrained by 'blood' and 'old membrane' as she is by the men of Ireland. The 'cloth wick' of the novel's opening page is linked to the 'doddery aladdin' which 'wait[s] for' Lil 'herself', 'haemorrhag[ing]' on her deathbed, to 'light it up' (22). What Irigaray identifies as 'the debt to the mother' remains 'unpaid' since the only available pattern for the separation of mother and daughter is the Oedipal one of hatred and rejection (Whitford, 1991a, 95 & 119). Mary's childhood memories of her mother recall those of the narrator in *A Pagan Place*; the dying Lil asks 'to be taken out of the stifling room, to the slopes of yellow gorse, to pick blackberries' again (23). As in *A Pagan Place* memory is bound up with the maternal body. Mary's confession that 'the thing I hanker after is custard, great soft glaubs of it in the mouth, but certainly with a dash of vanilla' recalls

²⁶ This recalls Beauvoir's observation that 'Man "gets stiff" but woman "gets wet"', through which she locates the site of woman's sexual embarrassment (Beauvoir, 1949 [1993], 406).

the *Pagan Place* narrator's analogy of the mother's body with 'appetizing' blancmange (32).

In *Night* Mary appears to reject matrilineage along with patrilineage, including female ancestors in her list of those among whom she 'do[es] not wish to lie':

Not to be a member of the communion of saints or demi-gods or fathers or mothers or grandfathers or grandmothers or brothers or sisters or brethren of any kind, germaine to me through consanguinity, affinity, or any other kind of linear or genitive or collateral bond (11).

Yet as Irigaray points out maternal genealogy is in any case not permitted, having been eradicated by 'patriarchal civilizations' (Irigaray, 1993, 27). Certainly Mary's relationship with Lil is seen, like the relationship between the narrator and her mother in *A Pagan Place*, to be limited and partly defined by the father, the 'shaman' along with whom Mary entered Lil's 'slit of absurdity'. It is her 'patrimony' that she will waste, 'according to [her] astrological sign', 'if the stars are ill-placed' (15). The 'law of the father' dominates Lil's funeral as much as the shoddy catering -- damp biscuits and thin catsup --with 'the adages of Saints Jerome and Bonaventure trotted out as applicable material' when Lil herself had 'a penchant for the colloquial' (19).

As in *A Pagan Place* the law of the father is partly qualified by references to an alternative female community, revealed once again through O'Brien's 'stitching' motif. Attempting to swallow the sacrament the dying Lil is tormented by 'stitches under her throat, jabbing like needles' and consoled by fantasies which are themselves 'stitched':

And she stayed there and said how she longed for it not to be dark, but to be bright, bright days and shafts of light passing through her and her children all young again and around her as in a needlework ... (21).

When Lil does die she 'le[aves] no heirlooms, only a fan, her ring and a little reticule', and then 'there was Boss and [Mary]' (24). Once again father and daughter are aligned. The name 'Boss' underlines along with the paucity of her 'estate' the pathos of Lil's position. But remembering being left with 'Boss' Mary reflects: 'Would to God I were a knitter because in such situations I could knit, or better still crochet' (25). Her desire to evade patriarchal bullying by creating complex stitching re-aligns her with the feminine. 'Thread the needle, thread the needle' intones Mary as she remembers Lil as 'champion at knots and quipus'. Her association of these with 'the crafty old Druid knot, intricate as the Coose snaim' is an attempt to reclaim maternal genealogy and a motherland. Like the narrator in *A Pagan Place* Mary is given a wallet made by her mother, though this is, in keeping with Mary's pragmatism, a 'utilitarian one' (59).

However *Night* goes further than *A Pagan Place* in redressing the balance between patriarchy and matrilineage. This is most apparent in O'Brien's pastiche of *Hamlet*.²⁷ She is not simply acknowledging one more literary father but is establishing the cruciality of the mother to the female psyche, rewriting the Oedipus complex itself. As Irigaray argues in 'The limits of the transference':

²⁷ Or even several; Innes points out that 'the struggle for authority played out between father/son figures is one that recurs almost obsessively in Irish drama and fiction' (Innes, 1993, 48).

The Oedipus complex states the law of the non-return of the daughter to the mother, except in the *doing like [faire comme]* of motherhood. It cuts her off from her beginnings, her conception, her genesis, her birth, her childhood (Whitford, 1991a, 105).

Mary is able to imagine 'her conception' only by aligning herself with her father. Irigaray goes on to argue that woman's 'normal' state is to be:

Divided in two by the oedipus complex ... exiled in the masculine, paternal world.
Wandering, a supplicant in relation to values she could not appropriate for herself
(Whitford, 1991a, 105).

'Exiled' in terms of nationality and gender Mary attempts to 'appropriate for herself' masculine 'values' and constructs. O'Brien signifies this attempt through her own explicit appropriation of Shakespeare's plot. At Lil's funeral, Mary 'make[s] an ape of [her]self' -- she takes herself less seriously than Hamlet -- by 'jump[ing] in' to Lil's grave. The scene's 'ludicrous' rather than 'tragic' aspect, perhaps suggests that patriarchal society takes the girl's loss of her mother less seriously than the boy's loss of his father.²⁸ In Mary's later recounting of the appearance of Lil's ghost, comedy soon gives way to profundity. Lil is 'rouged' and has 'a rosary swinging from her waist; her appearance as an overdressed old woman is less dignified than the ghost of the king. The definition of Lil by her appearance and possessions is softened by Mary's desire 'to put [her] hand out and touch the earlobe ... that just missed being chafed by the rim of gold' (46). Despite Mary's reluctance desire

²⁸ Though it must be acknowledged that O'Brien's employment of farce also indicates the narrator's suppression of extreme emotion.

for the maternal body is finally realised. The male-authored, canonical literary antecedent is acknowledged but feminised:

She arched and tilted and bowed her body so that she fitted exactly into mine, my tumescence and my curves, her tumescence and her curves, and it felt as if we were being welded together, or at least moulded together, like one of her legendary carragheen soufflés in its wetted mould (47).

But this very unity is threatening. As Irigaray argues the mother-daughter relationship is constructed under patriarchy as mutually ‘immobiliz[ing]’ (Irigaray, 1981, 62). Irigaray, like O’Brien, represents this relationship in terms of food: ‘Once more you[mother]’re assimilated into nourishment. We’ve again disappeared into this act of eating each other’ (Irigaray, 1981, 62). There is no language in which Mary can write ‘the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters’ (Whitford, 1991a, 43). Mary can construct her relationship with Lil only in terms of consumption and in relation to a male-authored antecedent (Whitford, 1991a, 107).²⁹ Mary qualifies the realisation of desire by stating that ‘She was not like Hamlet’s father, coming back at the appointed hour to deliver State news or instigate a bit of foul play’. The separation from the mother and the positive construction of female subjectivity which would enable women’s discussion of and involvement in political issues is not permitted. Mary’s ultimate desire to think of Lil ‘with liking’ points to a recognition of the need for balance and separation, but O’Brien is in the end able only to reinforce the

²⁹ The reference to ‘carragheen soufflés’ recalls the ‘appetizing’ maternal body in *A Pagan Place* whilst suggesting the ‘empty everydayness’ to which Lil has been confined (Whitford, 1991a, 107).

message that ‘... the female Oedipus complex is woman’s entry into a system of values that is not hers, and in which she can ‘appear’ and circulate only when enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely, men’ (Whitford, 1991a, 136).

In *A Pagan Place* and *Night* O’Brien’s protagonists fail to see through the ‘process of exorcism’ or realise the ‘redemption’ perceived by Pelan and Pearce (Pelan, 1996, 60; Pearce, 1996, 70). O’Brien discovers that even in its mode of ‘speaking *as* a woman *écriture féminine* operates within the framework of ‘the dominant discourse’ (Whitford, 1991b, 136). O’Brien’s move towards non-fiction in *Mother Ireland* heralds a new attempt at resolving the dilemmas explored but by no means resolved in *A Pagan Place* and *Night*.

Chapter Four

'Ireland has always been a woman': *Mother Ireland* (1976)

In her essay 'Using Memory and Adding Emotion: The (Re)Creation of Experience in the Short Fiction of Edna O'Brien' Maureen L. Grogan makes ingenious use of *Mother Ireland* to highlight the degree of authorial control evident -- as she sees it -- in O'Brien's short stories (Grogan, 1996). Rightly pointing out that '... [O'Brien] has often been accused of a damaging and self-defeating subjectivity' and that: 'There seems to be little consideration of the possibility that the emotional content of her work is a deliberate artistic choice, not simply an uncontrolled eruption of the writer's experience' Grogan goes on to compare episodes from *Mother Ireland* with selected short stories (9). Grogan argues that '... O'Brien, although strongly reliant on the power of personal memory in creating her intense and evocative fiction, does alter, rearrange, and create entirely new stories ...' (13).

Whilst Grogan's argument is highly convincing in itself, the assumption that the short stories reveal '... the deliberately mediating presence of an adult narrator, looking back and reconstructing her experience' whilst *Mother Ireland* simply 'tells it how it was' is reductive and misleading (15). Addressing the issue of 'seeing O'Brien's works as autobiographical' Peggy O'Brien suggests that '... the voice we hear in her interviews is even more fictional than that of her fiction' (O'Brien, 1987, 477). In context this is a comment on the problematics of O'Brien's public persona, but Peggy O'Brien does

implicitly highlight the dangers of treating *Mother Ireland* as 'factual'.¹ Toril Moi -- writing on Simone de Beauvoir -- argues that when looking at the literary and autobiographical texts of a single author 'the point is not to treat one text as the implicit meaning of another, but rather to read them all with and against each other in order to bring out their points of tension, contradictions and similarities' (Moi, 1994, 5). This is the methodology which needs to be used in examining *Mother Ireland* in relation to O'Brien's fiction, especially in the light of Rebecca Pelan's comments on the 'extraordinary level of intertextuality in [O'Brien's] writing'. As Eavan Boland points out: 'The words on the page, though they may appear free and improvised, are on hire. They are owned by a complicated and interwoven past of language, history, happenstance' (Boland, 1996, 103).

Intertextuality is evident in *Mother Ireland* where as Moi puts it 'points of tension, contradictions and similarities' meet. Pelan argues that this is instrumental in creating for the reader 'a recognizable fictional world' which 'turns [Southern Irish] female absence into presence' (Pelan, 1996, 51). Like Boland O'Brien is constructing 'a poignant place ... where the created returns as creator' (Boland, 1996, 217).

Peggy O'Brien's *caveat* about reading O'Brien's non-fiction 'straight' is especially pertinent to *Mother Ireland*, throughout which the narrative voice is carefully edited and revised. In the account of a childhood visit to Killaloe places and events are bypassed as the narrator recalls focusing instead upon a poem, 'the beautiful lament that celebrated the place' and which 'became more a living thing than the actual bypassed landmark'

¹ O'Brien's own comment on the perception of her works as autobiographical is: 'I'd be a goner now if I did everything I wrote' (Carlson, 1990, 73).

(O'Brien, 1976, 40). Later, in 'The books we read,' she highlights even more explicitly the contrast between art -- *East Lynne* -- and life:

Nothing could be further from reality. The topped egg had gone cold in its cup. There was scum on the cocoa, a voice was saying, 'Have you done your exercise?' or 'Get that table cleared' You ... thought all the more wrenchingly of poor Isabel and all she had to bear. Life was so tame beside that (81).

O'Brien's carefully selective realism suggests a sharp awareness of the gap between fiction and 'reality'.² She addresses this subject directly in her subsequent account of a trip to Limerick to see *For Whom the Bell Tolls*:

The film's historic or political significance was cast aside, or never grasped Yet up in Dublin a hundred young men had gone off in blue shirts under the aegis of General O'Duffy to fight for Franco in Spain, but this was in no way related to Hemingway's lachrymose story (83).

Describing her rejection by her first lover the narrator reveals that she 'waited knowing that he was not coming, and yet unable to budge, not out of hope but the better or more excruciatingly to live out the pain of the first conscious jilt'. This experience is immediately translated into 'the first mawkish poem' (140). Indeed the narrator constructs herself throughout *Mother Ireland* in relation to literary heroines, seeing herself arriving in Dublin like 'a heroine who, upon being brought from Munster, faded in the city 'for consumption has no pity for blue eyes and golden hair' (122) and comparing her

² Though as I have indicated in previous chapters *East Lynne*'s subversion of the domestic idyll is pertinent to the 'reality' of family life in southern Ireland.

elopement with that of 'Lord Ullin's daughter' (141).³ This technique not only underscores the romanticism of the adolescent 'Edna', reinforcing the subversion of romantic love in *The Country Girls*; it suggests that *Mother Ireland* is every bit as contrived as the ballads to which it refers. There are further parallels between femininity and literary form. The limited role models suggested by *Mother Ireland's* references to ballad, film, melodrama and religion emphasise the position of southern Irish women as outlined by Rebecca Pelan:

Despite the literary glorification of women ... the reality for many Irish women, particularly those in rural areas, was their systematic removal and exclusion from every aspect of public life, trapping them in a domestic sphere ... Seemingly, then, the response to one colonial regime produced nothing more than a form of social imperialism in which women paid the highest price. In turn, the literary reflection of political goals exacerbated the problem of women's exclusion by implicitly reinforcing their subservience as a counter-response to imperialist stereotyping ... the effect of such a formulation has been disastrous for many Irish women who, denied access to political power, have been subjugated by a literary stereotype which belies the reality of their lives (Pelan, 1996, 51).

In *Mother Ireland* this position is communicated through narrative uncertainty -- is this fiction or autobiography? -- which is in turn engendered by shifts in the narrative voice. The first chapter of *Mother Ireland* opens in third person narrative. The apparent detachment of this is scarcely disrupted by a shift to the second person in an early

³ This reference not only recalls the recurrent references to 'Lord Ullin's Daughter' in *The Country Girls* trilogy but also underscores the construction of the female author through 'literary fathers' and their fictions.

description of Tara, which seems simply less formal than 'one' ('You pass a tea house ...') (15). O'Brien's use of the second person later becomes more ambiguous: 'Romantic Ireland, quite dead, you say, when you are sitting down to high tea in Athlone, imploded with drop scones, apple pie and soda bread. It is here you recall that the brown Bull of Ulster gored the White Bull of Connaught ...' (33). Here, 'you' could refer *Pagan Place* style to the narrator herself, rather than to a projected tourist. By the end of the chapter 'you' refers unequivocally to the narrator and her experience of being Irish:

You are Irish you say lightly and behind you is all that plus the jargon about the proud melodious swans and the belling of the stag plus the tendency to be swamped in melancholy and loss.

Suddenly you must get away.

You are Irish you say lightly, and allocated to you are the tendencies to be wild, wanton, drunk, superstitious, unreliable, backward, toadying and prone to fits ... (36).

This 'you' immediately gives way to the text's first instance of first person narrative (37). From this point on, the narrative of *Mother Ireland* shifts between first and second person narrative, 'one' (42-43), and 'travelogue'.

These shifts question not only whether *Mother Ireland* is autobiography, fiction, or travelogue, but whether O'Brien or Ireland 'her'self is the subject. In recognition of this ambiguity I refer throughout this chapter to 'the narrator' or 'Edna' -- keeping the inverted commas -- to distinguish the various 'I's and 'you's of the text from O'Brien herself. The title of the first chapter, 'The land itself', implies along with '*Mother Ireland*'

that this is going to be a book about -- a biography of -- a country. Indeed, 'The Country itself' features in O'Brien's acknowledgements. Yet O'Brien's own story is interwoven with travelogue and legend, so that she is implicitly identified throughout *Mother Ireland* with Irish landscape and history. Peggy O'Brien argues somewhat irritably that O'Brien 'aligns her own persona with the great women of Ireland's past' (O'Brien, 1987, 475). This suggests not so much egocentrism as a desire to resolve the issues of Irishness and femininity previously addressed in *A Pagan Place* and *Night*. In feminising and maternalizing Ireland as a raped and pillaged female, O'Brien herself constructs the place as representative of women in general and of Irish women in particular. In this sense *Mother Ireland* becomes significantly more than a yardstick by which to measure authorial control.

In the conclusion to Chapter 3 I suggested that the production of *Night* did not facilitate the realisation of 'another writing', since even *écriture féminine* must operate, as Irigaray puts it, within 'the dominant discourse' (Whitford, 1991, 136). I argued further that O'Brien's move towards non-fiction in *Mother Ireland* indicates a further attempt to resolve the dilemmas associated with Irishness, femininity and the mother-daughter relationship. In the (inconclusive) conclusion to *Mother Ireland* O'Brien suggests that 'We leave [Ireland] because we dread the psychological choke' (144). James Haule has examined O'Brien's notion of 'the psychological choke' from a psychoanalytic point of view, backgrounded by Irish culture and politics:

The child [in O'Brien's fiction] instinctively desires what the adult, in Ireland or in exile, more fully understands to be a useless longing: the desire to be her own

mother ... it is mothering throughout O'Brien's work that condemns the women of Ireland to the support of a social and moral order that is hopelessly destructive. In O'Brien's Ireland, this order is the product of a mediaeval repression that focuses on reproduction in general and motherhood in particular ... (Haule, 1987, 217).

Though Haule rightly identifies connections between exile from Ireland and separation from the mother he stops short of identifying 'mediaeval repression' -- and constructions of 'mothering' in particular -- as specifically patriarchal. As I suggested in Chapter 1 'Kate's voluntary sterilization in *Girls in their Married Bliss* can be read as an attempt to evade patriarchal constructs of femininity, and especially of maternity. O'Brien's ongoing quest is for a female place and identity which has not been constructed by or in relation to the masculine.

O'Brien herself acknowledges that what Haule identifies as 'mediaeval repression' has its consequences for men as well as women.⁴ In *Mother Ireland* the narrator reflects that her first love relationship might have been different 'had he not been born with the same set of warped incantation'. This speculation is, however, qualified by the recognition that '... men had more bravado than women'; 'warped incantation' does not have 'the same' effect on men and women (140).

'Warped incantation' is certainly seen to affect male and female writers differently. In *Mother Ireland* as in *A Pagan Place* and *Night* the lack of a literary matrilineage is made clear. The epigraph to *Mother Ireland* is a quote from Beckett's *Malone Dies*: 'Let me say before I go further that I forgive nobody'. It is significant that O'Brien needs to

⁴ This acknowledgement is anticipated by the insights offered into the psyches of Frank in *Girls in their Married Bliss* and Tom in *Casualties of Peace*.

employ a male writer, to express an anger which she posits as gender-neutral in the assertion that: 'Irish people do not like to be contradicted. Foiled again and again they have in them a rage that comes at you unawares like a briar jutting out of a hedge' (33). This 'rage' does anticipate O'Brien's own specifically feminine 'quarrel with Ireland' (143).

O'Brien's generalisations about the contemporary Irish are not overtly gender specific. Observing that 'there are those who cannot forget the past and there are those only too eager to forget it and bury it in one of the much sanctified deep freezes' she goes on to identify 'a cultural atrophy that goes all the way to the brain' (33). 'The new poems and plays', argues O'Brien, 'are few indeed and represent either small voices that are sad with their own alienation, or works of such tastelessness that they are indexes of the mass psyche of a people who are throttled'. Cultural 'deep freeze' is perhaps a result of being caught between polarities; past and present, sadness and 'tastelessness', and contradictory responses to literature⁵. But women caught between 'colonial regime' and 'social imperialism' are particularly vulnerable to what Cheryl Herr terms 'stilling' (Pelan, 1996, 51; Herr, 1990, 7). I have already cited Herr's argument that 'various forms of doubling are frequently put forward as somehow intrinsic to Irishness' and that 'what keeps Ireland keyed into the photographic dimension in most of its cultural registers' is 'the neutralization of the body in [its] island culture' (5-6). Herr goes on to explain that:

Ireland has literally eroded, in the sphere of representations that constitute social identity, a comfortable sense of the body; in traditional as well as in colonial and

⁵ O'Brien refers specifically to 'revere[nce]' for literature and 'the banning of books' (39).

postcolonial Ireland, the body has frequently been associated representationally with danger and scrutinized with an intensity that *stills* (photographically) (Herr, 1990, 6-7).

'Stilling' is seen by Herr as an attempt to suppress 'the arkhein', a 'conceptual space' which for Herr embraces Kristeva's 'abject' and Irigaray's 'two lips'. As Herr points out, ~~these~~ are 'woman-identified' (8). Though Herr does go on to 'suggest that the projected category [arkhein] be taken as a fluidly ungendered alternative to the symbolic as we know it', she concedes that 'frames of reference' such as 'Kathleen ni Houlihan', 'Queen Medb' and 'the formidably misunderstood Irish Mother' are necessary signs of 'Irish resistance to achieving cultural identity in the terms that those outside of Irish society often deem necessary' (8). Such constructs, however, sanction and exacerbate the 'stiling' of women between two patriarchies. In the light of O'Brien's representations of women in *Mother Ireland* it is interesting that Irigaray identifies 'stiling' as a condition of the mother-daughter relationship under patriarchy. Irigaray argues that the lack of symbolic representation of the mother-daughter relationship prohibits separation.⁶ Though not specific to Irishness, Irigaray's references to 'stiling', termed 'paralysis' in 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other', are pertinent to *Mother Ireland*. 'You [mother] flowed into me, and that hot liquid became poison, paralyzing me' writes Irigaray, going on to refer to the 'immobilized body' and declaring: 'I became a statue' (Irigaray, 1981, 60-64). In 'Woman-Mothers, The Silent Substratum of the Social Order' Irigaray puts a more positive construct on cultural 'stiling', arguing that: '... there is a revolutionary potential

⁶ It is significant that Herr includes Irigaray's 'two lips' symbol in her account of the suppressed arkhein.

in hysteria. Even in her paralysis, the hysteric exhibits a potential for gestures and desires ...' (Whitford, 1991a, 47).

In *Mother Ireland* contradictory responses to and 'revolutionary potential' in cultural 'stilling' are expressed through shifts in the narrative. The following passage seems to be addressed to a projected second person:

Romantic Ireland, quite dead, you say, when you are sitting down to high tea in Athlone, imploded with drop scones, apple pie and soda bread. It is here that you recall that the Brown Bull of Ulster gored the White Bull of Connaught ... (33).

Similarly:

The cathedral was there, the rampart walls, and as in every Irish town toasted sandwiches from the infra grill.

It is no accident that 'Romantic Ireland' is superseded by images of consumption, or that O'Brien's projected tourist is 'imploded' with 'high tea'. food as represented in *Mother Ireland* becomes the focus of resentment of the reduction of the mother-daughter relationship to 'consuming and being consumed' (Irigaray, 1981, 61). Consumption is further integral to the relationship between coloniser and colonized, and to Irish women subjected to 'social imperialism'; 'starved,' as Edna Longley puts it, 'between patriarchies like Unionism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Nationalism' (Longley, 1990, 3).

O'Brien's 'Romantic Ireland' is a largely colonial construct of which she makes tongue-in-cheek use in her analysis of what it means to be Irish. The interdependence of positive and negative constructs of Irishness, which exemplifies the 'doubling' identified by Herr, is underlined by O'Brien's judicious repetition of 'You are Irish you say lightly

...'. 'Lightly' is implicitly contrasted with the 'weight' of Irish identity and its attendant baggage. In 'The classroom' O'Brien recounts 'daily inculcations of history, so immediate, so heart-rending and so riveting that it was possible to conceive of Sarsfield, Shane O'Neill and Bold Robert Emmet, and Sarah Curran his sweetheart as characters who might step out of the pages and into the room' (68). Yet pride in Irish nationalism is offset by O'Brien's reference in 'My Home Town' to 'a highly strung woman' whose family exhibit the schizophrenia peculiar to the colonized caught between colonialism and 'social imperialism'. Her 'father had brandished a Union Jack the day the Anglo-Irish treaty was signed and [her] children went mad periodically (45). O'Brien goes on to redress the balance by undermining colonial constructs of Irishness, pointing out that the inhabitants of her own native town were 'not at all like the image of them propagated abroad, as being full of bluff and yarn and blarney' (43). But for the exile it is not only colonial constructs of Ireland which are problematic. O'Brien records what it is to be:

Uneasy with the outsiders who expect their version of you to manifest -- jolly witty roistering, even more uneasy with the natives who want you or anyone to lift them corporally out of their mire and desperation and bring them straight to heaven in a chariot (38).

Exile does, however, help to keep the construct of 'romantic Ireland' alive and well:

You are Irish you say lightly and you walk the London streets at four and think of how Yeats predicted such a thing and walking the streets you have no trouble at all in re-invoking the wind that shakes the barley (38).

This passage, recalling Mary Hooligan's London-centred dreams of 'dark Rosaleen' in *Night*, shows once more the power of the 'literary father'. It is at the point of reference to exile that the issue of femininity begins to assert itself. Mary Jacobus cites Jane Gallop's argument that "*nostalgie*", in its French form, is primarily defined as (1) having regret for one's native land, or homesickness; and (2) melancholy regret, or unsatisfied desire'. But Jacobus acknowledges this as a feminist response to 'Freudian theory [which] says that this perception of loss on the part of the girl is perceived loss of the phallus ...' (Jacobus, 1995, 19). In the light of these responses it is significant that O'Brien is forced to express her sense of exile from the mother/country through the discourses of male authorship. As in *A Pagan Place* the necessity for reliance on male literary antecedents is apparent not only in O'Brien's self-definition in relation to Yeats but in her acknowledgement that she has been defined by Joyce long before reading his work, or writing her own:

Christmas was three Masses in one day and a Christmas dinner, and long before -- but you did not know it -- Christmas for James Joyce was the plum pudding and the brandy butter, and the happiness of a dinner table disrupted because one woman was religious and raged against Parnell the adulterer, taking issue with a guest (74).

In 'Dublin's Fair City' the narrator recounts her visit 'to Finn's Hotel -- where Nora Barnacle had been a chambermaid when James Joyce was courting her -- looking vaguely for the dining room where my parents had celebrated their wedding breakfast' (137-138). This revelation seems deliberately to align the female histories of O'Brien and Barnacle. O'Brien as an emergent woman writer is unable to avoid construction by the masculine:

I had entered a literary competition and was eager to know if I had won. Men stopped me on the stairs to say 'Laudamus te' and come to the tavern. One said he hoped I was not called Sheila or Oona or Moura or anything Ballyhooley like that (138).

It is not difficult to identify the source of Eugene and his dismissal in *Girl with Green Eyes* of Caithleen's name as 'too Kiltartan'. More interesting, though, is the apparent effect of such domination on authorial perceptions of Ireland. The male-constructed narrator is left ultimately with male constructs of the mother country. O'Brien asserts that '[Ireland] is a state of mind as well as an actual country', but *whose* 'state of mind' (144)? Whose 'actual country'? From the perspective of England, where 'the pigeons look man-made' and where the faces of the natives conjure up 'murder stories ... in the Sunday papers' (142), 'romantic Ireland' can reassert itself, becoming for the narrator:

... moments of its history, and its geography, a few people who embody its strange quality, the features of a face, a holler, a line from a Synge play, the whiff of night air, but Ireland insubstantial like the goddesses poets dream of, who lead them down into strange circles (144).

But still Ireland is male-constructed, this time as poet's muse. The 'dream' is not O'Brien's own. As Irigaray asks of her life prior to her engendering of a new symbolic: 'Was I a participant, or was I the dream itself -- another's dream, a dream about another?' (Irigaray, 1981, 61). Mary Jacobus -- responding to Freud's argument that: 'Whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: "this place is familiar to me, I've been here before"', we may interpret the place as being his

mother's genitals or her body' -- asks '... in what mythic place could we at once re-find the maternal body and re-member ourselves?' Jacobus goes on to call for the establishment of 'a feminist myth of origins whose function ... is to "re-member us"' (Jacobus, 1995, 1-2). For O'Brien, too, it is necessary to revise and reappropriate male myths of mother/country. I shall now go on to examine O'Brien's attempts to (re)establish a feminine -- rather than a feminised -- Ireland through references to femininity, religion, the mother-daughter relationship and 'Mother Ireland' 'her' self.

It is not easy to separate these issues in *Mother Ireland*. Throughout O'Brien's narrative they are intrinsically though not always explicitly linked. In 'The classroom', for example, the thoughts and recollections on a single page encompass Irishness, mother, Ireland and religion (66). Recalling the peat fire in the schoolroom O'Brien reflects that: 'Turf can get into one's head, making thoughts brown and sodden and flaky as the stuff itself'. This is an apt metaphor for Irishness, suggesting the insidious psychological effects of a country whose very surface is excavated and consumed by fire. O'Brien goes on to record the details of her 'best jumper', knitted from a 'prize pattern' in 'beautiful waves of colour' and worn 'Sundays, Holy Days and the days inspectors came'. Wearing the jumper -- 'stitched' perhaps by her mother and certainly associated with home -- she is asked by the inspectors to tell 'the miracle of the loaves and fishes'. This leads in turn to visualisation of the miracle:

The fishes in your imagination were flesh pink, medium sized like dab, and the loaves were white like altar breads, only fatter and spongier. The place where the

miracle occurred was green and leafy and not at all like the sparse sanded land that you were later to see.

The Holy Land of the child's imagination is Ireland, the 'green and leafy place' a 'pagan' one.

As in *A Pagan Place*, religion is seen to shape the narrator's femininity and eroticism.

The resultant contradictions are apparent in O'Brien's references to local productions of *Dracula*:

You dreamed of going with him, visualised the encounter backstage where he would at first rebuff you and then be melted by your offers to pack his trunk, be his stand-in maiden on whom he rehearsed the procedure of blood-sucking. Yes *Dracula* and you would go away and you would revive the saintly side of him (45).

This fantasy, owing more to romance fiction than to Stoker, ostensibly renders the devil safe. Yet in the light of Seamus Deane's post-colonial reading of *Dracula* the narrator's response is revealing. Deane argues that:

Gothic fiction is devoted to the question of ownership, wills, testaments, hauntings of places formerly owned, and, in its most commercially successful manifestation, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), to the story of an absentee landlord ... (Deane, 1997, 89).

The *Mother Ireland* narrator's dream of 'be[ing *Dracula*'s] stand-in maiden on whom he rehearsed the procedure of blood-sucking' suggests a willingness to collude with patriarchal and colonial oppressors which echoes the relationships represented in O'Brien's fiction. Deane's reminder that 'Gothic fiction is devoted to the question of

ownership' is relevant not only to the patterns of consumption examined in *Mother Ireland* but to the relationships between, for example, Kate and Eugene, Willa and Herod. It is significant that Kate envisages herself and the sepulchral, vampiric Eugene patching up their marriage in a Gothic house.

The narrator's desire 'to revive the saintly side of [Dracula]' conforms specifically to constructs of 'saintly' and self-sacrificing femininity. Deane has pointed out the conservatism of *Dracula's* ending and its reiteration of family values within a nationalist context, arguing that Mina's concluding speech on marriage shows that: 'Politically, the family is ... the embodiment of the nation and the national values, and it speaks the nation without flaw' (Deane, 1997, 94). Even in her attempt to escape definition by patriarchal Ireland through self-sacrifice to the vampiric landlord the *Mother Ireland* narrator is reminded of the necessity for self-sacrifice to the family. Searching for 'Dracula' at the actor's lodgings she is shocked to find 'children crying, some sort of meal in progress, and the actor in his shirt sleeves, looking at me with the most amazed, most irritated countenance, saying 'Scram', and then 'How did you get here?'' The narrator goes on to reveal: 'Yet that night he was the possessed Dracula, and the dark room and the wan woman with the metal curlers, and the squalling children made no indent at all' (95). Like *Dracula* itself, *Mother Ireland* is a text in which 'oppositions are multiple and glaring' (Deane, 1997, 90-91).

The *Dracula* account highlights not only the inescapability of family and nation but -- related to this -- the dangers and contradictions of romantic love, itself a social construct and convenience. Through melodrama romantic love is made attractive and accessible in

comparison to 'lofty' Shakespeare (94). The child 'Edna' is as yet unable to revise Shakespeare as Mary Hooligan does in *Night*. Denied access to the father of the literary canon, she makes do with romance. The pervasive influence of romance fiction is acknowledged in Chapter 4, 'The books we read', which opens with an account of how 'not many books were in circulation' but 'two or three or four dog-eared volumes were passed around, loaned page by page, endlessly devoured by the women and endlessly debated over' (77). Asking the questions: 'Did he love her? Was she jealous of his governess? Was there a curse on the estate?' and -- revealingly -- 'Was the broken mirror the significant factor?' the consumers find comfort in the formula: 'Always the 'Via Dolorosa' until the excruciatingly happy ending, until the miracle of everlasting love occurred' (80). Romance fiction informs the narrator's accession to womanhood:

One looked in the bone-backed hand mirror either before, during, or after one of these heady bouts to ascertain if some change had been wrought in one. Was one beautiful? The stuff of a heroine? ... Should one change one's name to Lydia? Beauty was of paramount importance. It decided one's fate, one's future ... (80).

The dangers of the romance myth, here attendant in the construction of self according to fiction, are further explored through O'Brien's accounts of local women. There are spinsters who 'missed out' altogether; O'Brien asks: 'How did they survive it -- those long years, from meal to meal, from Sunday to Sunday, their lives as static as the aspidistra in the occasional first-floor middle window?' (46). There is the schoolteacher who, after a frustrating courtship with 'a bachelor from up the country', 'die[s] young, in the hospital named after St Jude the patron of hopeless cases.' Her legacy is sadly feminine: 'She is

remembered for having introduced piped icing, little scalloped roses and carageen soufflés, into a bastion doggedly committed to potatoes and bacon and cabbage' (47).⁷ Lizbeth Goodman has identified '... a certain intimacy and understanding [which] develops between women (within stories and between female authors and readers) -- a shared sense of the intimacy of everyday items and events, the clues to "the meaning of life" to be gleaned from small things' (Goodman, 1996, 164). But in *Mother Ireland* 'intimacy and understanding ... between women' is of little use in the face of 'social imperialism'.

As in *The Country Girls*, O'Brien is quick to identify the uselessness of accoutrements such as 'little scalloped roses'. O'Brien clearly exposes the underside of 'romance':

Courtships were desperate affairs conducted in bogs and mires, eked out in the secrecy of wet hedges. And were they inarticulate affairs apart from the body's noises, apart from the grunts? (47).

Here, purity is suggested not by the lily of *A Pagan Place*, but by the trivial niceties of 'piped icing' and 'little scalloped roses'. It remains, however, firmly rooted in the bog. When 'Teddy the Protestant' decides to marry he goes '... to the next county to 'vet' three girls for his future bride'.⁸ Again, romance is unequivocally juxtaposed with 'the market'. In 'The books we read' O'Brien sends up the Cinderella myth, recalling that 'sex the forbidden fruit was the glass coach in which to do a flit' (81). This recalls the naivety of Caitheleen/Kate, whose faith in romantic love remains constant throughout *The Country Girls* trilogy. In *Mother Ireland* O'Brien exposure of the 'glass coach' as myth is even

⁷ In the light of the way in which Mary and her mother Lil are 'moulded together like one of her legendary carrageen soufflés in its wetted mould' the teacher's soufflés do suggest a suppressed maternal imaginary (O'Brien, 1974, 47).

⁸ The analogy of heterosexual relationships and cattle markets recurs throughout O'Brien's fiction from *The Country Girls* trilogy to *Down by the River*.

more explicit than in *The Country Girls*. For example, the child's expectation that 'love would do miracles' (65) is rapidly offset by an account of a visiting nurse's miscarriage or abortion:

The lady nurse went down to the closets and stayed there for an age and afterwards the floors -- all three tiled floors -- and the main murky passageway were running with blood, a veritable river of it (65).

O'Brien conveys simultaneously the child's confusion -- 'Why was that? What had happened?' -- and sense that this event is somehow linked to the nurse's subsequent departure ('paler now') for the city with the doctor whose 'escort' she is (66).

Mother Ireland further echoes *A Pagan Place* in its reiteration of male domination of landscape. Like the yard marked by 'gunnels of [the mother's] blood', the closets 'running with [the nurse's] blood' remain officially unacknowledged, but in 'My home town', O'Brien recounts the death of a man who 'had driven into a telegraph pole, in his car' and who subsequently 'had a hurley field named after him'. Unlike Maureen Grogan I do not intend to compare narratives as 'fiction' and 'autobiography'; for me, it is the gender implications of the story, in whatever context, which are of interest. Because *Mother Ireland* touches on myth and history in 'The land itself' and in later accounts of lessons at school, O'Brien is able to contextualise the naming of the hurley field, pointing out, for example, that:

Lough Dearg Deirc -- the Lake of the King of the Red Eye, [was] so named because an unreasonable grasping bard had asked the King of Thomand for an eye,

whereupon the king plucked out his own, gave it over, went down to the lake to wash, but his socket bled until the lake was not water but human blood (69).

The 'his'tory communicated in the classroom helps to set up the girl pupils for failure: 'One would suddenly be asked the meaning of a word, a difficult word and, as the lady teacher said, one never came up to expectations, one failed, missed, miscarried, disappointed' (64). Girls are exiled from language. As Irigaray argues '... their words [*leur parole*] are not heard' and, whilst '[men] have access to the truth' women 'scarcely have access to fiction' (Whitford, 1991a, 35). Female achievement must be measured in relation to the body and its functions. To fail is to 'miscarry' like the nurse. The alignment of femaleness with failure is compounded by the teacher's recitation:

In the lexicon of youth which faith reserves

For a bright manhood, there is no such word as failed.

The assumption that it is the fate of 'womanhood' to disappoint is reinforced by the differences in the girls' and boys' teachers. Whilst the woman teacher is apparently 'highly strung', throwing things one minute and spoiling the children with cake and toffees the next, the mood swings of her male counterpart achieve the status of high drama:

When the boy's master got into a tear it was bedlam for everyone. He roared and shouted and any adjacent boy was in danger of having his brains bashed out, onto the desk It was a constant threat like living close to Mount Vesuvius (67).

At the end of the school day the girls' teacher is left '... suddenly quiet, opaque, staring, possibly wondering what she might do for the remainder of the day without the annoyance

and the companionship of us' (72). She embodies the passivity demanded of, yet condemned in, her female charges.

The conflicts engendered in the girl manifest themselves most clearly through her responses to men. As in *A Pagan Place* the adult narrator recalls that: 'Even on the best days, with the sun shining, ... a sort of terror lurked' (74). This terror is male-generated: 'Might the men undo their breeches ...'. Despite the narrator's attempt to shift the focus of her 'terror' -- she transfers the 'gruesome murders' of her imagination to 'Pagan London. Pagan England' (76) -- it is firmly rooted in her home. This is dominated by a father who like the *Pagan Place* patriarch manages to turn shaving into an act of aggression: 'There was only the shaving mirror positioned between two windows, the scene of many a tirade on Sunday mornings when my father got into a tantrum before going to Mass'(77). Contrasting literary heroes with the men of her acquaintance the narrator recalls that: 'At any rate drink was the national sport and men were always stumbling through doorways or relieving themselves against a wall or inside the pub singing and calling for more' (97). This can be seen as yet another manifestation of what Pelan terms 'social imperialism'. Pelan cites Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford's suggestion that 'the native response to [nineteenth century] British "feminization" of Ireland was an inversion of the stereotype so that Irish masculinity was emphasized, producing ... "hyper-masculinity"' (Pelan, 1996, 50). In *Mother Ireland* the narrator and her mother, faced with drunken brutes marking their territory, focus their charms on a 'young priest':

How we fussed over him, wheeling the tea trolley to the edge of the step, getting a second cushion for his back, asking if he liked milk first, calling him 'Father,

Father' and later plying him with fruit cake, marble cake, and a slice of cold lemon meringue pie (78).

O'Brien goes on to reveal that:

If there is such a thing as the birth of maternal instinct I discovered it that day wanting to do everything for him, even dreaming of washing his feet. I thought of Mary Magdalen and her ointment (78).

O'Brien is right to question the 'birth' of 'maternal instinct' since she suggests throughout *Mother Ireland* that versions of femininity, including motherhood, are constructs rather than 'natural' states. It is significant that whilst in *A Pagan Place* 'Mary Magdalen' is the priest's fantasy, in *Mother Ireland* she is the girl's role model. Again, sexuality and religion are intertwined; the 'white veil' which the narrator feels she is 'already wearing' whilst reading her romances and watching melodramas may as well be that of a 'bride of Christ', who is no less nebulous than any other projected groom (82).

Chapter 5, 'A convent', does indeed recount the narrator's fleeting desire to be a nun. In Chapter 3 I argued that the convent in *A Pagan Place* as an apparently woman-centred environment seems initially to offer an escape from patriarchal culture, but is ultimately, as Innes points out, governed by paternal law, 'subject to the authority of any Father, or priest' (Innes, 1993, 40). Maureen Grogan specifically compares 'A Convent' with *A Pagan Place* in terms of 'Edna's' and the *Pagan Place* narrator's 'callings' (Grogan, 1996, 13-16). Again I do not intend to use comparison between the texts to try to establish narrative 'truths', but rather to examine common themes. In *Mother Ireland* the woman-centredness of the convent is explicitly delineated. 'The land itself' redresses the

balance of constructs of Ireland 'told and fabricated by men ... who described the violation of her body and soul' (11) with the following account:

Around 1860, a nun of a contemplative order in County Kerry spent her time compiling her country's history as an incitement to Irishmen and Irishwomen in America to remind them of their noble and glorious annals ... She felt that a patriot heart might burn just as ardently beneath the veil as beneath the coif! (12).

Although in the absence of a female role model the nun 'cite[s as an] example' 'a friar, who in the 1600s worked on *The Annals of the Four Masters* to set down the history of his sorrowful race', her own contribution to writing history is at least acknowledged. Similarly the emphasis is shifted from the male dominance of pre-Christian religion suggested in *A Pagan Place*. In *Mother Ireland* O'Brien chooses to reveal that 'The Druids, versed in magic and wizardry, were called the Tuatha de Danann, being under the reign of the magic goddess Dana' (13). Herr reveals that 'people ... have consistently overlaid onto the cairns [associated with the goddess] their own meanings, assigning to them a powerful charge and imagining them as having been the dwellings of female-identified supernatural beings such as the Tuatha De Danaan' (Herr, 1990, 27). Herr goes on to acknowledge the claim that 'the cairns and their decorations [are] evidence for widespread European worship of a primary goddess ... and for a corresponding social register of matriarchal power' (27).⁹

At the beginning of 'A convent' the narrator has not yet been seduced by its apparently woman-centred atmosphere. She is simply being sent away to school, where 'To go

⁹ This is relevant to the *Pagan Place* narrator's attempts to reclaim the druidic site for the feminine.

through the gateway and then hear the hasp being shut by the stooped gatekeeper [is] to take a step from which one could not retreat for five long years' (99). This suggests the price which must be paid for an escape from patriarchy. Furthermore, the 'world of women' is defined in relation to the 'lovely priest, lost to us in his beautiful vestments and his mysterious Latin' (99 -100). Yet there are compensations: 'To see a nun's face was as wicked and as bewitching as Keats felt when he saw the ungloved hand of the woman he loved as she walked over Vauxhall Bridge'. The convent offers 'the ripest of orchards' (101) in contrast to that of the narrator's father, which is 'in ruin, trees diseased and bent over, nettles clambering between the piles of rubbish dumped over the years' (48). The convent orchard is interesting in the light of Maud Ellman's argument that '...if eating is the route to knowledge, as the story of Genesis implies, is it possible that anorexia bespeaks a *flight from knowledge* masquerading as a flight from food?' (Ellman, 1993, 43). Edna Longley has suggested in response to Paul Muldoon's question of 'whether Ireland should be symbolized ... by the disease anorexia' that the disease 'should, rather, personify Irish women themselves', 'starved and repressed by patriarchies' (Longley, 1990, 3). The convent seems on the face of it to offer 'knowledge', an education independent of 'bright manhood'. The school play, an occasion of 'home rule for all', offers the narrator a chance to play Julius Caesar. Shakespeare is appropriated by and adapted to female 'home rule'. But this is not an alternative to an outside world in which women are 'starved and repressed by patriarchies', left, as it were, with the diseased trees of the father's orchard. In the convent as well as in the outside world 'almost everything [is a sin]' (43). Girls who cross their legs are told that 'Our Lady blushes whenever a

woman does such an indecent thing' (52). 'Shame', 'spiritual food' and 'the glandular desperation' of prayers' are closely intertwined (42). Irigaray argues that '... the image of the virgin goddess [is] born of the father and obedient to his law in forsaking the mother' (Whitford, 1991a, 37). The schoolgirls' response to the nuns is expressed in terms of a Keatsian 'male gaze' (101). Yet paternal law cannot eradicate the body; prayers are born of 'glandular desperation'. The nuns are not spiritually mentors, but 'the next instalments of parents', and 'spiritual food' continues to be as unnourishing as the 'tears that were as thick as glycerine' shed by the narrator on deciding to become a nun (102). In her quest for 'spiritual food' the narrator develops an ambivalent attitude towards bodily nourishment, assuming with her vocation the 'duty' of 'deny[ing her]self jam on Sunday'.¹⁰ O'Brien's juxtapositioning of recollections implies connections between spirituality, food and sex.¹¹ In 'The books we read' she describes:

... the fourteen stations of the cross depicting the route to Calvary, occupying both main walls [of the chapel], pictures as vivid as the bowl of pig's blood that they made the puddings from (p. 84).

In this passage the blood of Christ is explicitly associated with earthly food, specifically the somewhat scrotal puddings. Similarly in 'A convent' the narrator, recalling the head nun's Saturday night bulletins of 'something of moral, religious or political import', lists apparently unrelated reports of 'poor Poland' -- 'sister of dear Ireland ... suffering from faith and fatherland' -- and a 'bacon shortage' in Europe, followed by a lurid account of 'how new writers were arch hands at depicting immodesty ...' (103). In an environment in

¹⁰ The jam itself is a compound of 'thin watery rhubarb' but it is still a treat (104).

¹¹ In *The High Road* and *Down by the River* jam will be associated specifically with lesbian sex.

which 'girls f[a]ll in love with girls' food becomes erotically charged (104). Frightened into going 'to bed with legs sealed, hands clenched, [and] armpits so close that not even a little flea could crawl in there' (103), the narrator retains a capacity for illicit pleasure:

Sometimes slices of cake, a biscuit or a cherry might be covertly passed to one in the dark, and the pleasure of eating it was not a little mitigated by the realisation of the sin that was being committed ... (104).

Food for the narrator is specifically associated with a 'favourite nun' who saves jam tarts for her, and whose presence is implicitly associated with other repressed oral pleasures.

I used to look at [her] and speculate on how much or how little a crop of hair was concealed beneath her guimpe and most improperly fell to thinking of what I had read about smoker's fur and how to ascertain if one had it ... If her hair grew again it would be like a little thatch of fur (104-105).

Irigaray argues that in a culture in which 'the mother has become a devouring monster as an inverted effect of the blind consumption of the mother', 'what is known ... as orality' cannot be quantified, although 'there is no reason why either the hunger of a child or the sexual appetite of a woman should be insatiable' (Whitford, 1991a, 40). Outlawed, these desires become 'an abyss'. The *Mother Ireland* narrator, as yet innocent of smoking and sex, is attracted by the idea of 'stain'. Yet her desires have no outlet other than her self-conscious relationship with the nun, and their conflicting desires are signified by their Christmas presents to each other. The narrator gives 'a quarter-pound box of chocolates with two dancing kingfishers on the lid' whilst her love object gives in return 'a little illuminated card with serrated edges in which she predicted my future role as bride of

Christ'. Post-*Country Girls*, the chocolates anticipate the narrator's inevitable disappointment with this particular love relationship. The narrator tries to redress (to paraphrase Longley) the starvation and repression of Irishwomen under patriarchies, offering food and *jouissance* -- 'dancing kingfishers'. The nun redirects her towards the patriarchally constructed image of the virgin goddess. Sexual tension is safely defused by the nun's action -- 'Then she tickled my toes and we laughed...' -- and by a timely 'return to the natural world' (106). Yet this seems in turn to be artificially constructed. O'Brien's pathetic fallacy -- 'The very hills seemed to breathe' -- leads into a consciously fictional account:

There was the holly with the berries just as in a happy Christmas story, there were the winter branches flushed with a promise of life, and Robin Redbreast going from hawthorn branch to blackthorn branch, to sapling to huge winter tree, chirping and not chirping ... and soon there would be the icing on the cake and the frail little mirrors of ice in a puddle ...

Christmas is already being constructed as something to take back to school:

Somehow one knew that at Christmas one would smoke, go to one's first all-night dance, spin round in waltz or palais glide and go back to the convent with a secret to be shared with Lydia, the girl with the creamy neck and a long mane of hair which she sometimes held in a coil and slapped you with, as if it were a switch (106).

In 'The books we read' the narrator recalls wondering 'Should one change one's name to Lydia?' (80). 'The girl with the creamy neck' is linked to dancing -- which as O'Brien

recalls 'disturbed the body' (65) -- and smoking, which is in turn analogised with lesbian sex. All this is for her. Desire for Lydia herself is associated with punishment; her hair serves, not like Mary Magdalen's to anoint, but to 'slap'. In the face of the narrator's awakening sexuality 'Our Lady' loses her allure:

I looked at one of the many pictures of the Virgin Mary along the wall and realised that she no longer spoke to me as she used to when I was a child. The visions were waning (107).

Rejection of the Virgin signifies the narrator's choice of role model. Dismissing an 'image ... born of the father' she chooses 'femininity', wearing 'garters', 'seamed stockings' and 'blue long-legged satin knickers' for a date with a 'fumbl[ing]' 'love swain'. Frustrated by her lack of response, he asks 'Why wear such knickers, ... why such provocation'. The girl, admitting her confusion, once again channels her sexuality through food, 'demand[ing] peaches' on her return home: '...only these sliding down my throat would satisfy my yearning' (107). It is significant that the peaches are tinned; this emphasises their commodity status and the reduction of women under patriarchy to 'consuming and being consumed' (Irigaray, 1981, 62). As such, they could represent the denial of *jouissance* under patriarchy. Significantly the peaches themselves feature among the mother's accoutrements of femininity: 'They had been there for years, an heirloom, they were not for human consumption, they were ornaments to be proud of like the good cups or the good glasses or the plaster of paris ladies'. In retrospect Emma's prized peaches in *A Pagan Place* signify her own dual status as 'ornament' and object for consumption.

Having opted for 'femininity' the girl in *Mother Ireland* begins to amass her own props. Deciding not to be a nun she begins to model herself on an alternative construct, that of 'film star', acquiring 'a perm in [her] hair ... an accordion pleated skirt ... high heels, perfume and fur-backed gloves' (108). This is seen as a rejection specifically of the *Irish* feminine ideal: 'I distinctly heard W.B. Yeats calling to me ... But I turned a deaf ear'. The narrator is caught between the Irish and the Anglo-American -- 'The lure of the darksome wood and the hazelnut grove were giving way to a craving for glitter' (121) -- and concurrently between the roles of 'scholar' and 'adventuress'. With her 'head full of fancy' (122) she constructs herself in relation to Irish heroines such as the maid from Munster and later Lord Ullin's daughter (141), remaining ignorant of Maud Gonne, to whom she might have 'said some little ditty' (123). It is significant, however, that it is Yeats' description of 'Maud Gonne's passage through those streets [of Dublin]' of which the narrator professes to have been ignorant. Romance is undercut by sexual realism. The narrator's escort is a hurly-playing 'bread man' who takes her for gravy dinners and her pregnant friend is abandoned by 'the intended 'father'' who 'ha[s] no place save being the original furtive instigator in that tale of subterfuge and penance'. The friend's 'one dress', 'a black one with appliqued roses' which signifies her continuing aspiration to glamour, is 'heav[ed] out over her belly' (124). Again, food -- cakes sent in from the 'dainty dairy' -- provides an outlet for sexual desire: 'Nothing was quite so enticing as seeing them laid out, some iced, some dusted with sugar, some with fruit or candied peel bursting through the crack ...' (125). Consumption is associated not only with sexuality but with culture, 'eating [a]s the route to knowledge' as Ellman puts it. The narrator, keen to escape

cultural 'anorexia', recalls being caught in the back of the pharmacy where she works with 'jam, mocha cream and crumbs f[alling] out of [her] mouth'. She goes on to reveal that 'The shame of that now brings to mind the story of Chekhov being entertained in a grand restaurant in Moscow and suddenly spitting out a mouthful of blood' (126).

The inherent trivialising of female authorship -- O'Brien wolfs cakes, Chekhov spits blood -- is later offset by the story of 'a man who had been to England on a visit [who] brought back a set of false teeth that he swore had belonged to T.S. Eliot' (137). Moreover O'Brien seems to be saying that female experience makes valid fiction. The *Mother Ireland* narrator's accounts of early sexual experience do parallel events in *A Pagan Place*. A lover -- here an actor not a priest -- says 'I could go through you like butter' and the girl feels herself to be 'living at last'.¹² An unsatisfactory relationship is reconstructed even as it unfolds. The girl's unremarkable first sexual experience -- 'Was that it? Was the maidenhead, the precious gem, lost in such uncelebrated mire?' -- is followed by 'watching him eat chips, sausages and peas' whilst 'refus[ing] food in case he could not afford it'. She has 'no gnaw for food', only 'a longing to ask what had happened'. Yet by the time the inevitable 'jilt' occurs, she is precisely registering the scene, which itself externalises her status as 'commodity': 'The neon with a different gawdy light for each digit announced and re-announced the word BOVRIL'. As in *Girls in their Married Bliss* and *August is a Wicked Month* the narrator's commodity status is underlined. 'Pain' is shaped into 'the first mawkish poem' (140). For a readership

¹² In the light of Judith Butler's identification of 'gender' as 'an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*' O'Brien's positing of the lover as 'actor' anticipates her examination, in *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Down by the River*, of 'masculinity' as well as 'femininity' as socially constructed (Butler, 1997, 402).

sufficiently clued in to make the inevitable *Country Girls* connections the subsequent marriage is addressed in a single paragraph which despite its brevity does convey the narrator's position, caught between conflicting constructs and expectations.¹³ The narrator reveals that by marrying she 'defied family and friends' (141), yet she goes on to reflect that she 'had gone from the country to the city, then back again'. This route seems implicitly to have been pre-set:

The early mortifications, the visions, endless novenas, the later 'crushes' on hurly players, the melting glands at the cinema, the combined need for, and dread of, authority had all paved the way and it was in a spirit of expiation and submissiveness that I underwent that metamorphosis from child to bride.

The transition from 'child' to 'bride' is seen as inevitable. As in *A Pagan Place* and *Night* the influences of Ireland and the family are inescapable, and the roles available to women limited. As Herr points out: 'Although it is demonstrable that the Irish mother has a good deal of influence within many homes ... the actual power exercised by Irish women is severely constrained to a certain familial and ideological zone that does not disarm the more powerful patriarchal syntax of the culture' (Herr, 1990, 24). Similarly in the context of the mother-daughter relationship Irigaray identifies the 'paralyz[ing]' effect of the phallic symbolic order, seeing 'metamorphosis from child to bride' as inevitable:

See from afar how I move with measured steps, me, once frozen in anger? Aren't I good now? A nearly perfect girl? I lack only a few garments, a little jewelry, some

¹³ In the light of Deane's comments on *Dracula*, it is significant that the bridegroom is foreign.

makeup, a disguise, some ways of being or doing to appear perfect. I'm beginning to look like what's expected of me (Irigaray, 1981, 62-63).

The *Mother Ireland* narrator's attempted gesture of 'defi[ance]' is ultimately one of conformity. In *Mother Ireland*, as in earlier texts, the narrator's perceptions of mother/country are ambivalent. In 'The land itself' O'Brien, underscoring the interdependence of images of mother/ 'Mother Ireland', argues that:

The martyred Irish mother and the raving rollicking Irish father is not peculiar to the works of exorcised writers but common to families throughout the land. The children inherit a trinity of guilts (a Shamrock): the guilt for Christ's passion and Crucifixion, the guilt for the plundered land, and the furtive guilt for the mother frequently defiled by the insatiable father (32).¹⁴

O'Brien, arguing that 'martyred mother' and 'insatiable father' are not confined to literature, seems keen to perpetuate these stereotypes. From the later perspective of 'Dublin's Fair City' the narrator cites 'the eerie intimacy' between her parents as an incentive 'to run away if needs be'. She recalls them 'sometimes paired in another room for two or two and a half minutes letting out sounds that very nearly bordered on despair' (121). There is an acknowledgment here of the mother's active participation which contradicts an initial tendency towards a mother good/father bad interpretation of events. Expressing fear of men and the possibility that they might 'undo their breeches' (74) the narrator affirms that:

¹⁴ Here, the reference to Ireland's 'rape' by England serves to underscore the dual oppression of Irish women by colonisers and by what Pelan terms 'social imperialis[ts]' (Pelan, 1996, 51). The 'plundered land' is directly analogised with 'the martyred Irish mother.'

Only the women were safe to pass and even they might tirade about something you could not understand such as that milk had gone sour or a cow had given birth to a stillborn calf. There were mad women who flounced about, tossed kerchiefs and said 'no, no' when their brothers or their keepers put harnesses on them to drag them to the lunatic asylum. Only mothers were safe to be with (74).

Perceived 'safety' -- reiterated as if to dispel doubt -- is undermined by reference to subjects threatening to the child, incomprehensible yet obscurely familiar. Sour milk and stillbirths are negative facets of maternity. The position of the 'mad women' constrained by their 'brothers' and 'keepers' is not so very far removed from that of the mother subjected to 'the insatiable father'. Irigaray points out that:

Each sex relates to madness in its own way. All desire is connected to madness. But apparently one desire has chosen to see itself as wisdom, moderation, truth, and has left the other to bear the burden of the madness it did not want to attribute to itself, recognize itself (Whitford, 1991a, 35).

Irigaray sees women's madness as resulting from cultural 'murder of the mother', through which desire for the mother is repressed. Constructed in relation to this 'madness which is not ours', women/mothers can never become 'safe' (Whitford, 1991a, 42). The child 'Edna' is culturally conditioned to accept and approve the 'martyred Irish mother' (32):

Mothers were best. Mothers worked and worried and sacrificed and had the smallest amount on their plates when the family sat down to eat, mothers wore aprons and slaved and mothers went to the confraternity on a Sunday evening and

whispered things to each other in the chapel grounds about their wombs and their woes (74-75).

Yet the adult narrator uses 'best' ironically; this passage reveals even more clearly the 'unsafe' dimension of maternity. Mothers are not *allowed* to be 'best' within a framework which posits them as worriers and guiltmongers, and which exiles their bodily concerns to the 'chapel grounds'.

The narrator's recognition that her mother is *not* safe is expressed through acts of resistance which tend to be focused on food. In 'The books we read', a chapter which sets out to offer an account of spiritual and intellectual nourishment, O'Brien cites among the influential texts of her childhood 'a little framed prayer' which hung 'above the black range' in the kitchen:

May the meals that I prepare

Be seasoned from above

With thy blessings and thy grace

And most of all thy love.

Marina Warner has cited the 'Kitchen Prayer from Knock' -- similar to 'May the meals ...'but even more explicit -- as an illustration of the sanctifying of 'the hardships of Irish mothers in their kitchens':

Lord of all pots and pans and things,

Since I've not time to be a saint

By doing lovely things

Or watching late with Thee

Or dreaming in the dawn light

Or storming heaven's gates

Make me a saint by getting

Meals and washing up the plates (Warner, 1976, 190).

O'Brien goes on to describe the food sanctioned by paternal law, suggesting resistance to it:

The meals were the mashed potatoes referred to as pandy, potato bread or boxty, and a concoction of potatoes, onion and cabbage called colcannon. To eat them was pure penance There were blackberries glistening on the hedges but a glace cherry was as precious as a jewel. There was porter cake or the treacle cake that one turned up one's nose at, but a shop cake, a swiss roll say, stale as rice paper, spoke of another world ... (p. 82).

Considering the 'penance' integral to the consumption of food produced within the father's house, it is significant that shop cakes are aligned by O'Brien not just explicitly with freedom and romance but implicitly with the maternal body. In *The High Road* shop cakes likened to breasts are consumed on the occasion of a lesbian encounter. But it is paradoxical that cakes baked by the mother and produce offered by 'Mother Ireland' -- 'the land itself' -- are resisted as products of paternal law, whilst cakes such as stale swiss rolls or convent jam tarts signify the possibility of alternative relationships between women and beyond cultural 'anorexia'. After all, shop cakes and glace cherries are, like romance fiction, products not of 'social imperialism' but of the commercial exploitation of women

within a capitalist economy.¹⁵ In *Mother Ireland*, though, shop cakes are constructed as a metaphor for liberation. Refusal of the mother's food says, as Eichenbaum and Orbach point out in their study of eating disorders, 'I will not be like you, mother. I will not reproduce your life and I will not take in your food. I will not take you inside of me' (Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1982, 89-91). In 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other' Irigaray links 'consuming and being consumed' with cultural paralysis, writing: 'You [mother] feed me/yourself. But you feed me/yourself too much, as if you wanted to fill me up completely with your offering. You put yourself in my mouth, and I suffocate' (Irigaray, 1981, 61). 'Shop cakes' free the mother from her obligation to become 'a [kitchen] saint' through the production of food, liberating mother and daughter from mutual paralysis. In the context of *The High Road* though they represent the very paternal law and capitalist colonisation which O'Brien's protagonists try so hard to escape. The falsity of O'Brien's recurrent 'shop cake' metaphor highlights the impossibility of achieving a positive construction of 'femininity' within a patriarchal symbolic order.

In *Mother Ireland* ambivalent feelings are expressed not only towards the bodily mother but towards 'Mother Ireland' 'her'self. Mary Jacobus has identified parallels between loss of the mother and loss of a conceptual country:

The discovery that the mother does not have a phallus means that the subject can never return to the womb. Somehow the fact that the mother is not phallic means that the mother as mother is lost forever, that the mother as womb, homeland,

¹⁵ This recalls the episode of Caithleen's date with Reginald the confectioner in *The Country Girls* (O'Brien, 1963, 159).

source, and grounding for the subject is irretrievably past. The subject is hence in a foreign land, alienated (Jacobus, 1995, 20).

Like Jacobus O'Brien connects these losses, placing mother country alongside the bodily mother in the 'trinity of guilts' and analogising 'her' 'plundered' state with the mother's 'defile[ment] by the insatiable father'. *Mother Ireland* opens with the assertion that: 'Countries are either mothers or fathers, and engender the emotional bristle secretly reserved for either sire'. O'Brien goes on to argue that: 'Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare' (11).¹⁶ This list of names includes the derogatory -- 'cow', 'sow', 'harlot' -- along with the romantic -- 'Rosaleen', 'bride'; this identifies 'Mother Ireland' as a set of male constructs whose history 'ha[s] been told and fabricated by men and by mediums who described the violation of her body and soul'. As Irigaray puts it, there are no words to talk about [the womb], except filthy, mutilating words' (Whitford, 1991a, 41). 'Rosaleen' and 'bride' suggest 'the image of the virgin goddess'. The mother country, like the bodily mother, is subject physically and conceptually to paternal law: 'Ireland has always been Godridden'. Irigaray argues that 'The fertility of the earth is sacrificed to delineate the cultural horizon of the father tongue [*langue*] (wrongly termed the mother tongue)' (Whitford, 1991a, 41). In 'The classroom' the narrator recounts how Ireland's history was 'devoured' and how 'the country came into being simply by looking at the grey shredding cloth map ...' (63). Yet there is resistance to this: 'Ireland was never fully

¹⁶ In *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism* Robin Morgan points out that: 'Men have called [woman] catty, cowlike, a bitch. Men have named her pigeon, chick, vixen, shrew ... Men have spat out their contempt for her and for the natural world in the same perjorative slang, attacking two birds with the identical stone, mistaking the character of both targets' (Morgan, 1989, 345). In this context the connection between 'Mother Ireland' and Irish womanhood is reinforced.

taken, though most thoroughly dispossessed' (12).¹⁷ Mother and mother country are both constructed as objects for consumption. O'Brien reveals that 'One kissed one's mother and thought of blancmange ...' (43) whilst identifying the way in which, historically, 'Ireland was always looked upon as a freak with nevertheless a fascination bordering on gluttony for the outsider' (31). Throughout *Mother Ireland* O'Brien exhibits specific concern for the 'maternal body' of Ireland. Though this is expressed in ambivalent terms, it does indicate a recognition of the need for 'words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak the corporeal' -- a true 'mother tongue', perhaps (Whitford, 1991a, 43). In 'The land itself' 'travelogue' style seems to 'still' and reduce the landscape:

The hill of Tara in County Meath was the seat of inauguration of those kings and also the place where laws were promulgated or recited Tara of the green mounds, palisaded and dyked. Tara ... was where the kings learned their many taboos and the prescriptions that would bring them good luck -- the fish of the Boyne, the deer of Luibneck, the bilberries of Brileith, the cress of Brossnach, water from a well and the hares of Naas (14).

Yet bearing in mind O'Brien's concentration throughout *A Pagan Place* and *Night* on male appropriation of landscape, this style is aptly chosen for an account of the subjection of Tara's 'green mounds' -- 'the fertility of the earth' -- to paternal law or 'the cultural horizon of the father tongue'. Similarly in the following account O'Brien's use of the second person *seems* detached:

¹⁷ 'The particulars of her rape' are however male-authored, specifically by Swift (30).

You pass a tea house, a garden filled with postcard flowers, you pay a nominal entrance fee ... you try to read the plaque documented in Irish ... Six miles away is a holiday camp where girls in plastic rollers parade up and down the small toy-like concrete paths, looking for Mr Right and ironically finding only distraught fathers hauling their children in and out of a Mickey Mouse show (15).

The references to 'postcard' and 'plaque' suggest 'stilling' and O'Brien's bathetic tone invites comparison between the landscape, plundered for archaeological 'finds', and the girls whose future is projected onto 'distraught fathers [and] their children'. Concern for the 'maternal body' of the land is more explicit than in any other of O'Brien's texts. She laments 'rabid materialism' and 'jerry building' (33) and explicitly condemns indifference to environmental crises:

Most Reverend Lucy, Bishop of Cork, fears that the country is not in danger of pollution from the oil rigs of Bantry Bay but that there is much more to dirty the minds of the people and to pollute their souls in the books, papers and films circulating through Ireland. Elsewhere you read that in fact due to a faulty valve two thousand five hundred gallons of oil spilled into the sea and a local councillor tossed the matter aside saying it did no great damage and that the Lord was on their side and that somebody must have been saying their prayers (34).

This passage outlines graphically the extent to which Ireland remains 'Godridden'(11), subject to what O'Brien herself terms 'cultural atrophy'. Suppression of the body engenders indifference to the maternal body of the land.

Ireland is embodied by O'Brien through her accounts of historical female figures, such as 'Macha, a woman of red tresses, [who] claimed her right as lawful descendant', breaking 'a long line of kings' (14). The tone of such accounts is not always successful; Peggy O'Brien has argued that she 'misappropriat[es] a native tradition' through 'presumption and reduction' (O'Brien, 1987, 482). Yet the very blandness of O'Brien's description -- 'a woman of red tresses' -- again suggests cultural 'stilling'. Interestingly it also echoes attempts by the media to reduce the author herself to 'tumbled red hair, green eyes, and powder-pale skin' (Grove, 1994).

In the light of Herr's comments it is significant that *Mother Ireland* is illustrated by Fergus Bourke's grainy black and white photographs, the first of which is captioned 'Mother Ireland.' In her acknowledgments, O'Brien insists that '... only half the book is [her] doing, the other half belonging to the photographer Fergus Bourke'. This suggests the interdependence of illustration and text. Discussing the 'immobilizing' of the mother-daughter relationship in the phallic symbolic order Irigaray expresses the maternal tendency to create her daughter in her own image as 'the yet-undeveloped negative images of your coming to yourself/me' (Irigaray, 1981, 66). In this context the static photograph of 'Mother Ireland' can be read as a representation of the cultural 'image' which her 'daughters' are required to emulate. The 'Mother Ireland' photograph is captioned:

Ah! Light lovely lady with delicate lips aglow,
With breasts more white than a branch heavy-laden with snow,
When my hand was uplifted at Mass to salute the Host,
I looked at you once, and the half of my soul was lost (17).

The rhyme invokes various stereotypes of 'Mother Ireland'. The woman-nature connection is implicit in the breast/branch/snow analogy; snow and whiteness suggest an innocence which is contradicted by the sexualisation of the image ('lips aglow'). The location, 'Mass', invites association with the Madonna; virginity and maternity are simultaneously worshipped. Bourke's photograph shows the head and shoulders of a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman who seems to embody the 'tendency to be swamped with melancholy and loss' which O'Brien claims is attributed to the Irish (36). In writing what initially seems to be a 'coffee-table' book perpetuating stereotypes -- other photographs represent variously and idyllically a picturesque assortment of landscapes, peat-cutters, fishermen, tinkers and Dubliners -- is O'Brien complying with, or subverting, the cultural desire for and colonial expectation of 'stillness'?

In aligning her own history with that of her country, and by inviting the association of male constructs of femininity with male constructs of Ireland, O'Brien is subverting the very stereotypes which she seems to perpetuate. O'Brien's 'Mother Ireland' is not a single concept, a 'sow' or 'Rosaleen', but an entity invoking all 'the emotional bristle secretly reserved for' the bodily mother (11). Chapter 2, 'My home town', opens with the assertion that this is where O'Brien was 'born and bred'. Here the narrative voice is more readily identifiable than in 'The land itself' as autobiographical. In 'My home town' O'Brien reveals that:

To be on an island makes you realise that it is going to be harder to escape and that it will involve another birth, a further breach of waters. Nevertheless an agitation to go (45).

'*Nostalgie*', identified by Gallop as 'haunting regret for one's native land', is perhaps especially a condition of the female exile, whose separation from mother/country is incomplete (Jacobus, 1995, 19). Indeed, Irigaray argues that woman is forever exiled, from language and within 'the family of the father-husband' (Whitford, 1991a, 44). Certainly O'Brien's association of mother country with the bodily mother is made even more explicit in her account of leaving. 'Dublin's Fair City' opens with contradictory reflections. The discomfort engendered by 'the eerie intimacy' between the parents is offset by flippancy:

To put a big blanket over all those things, sighs and sounds, to forget voices and roars, to leave a note saying, 'I have gone with the razzle-dazzle gypsies, oh' (121).

Yet this is not simply a throw-away response but rather an alignment of the narrator with all that is romantic, balladic and adventurous. Rejection of 'Mother Ireland' parallels the urge 'to put a big blanket' over the parents:

To pack a small attache case and carry it down the drive, index finger over the lid lest the catches snap, saying a cruel, haughty goodbye to each landmark, treading for spite's sake on the harmless toadstools and puffballs, hitting the ash tree from whence came the series of plants that were used to belt animals and humans with.

'Mother Ireland' is newly aligned with the masculine, like the suddenly sexualised mother 'paired' with her husband in 'sighs and sounds'. The narrator, becoming aggressive, focuses on toadstools, which in *Night* are listed alongside masculinized features of the landscape (10). The perspective which allows mother and country to be recognised as

'plundered' victims is temporarily blurred. Yet their tenacity is made clear -- childhood and history are 'ineradicable', future experience pre-ordained. The opening assertion of Chapter 7 that: 'Leaving Ireland was no wrench at all' (142) has already been undermined by the revelation in Chapter 6 that:

The further I went away from the past, the more clearly I returned inwardly picturing meadows, grasses, some animal caught under briars, cuckoo spit, nightfall and the way the dogs used to wear paint away off the back door begging with their bodies to be let in (126).

In the light of O'Brien's alignment of 'Mother Ireland' with the bodily mother, the ending of *Mother Ireland* is significant:

I live out of Ireland because something in me warns me that I might stop if I lived there, that I might cease to feel what it has meant to have such a heritage, might grow placid when in fact I want yet again and for indefinable reasons to trace that same route, in the hope of finding some clue that would restore one to one's original place and state of consciousness, to the radical innocence of the moment just before birth (144).

One of the 'indefinable reasons' for the narrator's need 'to trace that same route' back 'to the radical innocence of the moment just before birth' seems, in the light of O'Brien's ambivalence towards and undermining of male constructs, to be a desire for a *female* definition of mother/Ireland. This O'Brien suggests may be achieved through a symbolic return to intra-uterine *potential*, which can be imagined only from the perspective of the exile, freed from cultural 'stopping' and from the immobilizing effect of 'Mother' Ireland

upon her daughters. Yet, as Jacobus points out in her discussion of Freud: ‘... psychoanalytically speaking, homesickness is a longing to return to the lost home (womb) of the mother’ (Jacobus, 1995, 19). This creates a dilemma for O’Brien, caught between ‘stilling’ and ‘homesickness’. The question articulated by Irigaray and explored by O’Brien of ‘*where* [my emphasis] we are to find’ ‘the imaginary and the symbolic of intra-uterine life and of the first bodily encounter with the mother’ is to be further addressed in *The High Road* (Whitford, 1991a, 39).

Chapter 5

'An Other Landscape': *The High Road* (1988)

In an interview with Sandra Manoogian Pearce Edna O'Brien commented: 'I don't think *The High Road* is realized. There are things in it that are O.K., but it's imperfect' (Pearce, 1996, 7). O'Brien does not expand on *The High Road's* perceived 'imperfect[ion]'; she simply reiterates the point that it is 'not [her] favourite'. O'Brien's dissatisfaction with *The High Road* is regrettable given that this novel offers the most focussed and directive critique of patriarchy that she has produced to date. Ironically, this may throw some light on O'Brien's own perception of *The High Road* as 'unrealized'; the novel's closure suggests that the potential of 'the radical innocence of the moment just before birth' identified at the end of *Mother Ireland* is never going to be 'realized' under patriarchy (O'Brien, 1976, 144).

In this novel O'Brien brings together the themes of female subjectivity, nationality and relationships between women in a succinct and disciplined narrative which examines in detail the possibility of what Irigaray refers to as 'the imaginary and the symbolic of intra-uterine life' (Whitford, 1991a, 39).

In 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother' Irigaray underlines the need for women 'to discover the singularity of our love for other women', arguing that 'this love is necessary if we are not to remain the servants of the phallic cult, objects to be used by and exchanged between men, rival objects on the market ...' (Whitford, 1991a, 44-45). In *The High Road* the relationship between Anna, the protagonist, and her lover Catalina does

briefly transcend 'the market' to realise 'the symbolic of intra-uterine life'. As Irigaray writes:

The value of a woman always escapes: black continent, hole in the symbolic, break in discourse ... It is only in the operation of exchange among women that something of this -- something enigmatic, to be sure -- can be felt (Irigaray, 1995, 176).

'The operation of exchange' between Anna and Catalina constitutes a space outside of the dominant discourse. The heterosexual economy is examined in detail through the exposition of Anna's 'relationships' with other women, which are seen to be undermined by patriarchy. As Pat O'Connor points out in her discussion of the marginalisation of female friendships, evident in previous O'Brien texts: 'The purpose it serves for the patriarchal society in which we live is to reinforce women's dependence on men. For if women cannot trust or work for or be friends with women, then they must of course turn to men' (O'Connor, 1992, 10). In *The High Road* Anna's affair with Catalina is not untainted by the patriarchal *status quo*. Anna's status as middle-aged Londoner on vacation posits her as more powerful than Catalina, a young native servant girl. Furthermore 'Catalina' echoes 'Caithleen', suggesting that she is to be the victim in the relationship. There is, however, some levelling of status. Anna is in a vulnerable position of flight from a failed love affair, and is insecure about her age (9). Her professional role is obscured, whereas Catalina is confident and ambitious, hoping 'one day' to go to university (81).

Still on the subject of friendships between women under patriarchy, O'Connor goes on to argue that 'the emergence of the social construction of lesbianism, and the continued stigmatization of that identity, has inhibited the development and maintenance of friendship between women' (O'Connor, 1992, 34). In *The High Road* Anna and Catalina subvert patriarchal stereotypes of lesbianism, embodied throughout the text by characters such as 'a very tall, patrician woman, and her young girlfriend' (25) and the English girl with 'greyish skin, like putty, and long hair which was severely and unrelentingly drawn back' (119) who warns Anna off Catalina, and who reminds Anna of 'those deserted country churches with damp weeping walls, unattended pews, a psalm on ravelled embroidery, lesson books, and hand-printed signs appealing for things from the fete' (120).¹ The *jouissance* experienced by Anna and Catalina is subversive in itself. As O'Connor puts it: 'The recognition of women's ability to enjoy themselves with other women obviously implicitly undermines a romantic-love ideology which stresses that true pleasure is only possible in the arms of a man' (O'Connor, 1992, 182). O'Brien's exposition of female *jouissance* undermines the cultural conditioning identified in *August is a Wicked Month*, the 'secret message that a man and a man's body was the true and absolute propitiation' (O'Brien, 1965, 136).

Patriarchal cultures and the nuclear family, which 'romantic-love ideology' serves to perpetuate, are sparingly but mercilessly represented in *The High Road*. The novel's dislocation from Ireland and from London points, like *August is a Wicked Month* before it, to the commonality of patriarchal domination to Western societies. In Chapter 6 as Anna

¹ This negative construction of English femininity offers an interesting counterpart to the equally bleak construction of English masculinity in *Girls in their Married Bliss*: 'England was screaming with facts and statistics and not one person to supervise soup machines' (O'Brien, 1967, 96).

enjoys an idyllic breakfast and projected new life, the presence of 'a German couple' at the next table provides an unwelcome reminder of what she has escaped. They wear 'identical seersucker shorts' and:

Soon as he finished eating, the man lit a little thin cigar The woman went on eating with a steady joyless rhythm as he delivered a monologue, which I was glad not to understand (O'Brien, 1988 [1989], 49).

'Joyless' suggests the extent to which the wife's *jouissance* has been suppressed, whilst Anna, not 'understand[ing]' the husband's 'monologue', seems to posit herself not just outside the German language but outside of patriarchal discourse. In the same chapter 'a proud English father' dominates the gathering around the hotel pool, addressing his baby son 'loudly' and forcing him into the water:

The baby screams but its father is undaunted

'The water's not cold ... Daddy doesn't feel it cold ... warm ... warm water.'

Proud now and masterful ... the father inveigles the baby to kick.

'Daddy says, baby Michael has got to kick' (52).

It is the father's perceptions which count -- 'Daddy doesn't feel it cold' -- whilst the little boy, still part of the maternal economy -- he is subsequently returned to his mother for hot chocolate -- must be hauled 'scream[ing]' through the Oedipal stage.

The cruciality of Chapter 6 to O'Brien's deconstruction of the nuclear family is compounded by her account of the English couple and their children, Ernest and Fiona. Ernest 'proclaim[s] his rights' by marking out strawberries for himself, 'running a spittled finger over each one':

He looked like a little weasel as he bent down over the strawberries, touching them with his features ... To the proud father, Fiona was a water nymph and to the proud mother, little Ernest had the makings of a Hercules (59).

As Whitford explains, Irigaray argues that:

If identity is formed by identification with elements in the social/symbolic order, then it means that social/symbolic formations will have to change for womankind to come into existence at all ... (Whitford, 1991b, 136).

In this context the Fiona/Ernest episode anticipates the role-play of Anna and Catalina in revealing the extent to which gender identity is informed and constructed by 'identification with elements in the social/symbolic order'. It is significant that for Fiona fluid compounds her essence as 'water nymph' whilst Ernest's bodily fluid -- spittle -- is already being used to establish ownership. This recalls the father's 'ritual pee[ing]' in *A Pagan Place* and the falconer's territorial ejaculation in *Night*. Distinctions between male and female fluids are suggested by Irigaray in 'The "Mechanics" of Fluids', in which she argues that: 'Fluid ... is, by nature, unstable. Unless it is subordinated to geometrism, or idealized' (Irigaray, 1985, 112).² In *The High Road* as in previous texts, O'Brien hints at the extent to which male fluids -- urine, spittle and semen -- are 'idealized' and employed for specific purposes of acquisition and control, whilst female fluids -- vaginal secretions and the (feminised) sea -- are 'unstable' and beyond control.

O'Brien's undermining of family life is not always so cynical. When the father of a little boy who drowns in the swimming pool tries to comfort his wife 'his ringed marriage finger

² I read 'subordinat[ion] to geometrism' as 'subordination to the masculine'.

look[s] absurd in this light, in this crisis' (98). Drowning in O'Brien is a recurrent metaphor for the cultural distortion of maternity, for the 'unstable' nature of amniotic fluid in the existing social and symbolic order. Mrs Brady, escaping the role of 'martyred Irish mother', drowns on a rowing trip with her lover in *The Country Girls* (O'Brien, 1976, 32) whilst in *House of Splendid Isolation* the protagonist Josie is repeatedly aligned with the drowned 'Colleen Bawn'.

In *The High Road* the need for a symbolic based on a stabilized female fluidity is implicit in Anna's recollection of the breakdown of her last love relationship. This provides a revealing commentary on the decline of the nuclear family. The suggestion is that her lover was married, since their relationship has 'consumed [her] middle years like a terrible wasting sickness' (9) while she 'waited for him, believed in his coming ...' (54). After a futile but significant attempt to 'drown' his letters in the Serpentine Anna 'head[s] for the Albert Memorial' and thence to the Albert Hall. Though there was apparently 'no reason for this' the state of these tributes to patriarchy and to family values is significant:

There was wet plywood around the base of the Albert Hall which meant that renovation was in progress, and the cupids and angels at its perimeters were grimed in soot (56).

'Wet plywood' suggests the necessity for reconstruction, whilst the soiled 'cupids and angels' expose the underside of romantic love, hinting that this particular myth has had its day. But despite its precarious state, patriarchy is still detrimental to relationships between women.

Anna's encounters with Charlotte/Portia, Wanda and Iris, which serve principally to highlight the uniqueness of her relationship with Catalina, are characterised by duplicity and bad faith. When Anna first moves into Charlotte's house Charlotte instinctively covers up her beansprouts: 'She did it aggressively as if my seeing them was itself something of an intrusion' (29). Significantly the beansprouts have already been likened to 'nipples ... full of beseech' (17). Charlotte is later discovered to be Portia, whom Anna has known in her youth, and who has been married to Pirate, reminiscent of Herod in *Casualties of Peace* and Dr Flagglers in *Night*:

[Pirate's] very langour was what attracted Portia, drove her mad and she used to tell the various ruses she had used to get him to bed. When drunk she used to go further and say he was repelled, didn't like her being wet and would order her to the bathroom, to shower and dry herself (31).

This recalls Beauvoir's comment that 'man "gets stiff", but woman "gets wet"', invoking 'childhood memories of bed-wetting, of guilty and involuntary yielding to the need to urinate' (Beauvoir, 1949 [1993], 406). Pirate's disgusted response to emissions constructs Portia's vaginal fluids as shameful and, in Irigaray's terms, 'unstable'. This recalls Dr Flagglers' admonition to Mary to 'look out' lest his own semen should drip from her onto his floor (O'Brien, 1974, 72). 'Order[ed] to shower and dry herself', Portia is forced to give way to Pirate's disgust. As Irigaray points out in 'Women on the Market', in a society 'based on the exchange of women':

A commodity -- a woman -- is divided into two irreconcilable 'bodies': her 'natural' body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values (Irigaray, 1985, 180).

This split is exemplified by Portia whose 'natural' body, wet with desire, fails to conform to the 'masculine values' of Pirate. His very name underscores his hijacking of her 'natural body'.

Pirate deserts Portia immediately after their wedding ceremony, feeling 'insofar as he allowed any feeling to trickle up to the vague repository of his brain, that he had done what she wanted, that he had married her and that in future Portia could always say, 'Oh, that was before Pirate and I got married,' or 'That was after Pirate and I got married'...' (32). Defined solely in relation to men, Portia is incapable of relating to other women. After her farcical wedding, she is told 'that in the ladies' lavatory in the bar in Kensington, [her] name was scrawled, followed by an insulting epithet'. This turns out to be 'Portia Whitehead is a lousy fuck' (33). As O'Connor points out, women under patriarchy are forced into competition with each other. In 'Women on the Market', Irigaray argues that 'the production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men' (Irigaray, 1985, 171). In these contexts, the lavatory graffiti is a 'sign' about a 'commodity', for the information of other 'commodities', but ultimately for the benefit of men. The assertion that Portia is 'a lousy fuck' suggests a relative value which (female) readers of the graffiti can capitalise on by aspiring to be better 'fucks'.

Irigaray argues further that:

The use of and traffic in women subtend and uphold the reign of masculine hom(m)o-sexuality ... Reigning everywhere, although prohibited in practice, hom(m)o-sexuality is played out through the bodies of women, matter, or sign, and heterosexuality has been up to now just an alibi for the smooth workings of man's relations with himself, of relations among men (172).

It transpires, significantly, that Pirate has 'fucked Daddy before he had fucked her'. This particular 'exchange' is subverted through being rendered ludicrous: 'He had done it in the grotto and she had come on them, with their pants down' (34). Furthermore he comes from a 'family who got their filthy lucre from the slave trade in the West Indies'. Patriarchal domination is seen as common to race and gender (34). Portia's subsequent marriage is to Martin who has 'a fling with a Polish au pair' referred to by Portia as 'the cow' (35). Significantly her pearl beads, apart from which she is 'stark naked' when she announces her engagement to Martin, reveal her identity to Anna in the Mediterranean house. Anna feels compassion for Portia/Charlotte's reduction to a roomful of 'clutter', 'the cardboard boxes with garments spilling out of them, grey-white stockings filled with things, an Andalusian shawl, tapes of music and a few paperback books, all with death or murder in the title' (39):

I could still see her naked, her waist like a belly dancer's, the pearls reaching almost to her navel ... It hurt, with a raw hurt, to recall our gadfly days ... those days when every new love affair brought us, as we thought, to the brink of a sustained happiness (40).

This response belies Anna's later response to Wanda, who makes her feel '... that other people's heartbreak does not touch in the same way, simply because we're not prepared to look at it, the depths of it' (75).

Despite -- or because of -- her empathy with Portia, Anna's discovery of her identity provokes fury: 'Her eyes were so violent, the sockets seemed to be filled with blood. They were no longer the pale blue eyes of a woman, but those of a bull'. Interestingly Anna herself later identifies with a wounded bull, telling Catalina immediately after their lovemaking about her reaction to a bullfight:

I bled for the entire week, in sympathy, with either the bulls or the horses or the young picadors or the strutting daring matadors, or the whole ritual which by its spectacle, its terror and its gore brought to my mind too vividly Christ's bleeding wounds and the women I knew, including myself, as if Christ was woman and woman was Christ in the bloodied ventricles of herself. Man in woman and woman in man (158).

O'Brien seems here to be identifying the need for a revision of a social order in which, as Irigaray puts it: '*Red blood* remains in the mother's side' but with 'no price, as such, in the social order' (Irigaray, 1985, 186). O'Brien is identifying men as well as women and animals as victims of a social order in which the phallus and 'Christ's bleeding wounds' constitute the bases of 'nihilistic religion' (Whitford, 1991a, 92). On the surface 'red blood' continues in this passage to be aligned with femininity. Indeed 'Irigaray argues that in Christianity the body and blood that are ritually consumed are the body and blood of women', since Christ comes from Mary (Whitford, 1991b, 145). In *The High Road*

Anna's prolonged menstruation is constructed as a form of stigma which echoes the martyrdom of Christ and prefigures the death of Catalina. Furthermore the 'strutting, daring matadors' are implicitly glamorised. There is, however, an attempt to reconcile the masculine economy with its exploited 'others' -- women, bulls and a feminised Christ. Anna's vision of 'Christ [as] woman' suggests a maternal imaginary in which woman no longer tries, in the words of Irigaray, 'to resemble, to copy, the one [God] who is [the father's] representative' (Irigaray, 1985, 178).³ In this context Portia's bull-like aspect makes her unlike 'a woman' in a socially constructed sense, but it does suggest the need identified by Irigaray for a female 'economy of the death drives' (Whitford, 1991b, 138). As Whitford points out, Irigaray 'does not suppose that women are essentially non-violent' (Whitford, 1991b, 145). In juxtaposing Anna's recollection of the bullfight with Portia's fury O'Brien is exposing the need for 'a resymbolization and reorganization of the *death drives* in the imaginary' (123). In this respect *The High Road* anticipates O'Brien's simultaneous engagement with patriarchal nihilism and detailed characterisation of men in *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Down by the River*. Portia's own 'nihilism' is further revealed by her 'vicious' destruction of her necklace, emblem of her 'gadfly days'. Its spilt beads recall those of Ellen in *August is a Wicked Month*, in which the broken necklace similarly functions as a metaphor for sexual disappointment. Portia hastens Anna's departure by 'forc[ing] herself to retch' (42), 'a thing she was adept at doing' even at the

³ My interpretation of Irigaray's reference to 'copying' is that woman mimics patriarchal constructs of femininity, especially that of the Virgin.

time of her engagement to Martin (35). Her bulimia underlines her own status as an object for consumption.⁴

The issue of women as commodities is further explored through Anna's encounters with Iris, who is distinguished from the other women sunbathing around the pool, '... nameless creatures, identifiable only as one with beauty spots, another with a mat of hair under the armpits, a hip that curved so gracefully it was like the handle of a salt spoon' (50). O'Brien is exposing the ways in which, as Irigaray puts it: 'In order to have a *relative value*, a commodity has to be confronted with another commodity, that serves as its equivalent' (Irigaray, 1985, 176). Iris is as conscious of her superiority to the other 'commodities' around the pool as Ellen is of her 'slightly blemished' state in *August is a Wicked Month*. Iris' impact upon the metonymically depicted gathering is considerable:

... at that moment a woman in a violet coat with a thick lace collar arrived and looked about imperiously From one of the baskets jutted the dun canvas backing of a piece of needlepoint. She wore bracelets which tinkled as she pointed in one direction, then another ... obviously irked that so many vantage positions were already taken (50-51).

Yet despite Iris' imperiousness, and despite her confidence of her place in the sexual economy she too is constructed only in terms of her accoutrements.⁵ The needlepoint emphasises her bourgeois uselessness. Though she plays with Anna, inviting her to her room for drinks and controlling precisely the length of time they spend together -- '6:30 -

⁴ In *The Hunger Artists*, Maud Ellman points out that the thin body 'ward[s] off the dangers of overproduction' and that 'hunger [is] a form of speech'. In these contexts, Portia's disorder can be read as a protest against the commodification of women (Ellman 1993, 3).

⁵ Iris dismisses potential rivals with disparaging comments about 'their awful bellies, their hideous bikinis [and] their bags with trade names plastered all over them' (p. 53). She only 'deigns' to talk to them (76).

7:15' (61) -- the game which she devises, in which she and Anna have to 'think, but really think, of the most beautiful building [they] had ever seen, that [they] yearned to return to, preferably with a lover', posits both women as victims. Anna chooses 'a cemetery at San Cataldo, which although a charnel-house had the look of a theatre', whilst Iris chooses an Emperor's 'tomb which had recently been excavated in China' and in which 'countless maidens had been sacrificed with him' (62). Iris' rented villa epitomises likewise her position in the patriarchal order. Anna, visiting her there after a contrasting outing with Catalina, perceives that 'the place had a sad, neglected quality' and 'imagine[s] invalids sitting [in the gallery] looking out at the roses, plaintively' (87). The Gothic aspects of the villa form a commentary on patriarchal society, recalling O'Brien's use of Gothic in *The Country Girls* trilogy and *Casualties of Peace*. Anna's imagined 'invalids' certainly suggest 'victimage'. Iris herself describes the house as 'a morgue with syphilitic ancestors on the walls and a phone that went out of order every time you blinked' (89). Her voice vacillates between 'dulcet' and 'abrasive' tones and she is represented largely in terms of her possessions:

From her handbag she took her make-up pouch and painted her lips hurriedly. Her shoes she hauled from under a chair. They were very high-heeled, suede, mauve shoes, with an ankle strap and I could not see how she was going to navigate in them (88).

'Pout[ing] like a child', this inhabitant of romance fiction dismisses the women whom her departed lover 'hope[s] to meet' as 'cheap little bitches, pseudo-starlets, models, tarts, the

lot' (88). Yet still she claims that she and her 'naughty boy' are 'like midsummer's night dreamers':

'I'm so lucky,' she said and gazed ahead at some point in the reaches of the long dining room, as if the gilded mirror could absorb an image of her pensive, but exquisite self (91).

Irigaray argues that 'Commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for men' because 'just as a commodity has no mirror it can use to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, an image of and for man, but lacks specific qualities of her own' (Irigaray, 1985, 177 & 187). In this way Iris can be seen as a highly successful 'mirror'. 'Gaz[ing] ahead ... as if the gilded mirror could absorb an image' she exemplifies the position of the narcissist who, as Kristina Arp suggests, 'attempt[s] to realize the union with [her] own body ... that has been denied through the process of bodily alienation' (Simons, 1995, 169). Iris has been alienated from her body, 'envelop[ed] and paralyze[d]' as Irigaray puts it by her own relative value in the patriarchal economy. She is able to measure 'her ... self' -- and the mirror reflects only one 'self', the 'pensive, but exquisite' one -- only by quantifying gifts and possessions and by gauging her market value. Thus, 'she had had roses, actual roses, not the Interflora muck' and '... she could eat anything, she could stuff herself and not put weight on' (91). Like Portia Iris aspires to socially desirable thinness. Iris achieves this with apparent ease and is therefore identified as 'really' valuable. Charlotte/Portia achieves thinness through bulimia, enhancing her market value whilst denying her womanhood.

Seeing Anna only as a potential rival, Iris is unable to connect with her, addressing her only through bullying, boasting, and pleading 'in the most girlish voice' for forgiveness (90). Anna's feeling that 'she had met women like her before' and that she had had cause to be 'frightened' of 'their brittleness, their heartlessness' is confirmed by the significant repetition of the 'Portia' episode (92). Once again Anna discovers a secret -- this time a tape of Iris' suicidal son saying goodbye -- which fails to establish connection:

I wanted to embrace her but somehow her coldness and her cleverness were deterring me ... I kept rehearsing it, I even saw her drop her defences (94-95).

Iris' defences are indeed broken down but the results are not what Anna envisages: 'All seemed havoc for a moment, the very centre of her being smashed, and rage issued from her like the vapour from erupting lava. She knew' (95). Anna, 'see[ing] clearly her terror', feels that 'if [she] could say it' -- this is unspecified -- 'something tender would occur between [them] and the stone inside her would dissolve'. But Anna lacks 'faith': 'Even as I tried I knew that I could not take those few but immeasurable steps between me and her, between me and life ...' (95).⁶ It is interesting that Iris, 'heartless' and 'brittle' though she is, in some way represents 'life' for Anna. O'Brien is expressing the need for 'the operation of exchange among women' (Irigaray, 1985, 176). Anna's empathy towards Charlotte/Portia and Iris, however unrealised, suggests a recognition of the importance of this 'enigma' as a key to 'life'. Certainly these women are less cynically represented than, for example, Denise in *August is a Wicked Month*, who is constructed simply as Ellen's major rival.

⁶ Anna's fear of intimacy with Iris recalls Mary's response to Madge in *Night*: 'I could see her predicament. I could touch it, it was like an opening in her chest, being let look in' (111).

It is through Catalina that Anna is able ultimately to investigate the 'enigma' and to connect with 'life'. Indeed, Catalina twice saves Anna's own life, initially by distracting her from suicide in Chapter 5 and later by 'meet[ing] the fate that was meant for [Anna]' as Willa does for Patsy in *Casualties of Peace* (175). Catalina's appearance is prefigured by references to carnival, to jouissant subversion of the dominant order. At the beginning of Chapter 5 Anna is given 'a pot of the terracotta make-up' left for her by the 'lively group' encountered in Chapter 2, who 'seemed like a troupe of travelling players, dressed in exotic clothes'. The pseudo-travellers' legacy of terracotta make-up, which is what gives their eyes 'hooded' sensuality', prepares Anna for the similarly carnivalesque and complex Catalina. Giving her the make-up and 'several little soft pink buds to apply it with' the hotel waiter 'laugh[s] as if he knew some wicked secret of [hers]' (43). The gift contrasts with Anna's own accoutrements as she contemplates suicide:

Yes I did have them, a bottle of sleeping capsules that I had carried for so long, just in case. It seemed unbelievably absurd that these capsules made in some factory in Switzerland ... had the potency to permit me to take my life (43).

Yet the life force represented by the terracotta make-up and embodied in Catalina has the 'potency' to save. As Anna lays out the pills 'like a necklace', aligning herself with loss, starvation and death -- the unthreaded 'necklace' recalls all the disappointments of Portia/Charlotte and Ellen -- Catalina knocks and enters:

It was a young girl carrying a great bowl of flowers ... Her hair was thick and shiny, her skin very dark like the skin of an aubergine. She crossed the room and laid the flowers on a little bureau and then she turned and smiled. The flowers

seemed like a tree, branching, growing, extending, to fill my mind with something other than death ...

'My name is Catalina,' she said.

'Catalina,' I said, as if I should know (45).

It is significant that Anna feels she 'should know' Catalina's name, since this has already been foretold 'with casual clairvoyance' by the Irish exile D'Arcy. Telling Anna the local history, he says '... mark the name ... Catalina ... the Beata whom Satan tempts with sugar' (4).⁷ Catalina is always to be associated with flowers and light; the 'carnival splendour' of the sun in Chapter 1 prefigures her appearance (18). The 'aubergine' quality of her skin suggests her capacity for nurturance though it also posits her as an object for consumption. She tells Anna that 'she would be on the landing outside if [she] should need her', and Anna recognises that Catalina 'had by her sudden arrival hauled [her] back' (45).

The morning after Anna's first encounter with Catalina seems to herald a new beginning:

Soon there was a smell of warm confectionery and coffee from the kitchen

Flower smells, pollen smells, shrub smells and now food smells made me feel again a nameless thrill as in childhood, a giddiness at the onset of things (47).

The emphasis on food and flowers suggests that it is Catalina who has generated the 'nameless thrill'. Her power both to intoxicate and to revive is further reinforced by her subsequent appearance:

⁷ In the light of the similarity between 'Catalina' and 'Caithleen', it is significant that it is the Irish exile D'Arcy who first identifies the name; this points to the similarities between Irish and Mediterranean Catholic cultures, which O'Brien clarifies by the end of *The High Road*.

She was by a long refectory table arranging flowers. I recognized her as the girl who had come to my room the evening before ... there was something untamed about her, a sort of recklessness as she hauled flowers from a barrow and threw them a distance away, on to the table ... (48).

The flowers themselves come to signify Catalina:

The flowers, strewn about the table, looked as if they had landed there in some primordial storm. There were roses, red, pink, and white; sweetpeas like wet jewels, anemones with black startling centres, and flutes of lilies, pale, waxen, saintly. They all smelt of water, as obviously they had been sprinkled at the market.

There was something infinitely sweet and harmless about them ... (48).

This passage clearly reiterates Catalina's life-giving qualities, uninhibited exuberance and sexuality -- the lilies may be 'saintly', but post-*Pagan Place* they are darkly rooted -- but there are covert warnings. The 'primordial storm' effect hints at Catalina's facility for attracting chaos, whilst the reference to the market suggests not only that the flowers themselves are not free from commercial taint, but that Catalina, like Anna, Portia and Iris, has her place in the patriarchal economy. 'Harmless' is a word which tends in O'Brien's fiction to be associated with repressed lesbian sexuality. But these signifiers carry no resonance for Anna. Despite the persistence of the dominant order embodied by the German couple at the next table:

I ate breakfast on the terrace. I ate ravenously, piled different types of jam on to slivers of bread, enjoyed flavours that I had long since forsaken. It was as if the

jams and the honey and the sugared bread pre-empted a life I was about to start on, instead of one that was more than half over (49).

This seems a long way from the rhubarb jam of the *Mother Ireland* convent, yet jam is still associated with sexuality between women. Significantly in the overall context of O'Brien's fiction, Catalina's eyes are likened to damsons. In *Johnny I Hardly Knew You* the narrator recalls of a lesbian lover that: 'Her quim was as warm as jam that has just been lifted off a stove. Quite a little damson she was and tart to the taste' (O'Brien, 1977, 24). In keeping with the jam metaphor, Anna experiences a 'trickle [like jam from a spoon and vaginal secretion] of happiness' thinking that she knows Catalina and 'could stop by her table and admire the flowers'. The desire for a one-to-one relationship is suggested by Anna's idea to 'buy a special little notebook to learn a few words from her, in Spanish' (50).

The possibility of a new life away from patriarchal domination is suggested not only through analogies of Catalina with food and flowers, but through her apparent evasion of stereotype. When Anna wants to buy 'a picture of a Madonna and child' from the market Catalina stops her: '...when she heard the price she dragged me away' (79). The 'price' for women of the 'Madonna' construct has already been acknowledged in *A Pagan Place*, *Night* and *Mother Ireland*. Catalina's rejection of the picture recalls Mary's choice of a patchwork quilt over the representation of Saint Teresa in *Night*.

Catalina's attitude to family life as well as to religious patriarchal ideals seems a long way from the Ireland of previous texts and of Anna's childhood. Recalling Catalina

covering a goat's teats to prevent the others from 'drink[ing] her dry', Anna reflects that: 'She had no illusions about family love whether it was among people or beasts' (116).⁸

The apparent escape offered by Catalina is firmly associated with the idea of escape to a new place.⁹ The village church precedes patriarchal Christianity; Anna is told that it 'was the seat of an Iberian moon goddess long before the fishermen -- with their transubstantiation gigs -- got their clutches on the needy' (5). Anna subsequently visits the place alone, 'following the Stations of the cross which [she] knew would lead [her] in the end to the church, the seat of the Iberian moon goddess'(19). Anna's journey through, as it were, the stages of Christianity to the goddess prefigures the effect of sex with Catalina, which will take her 'back in time to that wandering milky watery bliss ...' to a pre-patriarchal state of being (157). Significantly Anna, rejecting the local women 'in the chapel grounds' -- who recall the exiled women in *Mother Ireland*, 'whisper[ing] things to each other in the chapel grounds about their wombs and woes' (O'Brien, 176, 75) -- 'believe[s] that [she] was defying [her] own mother who had pervaded and begrudged every moment of [her] sleeping and [her] waking life, persisting even after death' (19). 'Defiance' of this mother, who recalls Lil in *Night*, again suggests a readiness for a new order which the Mediterranean seems to offer. Anna's friend Wanda has 'given herself' a new name 'when she moved here' (10) and Anna herself resolves to 'make this place [her] home for a long time' (18). At the end of Chapter 1 the sea is constructed as an alternative mother:

⁸ Catalina seems fully to articulate the ambivalences expressed towards family ties in, for example, *Night*, in which Mary complains that 'people cling to [her] like sloths' (O'Brien, 1974, 27).

⁹ 'New', that is, in terms of Anna's experience; the place itself is in many respects primordial, and as such seems to predate the current social and symbolic orders.

‘... a great, dark, recumbent wet mother; mother of creatures, animate and half-animate; mother of life and death, moon and star, mother of the unknown ...’ (20).

Yet there are similarities between the sea and ‘Lil’; there is more than a suggestion of the ‘devouring mother’ -- ‘great, dark’ -- constructed and ‘immobilized’ -- ‘recumbent’, ‘half-animate’-- by patriarchy. The sea, ‘mother of the unknown’, is a body of ‘unstable’ fluid. In terms of the relationship between Anna and Catalina, though, the sea is constructed through its sheer volume -- by comparison to, for example, the ‘unstable’ vaginal secretions of Portia -- as the signifier for a new symbolic order.¹⁰ Anna’s initial vision of the sea prefigures further her relationship with Catalina:

I climbed to the top of the town and had my first glimpse of the sea, a patch of blue between two rocks. It was of such blueness that it seemed not to be water but a potion, of magical properties ... The air was glutted with a smell of orange and lemon blossom, a smell that wafted through ... while the globes themselves were dusk-like, mystic fruits, globes to be worshipped, rather than fruits to be eaten (9-10).

Given O’Brien’s recurrent association of breasts with oranges, this passage suggests that in a lesbian economy breasts are to be ‘worshipped’ rather than consumed.

Later, Catalina emerges from the ‘recumbent wet mother’ as if from amniotic fluid:

¹⁰ In ‘The “Mechanics” of Fluids’, Irigaray outlines the disruptive potential of ‘unstable’ female fluids, arguing that a theory of fluids which incorporated ‘instability’ ‘might jam the works of the theoretical machine’, in other words of the phallic symbolic order and, in practical terms, of patriarchy itself (Irigaray, 1985, 107).

She stood before me, dripping wet, her arms outstretched, proclaiming to have a blue body. Was she not blue throughout? The colours of the sea had got into her, the blue and the violet and the indigo had seeped into her like dye (108-109).

Looking at some local pottery before the journey up the mountain Anna reflects that she 'came to regard [blue] as being the colour of that place and of her -- wild, vivid, cobalt' (141). Watching Catalina swimming Anna thinks 'with longing of the two of us down there, hand in hand, together, plumbing the deep, my coming to know and trust the water through her, growing free, like seaweed, or reed' (108). This again prefigures the fluidity of their sexual encounter.

As well as being aligned with flowers, fluidity and the colour blue Catalina is associated with food; Anna imagines 'her breasts like the oranges with perhaps a crescent around them' (77-78). The cakes which the women buy for their mountain picnic remind Anna 'of the magic that [she] had invested cakes with, as a child, one in particular, an orange cake that seemed like a moist full moon' (141). This recollection implicitly associates Catalina with the 'Iberian moon goddess'. Certainly she is invested with goddess-like powers, 'add[ing] sprigs of myrtle' to the flowers in Anna's room in the tradition of her grandmother, said to be a witch (57).¹¹ The grandmother 'keep[s] the evil one out' of Catalina's house on the terrace, 'with a hyssop branch':

... they believed in spells, in spirits, in incantation.... Her grandmother had reared her, had told her many secrets and together they travelled back in time to their

¹¹ According to Elizabeth Brooke myrtle was traditionally carried by the initiates of Demeter's temple at Eleusis, to mark Demeter's search for her lost daughter Persephone; this is significant given that the sexual encounter between Anna and Catalina constitutes symbolically a return to the womb, and therefore a reunion of mother and daughter within an alternative symbolic order (Brooke, 1993, 21).

bivouac days, to their Moorish ancestors.... 'People think we are mad,' she said, with triumph (117).

Catalina's 'magic' encompasses her tending of the earth:

She would never leave the land, it was in her blood, it was in her veins. She talked of how she dug the earth in places where the plough could not reach She is not with me, or rather she is with me and I am the witness to her excitement as she describes putting the seeds in and weeks later the first little leaf, the first little nursling above the ground (82).

This passage emphasises Catalina's empathy with the earth, which goes beyond the 'reach' of the phallic plough. Furthermore O'Brien's identification of Catalina with the earth transcends her analogies of the *Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland* narrators with Ireland. This may be a comment on Catalina's apparent freedom from the cultural paralysis identified as peculiar to Ireland. Yet O'Brien does outline what Irigaray identifies as '... the submission of "nature" to "labor" on the part of men who thus constitute "nature" as use value and exchange value ...' (Irigaray, 1985, 173). In 'Commodities Among Themselves' Irigaray more explicitly identifies both women and earth as commodities, arguing that:

Heterosexuality is nothing but the assignment of economic roles; there are producer subjects and agents of exchange (male) on the one hand, and commodities (female) on the other (Irigaray, 1985, 192).

This recalls O'Brien's concern with the 'maternal body' of the land in *Mother Ireland*. The immediacy not only of Catalina's affinity with her land, but of her connection with Anna, is communicated through O'Brien's use of first person narrative.

The sea seems as much Catalina's element as the land. Just as she provides for her family in tending the earth, she brings Anna 'a gift from the sea, two beautiful stones perfectly rounded and looking so like biscuits [she] almost put [her] teeth in them' (109-110). The fluidity of their sexual encounter is prefigured throughout a meal shared after the swim:

Each time, before she lifted her wine glass, she dipped her fingers in the blue fingerbowl and once our fingers met in the cloudy, lukewarm water and I felt a current go through me, half fear, half desire ... (111).

In the context of Irigaray's argument that 'metonymy [is] much more closely allied to fluids' the meeting of fingers in the 'cloudy, lukewarm water' -- reminiscent of amniotic fluid -- is significant (Irigaray, 1985, 110).¹² Here metonymy is not reductive -- as in the poolside scene in which women are described in terms of their body parts (50-51) -- but suggestive of infinite possibility.

Anna's decision to 'make this place [her] home for a long time' is based largely on the development of her relationship with Catalina, whom she associates with the landscape:

It was as if I was being dreamed, as I sat there waiting for her, the tips of the young pine trees yellow-orange, votive candles ablaze in the golden afternoon sun.

¹² Irigaray identifies metaphor as 'a quasi solid' which is linguistically 'privilege[d]' over metonymy. In this context, metonymy is analogous with female fluid. Both are used reductively in the current symbolic order -- in *The High Road* women are represented as body parts in the poolside scene and Portia's vaginal secretions are disparaged by Pirate -- but both are potentially powerful if reclaimed within an alternative symbolic order.

I thought that perhaps my mind was made up, that this surely was the place for me to stay, and moreover my friendship with her was no longer so stilted (114).

Woman and landscape seem to offer Anna an escape route from herself. Just as Wanda is able to re-name herself when she comes to the Mediterranean, Anna allows herself to be 'dreamed' through Catalina, who in turn becomes the focus of hitherto suppressed desires:

In the evenings when I had a drink or two I would allow myself to think of her, as I might a painting or a beautiful garden. I would dwell on her body the way I never allowed myself to dwell on my own, exploring it with invisible hands, invisible eyes, touching her tentatively and without shame (77).

Similarly, Catalina reconstructs herself through Anna, 'look[ing] around and seeing the place as a stranger might see it, as [Anna] might see it' after she has milked the goat (116).

It is significant that their relationship is consummated on a mountain since this is a landscape feature associated in O'Brien's fiction with lesbian sexuality. In the short story 'The Mouth of the Cave' the protagonist encounters the girl who becomes the object of her unfulfilled desire by taking one of 'two routes to the village', 'the rougher one, to be beside the mountain rather than the sea' (O'Brien: 1984, 173-176). In the context of 'The Mouth of the Cave' the title of *The High Road* clearly signals O'Brien's intention to pursue the theme of lesbian sexuality.¹³ The 'Mouth of the Cave' protagonist becomes afraid at the sight of the flattened heather where the girl has lain:

¹³ Though it must be admitted that O'Brien confuses her metaphors, dichotomising 'mountain' and 'sea' whilst continuing to construct the sea as 'feminine'.

I thought, why am I running, why am I trembling, why am I afraid? Because she is a woman and so am I. Because, because? I did not know.

Significantly the narrator plans to offer the girl figs, wine ‘and also those long sugar-coated biscuits that can be dipped in white wine and sucked until the sweetness is drained from them and redipped and resucked, indefinitely’ (O’Brien, 1984, 174). Bernice Schrank and Danine Farquharson point out that: ‘In this story, in which the title itself suggests the vaginal opening, the unnamed woman explicitly imagines eating figs with her beloved as an orgasmic release’ (Schrank and Farquharson, 1996, 23). After a fruitless wait for the girl, the narrator begins to avoid the mountain road altogether. ‘Yet I always find myself taking the sea road, even though I most desperately desire to go the other way’ (176). In the context of the narrator’s ‘choice’ Elizabeth Berg’s commentary on the problematics of Irigaray’s imagery is significant. Berg argues that:

For Irigaray, if woman is given an image -- if she is represented -- this representation must necessarily take place within the context of a phallogentric system of representation -- Thus the feminist theorist is caught in a double bind; whether she presents an image of woman or not, she continues the effacement of woman as Other ... The images [Irigaray] proposes -- of fluids, caves, etc. -- are empty ones (Berg, 1982, 17).

‘Feminist theorist’ can be extended to O’Brien as ‘female author’. O’Brien’s images too are ultimately ‘empty’, failing to realise a maternal symbolic and constituting only a space within patriarchal discourse.

In common with the narrator of 'Mouth of the Cave', Anna 'fear[s] the mountain' (140):

'We'll be up there, far up,' she would say, making me queasy as I looked through the window of the bus at the jagged summits and the dizzying tree-clad slopes (139).

Anna is forced to leave behind her 'learned' femininity, symbolised by her flimsy espadrilles which irritate Catalina. The reminder of Iris' crippling sandals reinforces O'Brien's construction of the mountain encounter as the promise of an alternative economy. Catalina offers a woman centredness suggested by the cakes which the women take with them:

There were wide pale buns, like hollowed breasts into which cream and custard had been poured. The cream was whipped and looked substantial whereas the custards were softer and spilt over ... There were tarts of every kind, some filled with jam, red and dark purple ... (40-141).

There is also the reminder of the moon-like 'orange cake' which in turn recalls Catalina's breasts. In the context of breasts as 'globes to be worshipped' within a lesbian economy Catalina's choice of 'the local cake' is a rejection of the patriarchal construction of breasts as objects for consumption, signified not only by the orange cake but by the 'wide pale buns, like hollowed breasts'. Catalina 'predict[s]' that the cake bought by Anna will 'melt, on the mountain'. The cake is filled with jam which, recalling the convent jam and Anna's 'trickle of pleasure', prefigures the fluidity of lesbian sex. Anna becomes anxious about the cake, 'thinking how [it] was getting squashed' as they run for a bus (141) and

experiencing the sun through the bus windows as an 'assault' on it (143). Her fears for herself as an object for consumption are also acknowledged: 'I felt as if I was being consigned to some oven, like white dough about to harden and bake' (143). Asking 'What malady possessed me?' Anna realises that her journey with Catalina is going in some way to be cataclysmic. With 'every nerve in [her] body raw, rebellious' she is still reassured by Catalina's affinity with the landscape:

Now and then she would pat an olive tree as she might a friend. The olive was her favourite because of the way it lived and survived in aridity (143-144).

The olive trees themselves are likened to 'bowed witches', recalling Catalina's matrilineage and the lore shared with her grandmother. Catalina is constructed in opposition to patriarchal nihilism, explaining that 'since Chernobyl the thrushes of the world had been contaminated and that hoteliers would no longer buy them as delicacies for the guests' and arguing that:

... in its way it was a good thing that the tragedy happened, it made people realise that the world was one planet, countries were not separate ... but vast families joined by something far more important than creed, or politics, joined by nature; and answerable to one another (144).

Catalina's vision, combined with her ambivalence towards the patriarchal economy and -- related to this -- the nuclear family, accords with Irigaray's argument that 'if commodities refused to go to "market": 'Nature's resources would be expended without depletion, exchanged without labour, freely given, exempt from masculine transactions' (Irigaray, 1985, 196-197).

Catalina brings Anna 'home' to a place which suggests in its resemblance to 'a fairy fort' the circular 'pagan place', somewhere which could offer an alternative to patriarchal domination. Here Catalina strives for what Jim Cheney has termed 'storied residence' or 'the notion of a mythic, narrative, and bioregional construction of self and community'. This, Cheney argues, 'has a close affinity with, and relevance to, feminist postmodernist attempts to deal with the "fractured identities" of multiple female voices in the wake of the deconstruction of patriarchal totalizing and essentializing discourse' (Warren, 1994, 175). Catalina certainly shows a sense of rootedness -- which the Irish exile Anna has lost -- combined with an awareness that, as she herself puts it, 'the world [is] one planet'. Catalina's ecofeminism is underlined by her assertion 'that her heroine was Gaia, the earth mother who even when she lost everything, was not vanquished' (144-145). Although Anna takes this as a 'reference to her recent and doomed escapade' with a man, Catalina's allegiance seems as much a reference to her own ethics and beliefs. Following Catalina's lead on their risky trek, Anna keeps going by 'star[ing] straight ahead at a circular peace sign that had been stitched in black on the back of her T-shirt' (145). Once more Anna derives a sense of place and security from Catalina. Back at their mountain 'home' she 'think[s] what a bleak place it would be, without her, what a dungeon, but her presence gave it the glow and ritual of a palace'. Anna 'fe[els] elated, as if set down in some faraway universe' (150). In a sense she is; the mountain is, for the moment, a space outside of the dominant order.

Catalina sings a song which Anna assumes is 'addressed to a man or a woman, certainly a loved one', but which is 'about an instrument ... that when pleaded to will bring

the bread and the needed woman' (152-153). Though Anna tries to deny the significance of this, hastily adding "Or the needed man", the song unmistakably articulates the women's need for each other, which has been expressed largely through the exchange of food. Catalina continues to nurture Anna:

Later she took warmed leaves from around the fire and placed them on the bed one by one as if placing patchwork squares or linen roses on a quilt ... (153).

In the context of Catalina's ecofeminist ethics, her 'quilting' with leaves is significant. Karen Warren has 'offer[ed] suggestions for conceiving an ecofeminist peace politics':

... by conceiving of feminist theory and feminist theory building on the metaphor of quilting The quilts (or patches) tell unique, individualized stories about the quilters and the circumstances of their lives; they are candidate patches for a larger, global mosaic ... (Warren, 1994, 186).¹⁴

This recalls Catalina's sense of the world as 'one planet'. The women's exchange of song and stories completes Anna's growing sense of 'storied residence'. Catalina 'ask[s Anna] for a story; one from [her] own land, an ancient story' (153). Anna tells of Queen Medb; this represents an imaginative leap from the childhood recounted in *Mother Ireland* throughout which the 'strong' women of Ireland's past -- Queen Medb among them -- were not perceived as desirable role models. Anna is at last able to acknowledge her need for, as well as her attraction towards, Catalina:

I lay there stiffly, quietly confiding to myself that I wanted to hold her, be held by her, but in her sleep, so that our night-selves might reach out, and give each other

¹⁴ In this context, the relationship between Anna and Catalina is anticipated by Mary's choice of the quilt over the representation of St Teresa in *Night*.

that thread of sustenance that we craved, the invisible sustenance, not what we sought from men, something other, womanly, primordial (156).

'Night-selves', post-*Night*, signifies rebirth; as Dawn Duncan points out, Mary Hooligan 'dies to her old self in the night' (Duncan, 1996, 103). 'Night-selves' may also, less positively, signify the placing of lovemaking between women -- themselves traditionally aligned with darkness and the moon -- outside the dominant order. Yet Anna's desire to experience this only as her 'night-self' -- her last resistance to the concept of lovemaking between women -- is broken down as Catalina awakes:

... I stretched out and cleaved to her, through her opening to life; arms, limbs, torsos, joined as if in an androgynous sculpture, the bloods going up and down merrily ... even the cheeks letting go of all their scream and all their grumble ... back, back in time to that wandering milky watery bliss, infinitely safe ... boundaries burst, bursting, the mind as much as the body borne along, to this other landscape, that was familiar yet unfamiliar ... slipping through a wall of flesh, eclipsed, inside the womb of the world ... (p. 157).

Anna at last discovers the 'mouth of the cave', Catalina's 'opening to life', previously hinted at in the encounter with Iris (95). Lovemaking with Catalina transcends language and gender; the bodies are joined 'androgynous[ly]'. The journey 'back in time to that wandering milky watery bliss' is the 'return to the radical innocence' of pre-natal experience which recovers 'the imaginary and the symbolic of intra-uterine life' (O'Brien, 1976, 144; Whitford, 1991a, 39). Similarly, in the context of Irigaray's argument that: 'Culture, at least in its present form ... prohibits any return to *red blood*', the women's

'merrily' jouissant bloods are clearly assigned to an alternative symbolic order (Irigaray, 1985, 192). Blood and fluid are rendered safe -- stabilized -- within a new economy. Catalina's action the next morning, pouring water over herself and Anna in 'a baptism at once reckless and cleansing', indeed offers the promise of new life, suggesting not only baptism but the breaking of waters. Anna feels none of the anxieties inherent in her relationships with men, simply that:

Our night was not something to fear either, but to carry within us, not as a memory of debauch, but a constant, like one of those streams or rills that one hears when walking along a country road, but that one does not see, simply knows it to be there (158).

Significantly Irigaray, imagining the realisation of a female symbolic order between women, writes: 'These rivers flow into no single, definitive sea. These streams are without fixed banks, this body without fixed boundaries' (Whitford, 1991a, 215). Irigaray goes on to envisage a relationship which sounds very much like the non-possessive love of Anna and Catalina for one another: 'You are there, like my skin ... The fact that you live lets me know I am alive ...' (216). Yet it must be acknowledged that Irigaray is proposing '*a world for women themselves*. Which has both never existed and at the same time is already there, repressed, latent, potential' (Whitford, 1991b, 169). Once again the realisation of 'potential' is problematic and, as O'Brien suggests, ultimately impossible within the confines of a symbolic order constructed according to the masculine.

Despite the momentary fulfilment of Anna's quest for 'the radical innocence of the moment just before birth', there is throughout *The High Road* a pervasive sense of the

inescapability of patriarchal discourse, which ultimately reasserts itself through the murder of Catalina. Even the women's lovemaking has to be sealed with a 'baptism' constructed through the discourse of patriarchal Christianity. Anna and Catalina are posited as women whose destinies are pre-set. At the opening of the novel Anna is staying in a room in which there is 'a photograph of a girl in a leotard, sitting on a bed, apprehensive before she stood up'. Anna's interpretation of this photograph seems a projection of her own situation, showing an awareness of 'femininity' as performance: 'Somewhere in her limbs and the recesses of her frightened being she was trying to find the pluck and resolution to get up and dance, to bedazzle an unseen audience' (2). The photograph of the woman is both 'commodity' and 'sign', suggesting that "'the development of a normal woman'" 'has to be subjected to man in order to become a commodity' (Irigaray, 1985, 171 & 187).

Later, Catalina is 'commodified' as 'a little tragedienne' or 'mountain Carmen' by a man who affirms that 'there is one in every village' (77). The intertextuality of *The High Road* reinforces the Catalina/Caithleen connection. As in *The Country Girls* intertextuality is used to underline patriarchal constructs of femininity to which Catalina, like her near-namesake, is recurrently subjected. After Catalina's death D'Arcy tries to console Anna by arguing that 'it was on the cards from the very first day [Juan] and Catalina met' (180). As 'little tragedienne' Catalina is predestined to meet a violent and vengeful counterpart. It is significant that Catalina is constructed by the male gaze even as she emerges from the sea: 'She was blue upon blue, a creature Picasso had painted' (109).¹⁵

¹⁵ The futility of attempting to subvert the dominant order is suggested by the inedible nature of the 'biscuit' stones which Catalina brings for Anna from the sea.

Intertextually *The High Road* is a 'haunted' work, full of echoes from previous novels. Portia/Charlotte and Iris, for example, recall the 'jet-set' women of *August is a Wicked Month*, and Catalina's father recalls the patriarchs of *The Country Girls*, *A Pagan Place* and *Night*. The epigraphs suggest the tenacity of religious and familial bonds, particularly in the context of maternity:

God that berreth the crone of thornes

Distru the prud of womens hornes ...

CURSE

Mother Mother I am coming

Home to Jesus

And to Thee ...

HYMN

'Curse' and 'hymn' point further to the interconnectedness of religion, family ties and violence -- phallogentrism as 'nihilistic religion' -- which is reiterated in Anna's opening dream:

It rose, swelled, then burst and dispersed in a great clatter of sound. First it seemed to be a roar inside my head, a remembered summons, but then ... it became clear

that it was a roar being uttered at that very moment ... I thought I heard my name -
- Anna, Anna -- being uttered with malice (1).

That Anna's fears are directed towards men is suggested by the sexual violence of O'Brien's language -- rising, swelling, bursting. The 'remembered summons' indicates preconditioning and tenacity, whilst her attempt to assert her identity through the early disclosure of her name is undercut by 'malice'. As in *Casualties of Peace*, in which Willa's dream of men who are recognisable 'not by their faces but by their intention; which was to kill her' prefigures her murder by Tom, psychic insecurity is vindicated by external threat (O'Brien, 1966 [1968], 8). The maid has 'demonstrated an attack' and 'predicted' a power cut; there really is 'no lamp' by which to disperse 'crawling things and madmen'. 'Easter Sunday' seems associated with Anna's fears; she later elaborates that 'maybe being Easter Sunday, [the shops] might not open at all. In them somehow rested my refuge' (2). Shops are associated with the feminine; the austerity of Easter Sunday with the masculine. This underlines the ongoing nature of Anna's own commodity status. Anna's sense of being cut off from the feminine is exacerbated by the maid, Celestina, being 'beyond the bridge'. When Anna goes to call for her she sees through the window the embodiment of her fears:

Parting the shutters a fraction I saw that outside, sitting on the low wall of the bridge, was a man in his shirt sleeves, paring his nails with a carving knife and still shouting (2).

This anticipates the return of Juan and the knifing of Catalina. Anna can only respond passively -- a condition underlined by the photograph of the girl in the leotard -- trying to

'induce him to go away' simply by being present, and by 'pretend[ing] to speak to an imaginary person in the room, the one [she] wished was there'. The man does go, and his knife is rendered harmless as he 'wav[es it] as if it was a little skittle'. Anna's tentative power is suggested by the comparison of logs in 'the remains of a fire' to 'three faltering witches'. She makes a point of 'turn[ing] the horseshoe the way it should be, for luck', a gesture which prefigures her empathy with Catalina and her witchery (3).

But Anna's experiments with female power are intruded upon by D'Arcy, who is significantly confused with 'the madman'. This suggests the interchangeability and common violence of the men in the novel, once more recalling what Peggy O'Brien terms 'the glacial nihilism of the middle novels' (Peggy O'Brien, 1987, 484). It is also significant that D'Arcy's physical presence is preceded by his disembodied voice singing an Irish song. D'Arcy's 'stage-Irishness' -- he says "'top o'the morning to you" ... in a pronounced brogue' -- signifies the inescapability for Anna of Irishness, and by implication of Irish constructs of femininity (3). D'Arcy's affection for stereotype is evident in his response to Anna's decision to go 'home', which for her means London:

'Ah, a Bethlehemite,' he lamented, then went on to laud the providential fact that like himself I was a descendent of the trilobed-foliaged, leprechauned folk, hence on the run from myriad forms of knackers and massacrers (4).

D'Arcy is similarly keen to name and define the landscape, 'spouting snatches of history' in terms of kings and 'conquest'. It is he who mentions 'one Catalina' and 'another'. Neither is Anna's Catalina but both pre-empt her, one through an 'imprison[ing]' love relationship, another through being a 'stigmatist and saint'. Catalina herself shows Anna

her wounds from picking lemons, and later dies in her place. D'Arcy's patter validates the fear experienced by Anna at the opening of the novel:

'Easter morning ... resurrexi et ad hoc tecum; sum Alleluia,' he said as he made rapid crosses in the air with his cigarette holder. Something about him frightened me, it was his mockery, his rasping energy and the fact that underneath I felt all was seething -- amok (6).

Anna's dread of 'Easter Sunday' has its roots in her fear of male 'mockery' and 'energy'. D'Arcy later reveals himself as an 'unfrocked priest' (165). His list of 'non-locals' -- 'bards, pseudo-bards, painters, potters, versifiers' -- echoes the 'host of losers' catalogued by Mary Hooligan in *Night*, indicating the futility of Anna's bid for escape (Pearce, 1996, 64). Anna herself has come to believe that 'the soul of a race cannot be transmitted any more than the soul of a person':

A year earlier I had gone around America, giving lectures ... the summing up of one's land ... thereby quoting not a Gael but Spenser, the befriender of Elizabeth, the Faerie Queene (14).

Recognising Spenser's 'sell-out' and her own use of quotation as admissions of the impossibility of operating from outside of the dominant discourse, Anna -- unlike D'Arcy -- chooses not to stereotype the 'hurt and rage' engendered by her nationality (15). Whilst in America, she reflects on 'how things differ between one country and the next' (16). But patriarchal discourse is all-pervasive. The 'madman' who so terrifies Anna is identified by

D'Arcy as 'a poet of some sort' who 'had been a nuclear physicist'.¹⁶ A nihilistic profession is perceived even by the whimsical D'Arcy as 'saner' than writing poetry (4-5).

D'Arcy's own facility for nihilism is expressed through his tendency to see the landscape as ripe for consumption -- he later articulates his need 'to lay claim to territorial rights' (8) -- and to force this viewpoint on Anna. D'Arcy 'urg[es] her to take a mouthful of [her] surroundings':

He took my elbow and literally plonked me on a low wall, not simply to avoid a bit of wet tar that had been randomly smeared on a patch of road, but as he said to see the vista in the same sort of light as Wordsworth himself ... saw Westminster Bridge (5).

Not only does the Mediterranean landscape have to be constructed in terms of patriarchal and colonial discourse, but Anna, like Mary Hooligan before her, has to bow to male literary antecedents.

D'Arcy is also a perpetrator of constructs of femininity; women are for him 'Lolitas' or 'eunuched females ... soulless replicas of nature' (7). Only with his 'Prodigious Muse' can he be safe. His stereotypical view of lesbians -- people who are likely to 'invite [Anna] for footsie and cocoa' -- says nothing about Anna and Catalina. Though his later 'Lesbos' graffiti is ostensibly well-intentioned it denies the power of the relationship between Anna and Catalina by diverting attention (168). D'Arcy does save Anna's life, preventing Catalina's family from a revenge killing, but she then has to 'set out for home' under the terms of patriarchal discourse, 'banish[ed]' from the maternal imaginary (179). His

¹⁶ In the light of Dworkin's identification of 'poets' with 'men [who] have ... weapons so perverse and deadly that they defy any authentically human imagination', 'poet' and 'nuclear physicist' are not incompatible positions (Dworkin, 1981, 48).

identification of 'the hackneyed poetic dream of the Spanish senorita' prefigures Catalina's imprisonment in stereotype as 'mountain Carmen'. Anna is for him a 'little Druidess', a diminutive which retrospectively legitimizes the *Pagan Place* narrator's recollection: 'you were afraid of Druids'.

Anna's dual entrapment in the patriarchal discourses of Druidism and Christianity is signified by O'Brien's references to Catholic iconography. As Anna leaves the house to explore the village, the 'carnival' effect of the sun is undermined by the 'Station[s] of the Cross' which constitute Anna's landmarks: 'The Virgin was in pale blue, as was the other Mary who had succumbed to an orgy of tears. Both in blue togas, both supplicating' (18). Similarly the former 'seat of the Iberian moon goddess' is reconstructed as a patriarchal church whose female congregation remind Anna of her mother, in turn a product of the patriarchally constructed conceptual Ireland from which she is trying to escape. Exiled like the *Mother Ireland* women to 'the chapel grounds', they communicate 'a message which was hard, outraged and unforgiving':

The years and their hardships had made them look alike, and they all wore black ...
. I stared back at them and in staring I believed that I was defying my own mother
.... In their eyes, as in hers, were uncharted vortexes of hurt and rage that I
believed went back to their own mothers and their mothers' mothers, figures who
had usurped their lives from them (19).

Female subjectivity is compromised to the extent that the women are homogenized. The death of Anna's own mother from shingles similarly identifies 'uncharted vortexes of hurt and rage': 'All the ire, all the fret and all the longing had culminated in this, this harvest of

purplish scabs' (37).¹⁷ Later Anna recalls her 'mother's face as she lay inside the lined coffin ... an unfinished quarrel on her face, a quarrel over her own acres, with one of her own, acres she had striven for' (44). This recalls the death of Lil in *Night* and also Deane's observation that 'Gothic fiction [with particular reference to Ireland] is devoted to the question of ownership, wills, testaments, hauntings of places formerly owned ...' (Deane, 1997, 89).

Anna is 'drawn' to the Gothic aspects of the chapel: 'Inside, [it] had that aura of gloom and theatricality that I could never resist, that uniting of blood and glitter' (19). This prefigures the blood/woman/Christ associations generated for Anna by the bullfight (157-8). The women of the congregation, caught between 'blood and glitter', communicate their litany in a 'sub-human' -- significantly not 'super-human' -- 'drone' (20). The maternalized sea is subsequently relegated to the 'half-animate'. In the chapel the 'litany' is to the idealised mother, Mary, who is constructed as a response to, and surrounded by, male violence. As Marina Warner has pointed out, '*machismo*, ironically enough, is the sweet and gentle Virgin's other face' (Warner, 1976, 183):

Above the tabernacle was one of those Virgins ... crushing the serpent rather demurely with her bound plastered feet. Above her was the Sacred Heart, with spikes of gold streaking out from his Heart, skewers of pain and beatitude. Two points of painted flame above him made shadows on the arch, and looked exactly like the bloodied points of two butcher's knives (20).

¹⁷ Anna's mother's 'ire' identifies her with 'Ire-land, anger-land' (4), but the account of the Mediterranean women does point to some universality of female experience.

'Real women' -- those who collude with, rather than demurely crush, the serpent -- reiterate what Goodman terms 'the importance of small things' in the chapel grounds, their place of exile where 'flat and friendly' tombstones, 'giving the name and the lifespan of each person' are decorated with 'flowers or herbs or quaint little souvenirs, things people brought from their own houses and left there -- ornaments, mementoes, a hand-written poem' (Goodman, 1996, 164). But neither this affirmation of 'life' nor the presence of the sea, 'mother of creatures', can entirely negate the effect of the 'blood and glitter' and knives which presage the death of Catalina, who is in her own way a 'stigmatist and saint' (4). The iconography points to the universality of woman's suffering, common to 'madonna' and 'whore' alike.

Back at the hotel Anna is subject to assumptions which, though less dramatic, are equally pervasive. Her table is 'laid for two', and the waiter 'ask[s] where [her] husband was' (21). The carnivalesque group who give Anna her terracotta make-up is similarly male-defined. The make-up artist says 'Just you wait, 'Enry 'Iggins' as he 'thumps one of the models', indicating his Pygmalion role in their relationship and destroying the illusion of supposedly egalitarian carnival (23). This sentiment is reiterated as he 'ogle[s] the photographer to take some snaps of' Anna (24). The photographer in turn tells Anna 'to look sad and ... think of those dirges of [her] native land', a construction which recalls Fergus Bourke's image of 'Mother Ireland'.

Anna's reflection that 'had I looked in a mirror I would probably not have recognised myself' is significant. The 'Mother Ireland' image is *not* her self. The photographer further compromises Anna's sense of her own subjectivity, compounding her 'bodily alienation'

by commenting that 'fucking is very overrated and coming is very overrated too' (26). This seems 'reassuring' so that Anna thinks 'that this would be enough forever, this moment of pure life, this stream of abstract love' (27). Compared, however, with the 'stream' which Anna likens to her night with Catalina (158), the photographer's self-conscious pose is a denial of 'life' which echoes the 'terrible wasting sickness' induced by her previous lover (9). Thinking of him as she sits by the hotel pool Anna is 'bunched up, foetus-wise', reduced (54). This pre-empts the novel's ultimate suggestion that the 'potential' of an intra-uterine symbolic is unrealizable. Anna remembers trying 'to destroy his letters, choosing to drown them, rather than burn them in [her] grate at home'.¹⁸ As Anna recalls throwing the torn up letters into the Serpentine she struggles to invest the 'characters traced on greyish headed paper' with life-affirming imagery, 'a child's tooth' and 'confetti'. The confetti, though, is 'colourless'. 'Colourless confetti' is an apt metaphor for a sexual relationship founded on contradiction. The letters show 'handwriting portraying the oscillations of his mind that tried to cancel what it was saying and to affirm what it had just denied'. Even the ducks recognise the un-nourishing quality of these 'utterances'; they 'mistak[e] them for crumbs but d[o] not try to eat them' (55). Anna, though, feels that 'they would have to see [her] through, to eternity', and salvages the pieces. As she holds 'the damp remains' she 's[ees] the buildings that [she] would forever connect with the moment -- the beige dome of Harrods, the obelisk of Big Ben, the fawn wings of the Houses of Parliament' -- all of which bespeak the power of 'between-men' economy'. O'Brien is exposing the extent to which, as Irigaray puts it, '...

¹⁸ Significantly, the letters do not 'drown'; they refuse to sink, and 'drift[] back in [Anna's] direction,' signifying the victory of patriarchal discourse over female fluidity.

all the systems of exchange that organize patriarchal societies and all the modalities of productive work that are recognized, valued, and rewarded in these societies are men's business' (Irigaray, 1985, 171).

'Men's business' also dominates the Mediterranean community and is common to natives and to visitors. The communications between Irish D'Arcy and his Swedish friend Gunnar point to the universalism of 'between-men' culture. In 'Commodities Among Themselves' Irigaray argues that:

... the *very possibility of a sociocultural order requires homosexuality* as its organizing principle. Heterosexuality is nothing but the assignment of economic roles ... (Irigaray, 1985, 192).

Though not so overtly 'homosexual' as Portia's husband and 'Daddy', D'Arcy and Gunnar still prop each other up as -- to use Irigaray's term -- 'producer subjects'. Anna meets them both in the bar where she has gone significantly 'in hope of seeing Catalina; she is introduced to D'Arcy's 'bosom friend' as 'Druidess'. The men discourse on 'topics ranging from the trace elements in mother's milk to 'The Descent of the Locusts', extremes which suggest a link between maternity, parasitism and consumption (64).

Both men are in their respective ways competitive and keen on labelling; D'Arcy does 'a study of [Gunnar's] head, to see if there was a brain in it at all' (66). Gunnar seeks the ideal romance with 'picnics on the mountains' -- a dream which is to be realised by Anna in a lesbian context -- whilst D'Arcy lectures him on economics, reciting a Japanese sales song: "Pro ... duct," the Swede said heavily'. This all highlights the social order in which in the words of Irigaray: 'The work force is thus always assumed to be masculine, and

“products” are objects to be used, objects of transaction among men alone’ (Irigaray, 1985, 171). It is significant that Anna’s own profession is mentioned only obliquely, and never actually specified. D’Arcy goes on to outline ‘the businessman’s breakfast test’, explicitly linking production and consumption:

‘A salary man must have breakfast, because without breakfast he will be lacking in health and energy. What happens if a salary man does not have breakfast -- he will not be a good salesman’ (68).

D’Arcy goes on to explain the need for a ‘salary man’ to ‘perform the task as cleverly as a fox, as faithfully as a hunting dog, and as bravely as a lion’ -- all of which assumes the male’s dominant position within the family who ‘will suffer’ if deprived of his spoils (69). The transaction between D’Arcy and Gunnar reveals the close alignment of ‘artist’ with ‘salary man’. Despite D’Arcy’s attempt to swindle Gunnar over the portrait of Van Gogh there remains a sense of ‘bonds of friendship and brotherhood ... as they salute Vincent, the Impoverished One’ (71). After their fight D’Arcy affirms that ‘true friendship is always forged on fisticuffs’ (72). Though D’Arcy abuses Gunnar once he has left, this does not undo the ‘bonds’ of masculinity. D’Arcy claims that ‘his soul, his scrotum’ are in his picture (72). Unable to take seriously any economy other than a heterosexual one -- he later dismisses Anna’s lovemaking with Catalina as ‘McQuarie Street’ (169) -- he ‘concede[s] that all scheming and dreaming on this planet concerned men and women’ (73). Finally, his decision to ‘paint different orchards, straggled orchards with blight’ is telling in the light of the contrast between the father’s orchard and the convent orchard in

Mother Ireland. D'Arcy seems implicitly to be denying the possibility of a woman-woman economy.

Even Anna's relationship with Catalina has to be constructed in terms of the dominant discourse, often in the language of romance. Seeing a 'young girl' with 'black hair' in the market, Anna's 'heart g[ives] a little lurch because [she] thought she looked like Catalina' (77). She is jealous when she thinks that Catalina has gone to work for Iris (119). Later at the hotel, Anna 'wait[s] for her, eager for her as if her appearance alone would dispel the morbid gloom' (102). O'Connor has identified such elements of romance as typical of close friendships between women, citing the sociological research of Olicker (1989), whose survey revealed that '... [women's] accounts often portrayed the beginning of a new friendship in terms of excitement, heightened energies, frequent thought about the other, invigorated self-regard -- in short, in terms of the ardent sensibilities of romantic love' (O'Connor, 1992, 15). As O'Connor later points out in her discussion of 'gender-role ideologies about romantic love which depict friendships between women as very much second best', the women's romantic feelings towards each other can be interpreted as subverting the dominant discourse (91). The less optimistic construct is simply that there is no other available discourse for the articulation of love between women.

In *The High Road* Anna is conditioned to associate love with martyrdom and sacrifice. Reflecting on her former lover she thinks:

... that I had run away not because I loved him too much but because I feared I had not loved him enough, that I had not loved him in the selfless way in which as a

child I had loved the saints and the martyrs and that maybe as a grown-up I did not know how to love at all. I was not capable of the sacrifice (123).

Lorna Rookes-Hughes argues that this ‘affirms [the] Catholic view of maternity’ ‘that love is sacrifice’, and even that this is ‘the novel’s central statement’ (Rookes-Hughes, 1996, 86). Given that Rookes-Hughes refers also to the novel’s ‘Greek setting’, and to Catalina as a ‘Greek girl’, her overall reading of the text is somewhat suspect (86).¹⁹ Although ‘love’ and ‘sacrifice’ are indeed central themes, Anna and Catalina strive together for a *different* interpretation of ‘maternity’, a maternal symbolic. As Whitford argues of Irigaray: ‘Bringing the maternal-feminine into discourse does not imply that this is what women’s generic *identity* will consist of. On the contrary, it is the condition for distinguishing between mother and woman, so that *woman* can come to be’ (Whitford, 1991b, 139). In this context O’Brien, far from perpetrating ‘the Catholic view of maternity’, seeks actively to undermine it in her exploration of ‘the maternal-feminine’. O’Brien does *not* extol the concept of ‘love [a]s sacrifice’; rather, she reveals that this is the form that love must take within a symbolic order in which the death drives are distributed in favour of the male.

The novel’s themes of tragedy and sacrifice are reinforced by Catalina’s construction as ‘mountain Carmen’. In their efforts to avoid patriarchal definition, both women play ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ roles in turn. Like Irigaray, O’Brien sees such gender confusion as inevitable in relationships between women. Irigaray asks:

¹⁹ Though the novel’s setting is unspecific, the local characters speak Spanish and have Spanish names. D’Arcy identifies the town as a place ‘in which Moorish, English and Spanish kings ... held sway’ and constructs a local girl as a ‘Spanish senorita’. Looking at mantillas in a local shop, Anna wants to buy one for Catalina (81). All this renders Greece somewhat unlikely.

Considering that the peculiar status of what is called heterosexuality has managed, and is still managing, to escape notice, *how can relationships among women be accounted for in this system of exchange?* Except by the assertion that as soon as she desires ... a woman is a man. As soon as she has any relationship with another woman, she is homosexual, and therefore masculine (Irigaray, 1985, 193-194).

'Desire' between Anna and Catalina before their night on the mountain -- 'time out' from patriarchy and the symbolic order -- can be constructed only in terms of the masculine. Catalina is 'flirtatious' yet 'full of bravura' 'show[ing] no interest in clothes' (80-81). Catalina resists Anna's desire to dress her up, yet Anna 'picture[s] her ... in a taffeta dress the colour of fuschia, tier after tier of it ...'. This image suggests again 'the hackneyed poetic dream of the Spanish senorita' (8). In the absence of a coherent symbolic representation of love between women Anna can construct Catalina only as feminised love object or as 'chevalier' on a motorbike (84).

Even listening to Catalina talking about the land which is 'in her blood', Anna can only be 'the witness to her excitement' (82). Catalina competes in farming with her father, who she says 'always wants to break [her]'; 'since he had no son she had to be his son' (83). Anna shares in Catalina's earth-centredness only on the mountain. As heir apparent, scornful of her 'crying, sulking' sister, Catalina rails against the accoutrements of femininity:

She put her hand on the belt of her jeans and said she had no liking for finery. All that was for other women, different kinds of women, but not for her. She would hate herself if she were seduced by such things (81).

Aspiring to a university education, Catalina is sufficiently intelligent to recognise the cost of finery, later telling Anna: “I cleared two terraces to get this blouse”(113). The only ‘finery’ which Catalina will accept is a shell earring from Anna:

She took one earring and put it through her pierced ear and I took the other and put it through mine and then she shook her head and her hair as one on the brink of adventure (83).

This ritualistic exchange seems part of a different economy. Yet the poetic ‘line’ which ‘c[omes] to [Anna] out of the blue’ -- significantly, since Catalina and her ‘place’ are associated with blue -- suggests once more her construction of Catalina as love object, even muse: ‘Her heart amber and plump’.

As if to demonstrate the realities of relationships between women under patriarchy, the subsequent chapter is focused on Anna’s visit to Iris’ rented villa. Iris herself is constructed according to multiple stereotypes. Part *femme fatale*, part ‘moon goddess’:

Her eyelids are covered with silver shadow and her hair which is also silverish is strewn with little diamante things which glitter like dew. A woodland creature. Although no longer young, she is extremely slender and to emphasise her slenderness ... she keeps tightening a snake belt which she is wearing around her waist (53).

Whilst Catalina is subject, despite her resistance of ‘the other’, to constructs, Iris is all construct; the voluntary tightening of her ‘snake belt’ suggests submission to ‘femininity’. ‘Tightening [the] snake belt’ which emphasises her ‘socially desirable thinness’, Iris exemplifies the immobilization of the maternal body under patriarchy. This is emphasised

by the death of her son, Andy; Iris, like Ellen before her, cannot be a mother and a sexual being.

Distortion is further suggested in Chapter 11, in which the *scirocco* is portentous in overturning order:

It was like walking through a heated void. The wind still thrashed and keened and in the distance I could hear the cocks crowing deliriously which added to the displacement of things (104).

Yet the sirocco which has caused the apparent 'displacement of things' is, like the relationship between Anna and Catalina, part of a natural order, rather than of the dominant symbolic order. Irigaray suggests significantly that women's adaptation to patriarchal discourse causes 'some turbulence, we might even say some whirlwinds ...' (Irigaray, 1985, 106). Expectations that the natural world should be serene are, like constructs of femininity under patriarchy, unrealistic. But Catalina's attempts to offer Anna hospitality by giving her custard are undermined by her 'hunched but combative' father, who is 'waving a letter in his hand, a letter typed on official paper' (104-105). Anna's assumption that the letter is 'about money' makes sense in view of Catalina's position in a patriarchal economy (106). Anna and Catalina have both been shaped according to what Pelan terms 'social imperialism' (Pelan, 1996, 51). Certainly Catalina's father is not so very different from the Irish patriarchs of previous texts. When his wife fears that Catalina has been raped by the visiting stranger, his response is this:

What were they to do, the mother asked her husband, who merely shrugged and said he did not know since he was not a woman and had never been raped and that anyhow, women were the stupidest creatures on God's earth (110).

The similarities between Irish and Mediterranean cultures, hinted at through D'Arcy's sub-Joycean ramblings and through the resemblances of the local women to Anna's mother, are compounded by the anonymous letter received by Anna and concerning Catalina. These similarities have been identified in detail by Marina Warner, who points out that the concept of Mary 'act[ing] positively only through the principal man in her life':

... mirrors faithfully the patriarchal family as it exists in the Mediterranean and in Southern Ireland, where a woman is considered to have sovereign powers in the family ... yet has little or no rights beyond her role as a mother (Warner, 1976, 288).

Catalina is ultimately defined by her role as mother and wife. Though the anonymous letter seems an external threat, appearing 'along with the English-reading newspaper', it comes as a sharp reminder that she and Catalina are operating on the margins of the dominant discourse (117). Anna realises that: 'People disliked [Catalina], there was something in her that provoked malice, envy' and that she has been 'foolish to forget that [she] was in a small place where nothing, no matter how *harmless* [my emphasis], went unseen' (117-118).

At this point in the text D'Arcy becomes crucial to O'Brien's exposition of cultural commonality. The employment of Joycean style in his account of his supposed elopement with Iris signifies O'Brien's disillusionment with this particular strand of *écriture féminine*

which is analogous with men's freedom to exploit women along with language. Certainly, D'Arcy's pastiche of Joyce reinforces his hatred of women in general and of Iris in particular. His self-confessed admiration for 'Jolls Joyce' (130) is evident in his abuse of her:

'She tried all the winsome, wonsome ways the four winds had taught her ... She tossed her stumastelliacious hair like the Duchess of Alba in her light gown spun of Sistine shimmer ... half strumpet, half milk maid' (128).

Stereotypes such as 'strumpet' and 'milk maid' are, of course, male constructs. Iris is later caught, according to D'Arcy, between 'Cleopatra muse' and 'Florence Nightingale nanny' (131). D'Arcy claims to have used Iris as a means of getting money to visit his affirmed love object, 'one Ming who has lascivious powers over [him]' and who appears to conform to yet another cultural stereotype, that of oriental geisha (129). D'Arcy's rage at his own impotence is channeled into murderous impulses; he 'consider[s] strangling' Iris (p. 130), and later 'murder crosses [his] mind again, only this time more strenuously' (131). He expresses resentment at the 'contract' offered by Iris, identifying it as 'house arrest' (132). In the light of previous relationships in O'Brien such as Kate/Eugene and Willa/Herod, this seems ironically to underscore the position of women under patriarchy, rather than to redress the balance. After all, D'Arcy has the powers of contempt and ridicule at his disposal, mocking Iris' age and attempts at seduction (129) and calling her a 'cow' (133) This recalls 'Simon the poet', who in *Girls with Green Eyes* calls all women cows. Whether or not D'Arcy's account is true -- he ultimately claims not -- the force of

his misogynist invective remains considerable, and he still manages to trick Anna into selling her woman-identified 'ovary-shaped' earrings (133-134).

There are further echoes of Eugene in Catalina's account of her abortive visit to her supposed lover. Returning from the city where she has been rebuffed by him she appears to Anna in Magdalen pose:

I found Catalina on the top steps of the stone stairs that led to my room. Her head was down and her hair spilt over her face, covering it completely. At first, I was not even certain if it was she, then I recognized her by her pink running shoes and she looked up, desperate and haggard (135).

Thus reduced, even Catalina becomes defined by her accoutrements, specifically her 'pink running shoes.' 'Rant[ing] on about family chains, family madness' she goes on to describe her lover: 'He was cold and austere but the coldness was only a mask' (135). This reinforces once more the Catalina/Caithleen connection; Catalina too is susceptible to the 'shadow male'. Anna 'long[s] to be able to tell her something that was not true' but cannot (137); Catalina herself wants to know 'why he was afraid of her, why, why, why' (138).

The episode on the mountain seems to reconcile Anna to her past. She feels 'happy to be going home' and is able to reinterpret her relationship with her male lover in the light of her feeling for Catalina (159). She reflects after dinner that:

The lights along the wall were covered with pink roof tiles which transmitted a shower of radiance, the lining a frailer pink, not like stone at all, but like flesh, and something about these colours and these exquisite drained tints reminded me

of her and of him, as if love itself was a beautiful warm glow, a lamp inside of one (159).

Here, 'love itself' is non gender specific. Again Anna is trying to break down gender constructs. However is not so easy to revise the dominant order. Anna is brutally interrupted by Catalina's sister 'burst[ing] into [her] room' to confront her with the 'Lesbos' graffiti (160). The sister's accusations reassert the supremacy of the nuclear family under patriarchy:

I had deliberately destroyed their good name ... they were one of the oldest families in the parish and I had usurped their honour in one swoop (161).

Anna is further informed that '[Catalina's] father had beaten her savagely, in front of the neighbours, and but for her grandmother he might have killed her'. Cultural commonality is suggested once more. Anna is perceived ironically as a powerful, menacing and even -- in view of the gender ambiguities identified in female friendships by Irigaray, 'masculine' - - outsider.²⁰ In this context, D'Arcy's identification of Catalina as 'the Beata whom Satan tempts with sugar' posits Anna as female Satan (4). Anna finds herself 'hauled right back to that state of childhood trying to brazen out some terrible confrontation with adults, while quaking within' (161). Anna's sense of vulnerability is heightened by her visit to the priest, an inadequate specimen by the standards of *A Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland* with his 'protruding stomach' and obvious 'brunette toupee', but still sanctioned by his position to inspire fear (166). Anna is forced to participate once again in patriarchal exchange, suspecting that the priest might have told her that their patron saint is not Saint

²⁰ 'Ironically' because, although Anna's social status as a tourist from London posits her as relatively 'powerful', her destructive effect on Catalina is the direct result of a patriarchal society's intolerance of intimacy between women.

Sebastian but John the Baptist 'as some sort of consolation or reward for the lavish offering I had given him' (166-167). The priest's revelation underscores the patriarchal construction of the mountain 'baptism'.

The possibility of a woman-to-woman economy is further negated by Catalina's estranged husband Juan. Looking 'like an embryo' whilst being a killer in the making, he embodies the distortion of maternity under patriarchy, the 'matricide' on which Irigaray argues that 'the whole of our society and our culture' is based (Whitford, 1991a, 36).²¹ The economy of O'Brien's language suggests the focused and concentrated nature of Juan's violence; the 'uncharted vortexes of hurt and rage' apparent in the eyes of the local women (19) are condensed in Juan: '... his eyes vortexes of hurt and rage'. His tattoo, 'an eye, a blue indigo eye with thick indigo lashes' (171) supersedes the 'lucky eye' which Catalina gives to Anna as a 'protection against evil' (106). Without her lucky eye Catalina dies in Anna's place at the tattooed hand of Juan, whose physical confidence is suggested by the restaurant proprietress' comment to Anna: "He heself"(171).

As Catalina is murdered, the androgynous quality of her scream -- 'it could have been a man or a woman, the gender being impossible to tell because of the pitch and the delirium of it' -- negates her womanhood once and for all (174). Under the 'nihilistic religion' of phallocracy Catalina is freed from patriarchal constructions of 'femininity' only by death (Whitford, 1991a, 92). Yet she is immediately reconstructed as an object of exchange between men. Beaten by her father, she is murdered by the husband whom she has attempted to deny. On hearing the news Anna thinks significantly 'that maybe it was her

²¹ In this respect, Juan prefigures the terrorist McGreevy, who in *House of Splendid Isolation* is simultaneously likened to a 'foetus' and a 'corpse' (O'Brien, 1996, 7).

father, still livid from the disgrace over the graffiti' (175). The male supremacy of *Casualties of Peace* is reinstated. Catalina's family history is dwelt upon, with 'an older woman' spectator 'ream[ing] off the names of grandparents and great-grandparents from both sides of the family' (175). Anna is further informed of Juan's behaviour with the corpse: "He drink har blood ... he say I lave har ..." (176). This recalls the Dracula of *Mother Ireland*, positing Juan as the 'absentee landlord' of Catalina's body (Deane, 1997, 89). Heterosexual love is linked once more to consumption in contrast to the lesbian encounter in which exchange is equal, and in which there is, as Irigaray puts it: 'No need for a wound to remind us [women] that blood exists' (Irigaray, 1985, 206). Catalina has fulfilled the destiny proscribed for her by D'Arcy; "beata, beata," comments an onlooker seeing her corpse. Charlotte/Portia has discovered the body 'on the way to the village to sell her Walkman', a circumstance which underscores Catalina's position as 'commodity' (176-177). Charlotte/Portia describes the 'gruesome tableau' that she beheld, with Juan 'crying to his Maker' (177). Catalina's mother and the women around her are 'weeping, like extras in one of the Stations of the Cross' (178). Anna, pulled towards nihilism -- 'Who in their right minds would not exchange love for death?' -- feels herself being constructed as a 'Bad Shepherd' who has led Catalina astray (178-179). This reinforces her construction as female 'Satan' (4) whilst highlighting the inescapability of the patriarchal discourses which are themselves responsible for Catalina's death. Once more Anna herself is passed 'between men', saved from a family 'vendetta' by her compatriot D'Arcy. It is Catalina's grandmother, the supposed witch, who provides the concluding note of qualified optimism. She gives Anna Catalina's 'vibrant' hair, which appears as an

amalgam of Christian iconography and matriarchal symbolism: 'Under the moon it glistened, black but for the most part red where it was matted with blood' (180). This bodes ill for the possibility of an alternative symbolic order. O'Connor points out that: 'It is only by demythologizing women's lives that we can come to an understanding of their real nature and complexity' (O'Connor, 1992, 175). The grandmother gives the hair '... with a kind of ecstasy. Take it, she was saying, for to love one must learn to part with everything' (180). This reinforces the theme of Christian martyrdom identified by Rookes-Hughes whilst also -- and this is more important within the wider context of O'Brien's output -- suggesting the difficulties for women of operating within the dominant discourse. 'Love' in this context does indeed entail 'part[ing] with everything'. The women's brief experience of 'exchange without identifiable terms' has been, as Irigaray suggests that it must be under the current symbolic order, 'utopian' (Irigaray, 1985, 197). This exposes one of the problematics of Irigaray's theories, namely that whilst she is 'positing an identity that still has to be created' she also realises that 'being outside the symbolic order is not a condition to which women should aspire; the absence of adequate symbolization is the dereliction in which they already exist' (Whitford 1991a, 136 & 78). *Post-High Road* O'Brien is no longer interested in 'utopia'. Instead she recognises the need for direct engagement with the dominant discourse. This recognition is anticipated by her acknowledgement, through Anna's response to the bullfight, of women *and* men as victims of phallocracy, and it will characterise *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Down by the River* (158).

Chapter 6

‘Might before Right’: *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) and *Down by the River* (1996)

In Chapter 5 I argued that whilst *The High Road* explores the possibility of an alternative symbolic order or ‘imaginary and the symbolic of intra-uterine life’ the death of Catalina signifies ultimately the inescapability of the dominant discourse (Whitford, 1991a, 39). Though Anna’s experience on the mountain does transport her to an ‘other landscape’ this constitutes not the permanent realisation of a symbolic order based on the feminine but ‘time out’ from patriarchy (O’Brien, 1988, 157). In *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Down by the River* O’Brien progresses to direct engagement with the dominant discourse which is represented in the extreme forms of terrorism and incestuous rape.

Robin Morgan ‘locate[s terrorism] along an entire spectrum of patriarchal violence’ whilst Madeleine Leonard cites Mackinnon’s argument that ‘the propensity to rape is ... an extension of normal sexual behaviour in the male population’ (Morgan, 1989, 16; Smyth, 1993, 108). O’Brien’s themes of terrorism and abortion law represent a significant departure from O’Brien’s previous work which has been perceived as repetitive and narrow in scope.¹ These issues offer considerable scope for O’Brien’s continuing

¹ Maureen L. Grogan has pointed out that: ‘Because O’Brien relies strongly on the power of memory, using places, persons, and events from her life ... as bases from which to construct her fiction, and because she seems to be emotionally involved with her female protagonists she has often been accused of a

examination of patriarchal nihilism.² Throughout *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Down by the River* O'Brien develops themes common to previous works of history and land ownership, constructs of femininity -- with specific attention to Irishness -- and cultural representations of maternity.

House of Splendid Isolation engages with these issues from male as well as female perspectives, principally through the terrorist McGreevy but also through subsidiary male characters such as Rory the policeman.³ This signifies O'Brien's ongoing recognition that men as well as women are constrained by patriarchal social and symbolic orders. Rory's marriage, unlike for example that of Kate and Eugene, is viewed from the perspectives of both partners. Whilst the position of his wife Sheila as subservient consumer comes as no surprise insight is offered into Rory's response to this:

'You live in clover,' he says and gestures to a new carpet, the cuckoo clock, the sideboard crammed with ornaments Wardrobes. Finery. Jewellery. Lolly. There was a time when this avarice of hers was a charm in itself and never did he go for a trip or do a job without bringing back some little thing to hang on her (O'Brien, 1994, 10).

damaging and self-defeating subjectivity' (Grogan, 1996, 9). Obviously *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Down by the River* move beyond 'memory' and identification with female protagonists.

² It must be acknowledged though that O'Brien expressed concern about abortion law well in advance of the publication of *Down by the River*. In her 1990 interview with Julia Carlson, for example, she argues that 'No woman is overjoyed to have an abortion, but if she must have it, she should not be made to feel like a criminal'. O'Brien goes on to identify the refusal to women of 'access to information on abortion' as 'also a potential form of murder. Murder to the lives of women who are already born and trying to live their lives' (Carlson, 1990, 77). This can be linked in turn to Irigaray's identification of cultural matricide (Whitford, 1991a, 36).

³ As I argued in Chapters 1 and 2 O'Brien does offer insights into the characters of Frank (*Girls in their Married Bliss*) and Tom (*Casualties of Peace*). *A Pagan Place*, *Night* and *The High Road* are, however, almost exclusively woman-centred.

Here the gradual attrition of romance is not simply implied but clearly delineated from the perspective of a male character. Sheila has been constructed as a consumer and defined by her possessions and Rory has become disenchanted with the very qualities which initially defined her as 'feminine'. In this context Irigaray's analysis of women as and in relation to commodities is significant: 'Man endows the commodities he produces with a narcissism that blurs the seriousness of utility, of use' so that 'perversion [is] attributed to commodities' (Irigaray, 1985, 177). Rory constructs Sheila as narcissist and consumer then resents her 'perversion', telling her "You live in clover"⁴. By revealing Rory's 'disenchantment' as well as his capacity for 'endowment' O'Brien demonstrates even more clearly than in her previous woman-centred texts the commodification of the feminine.

In *Down by the River* O'Brien attempts to render the character of James MacNamara - the father who commits incestuous rape -- understandable if not actually sympathetic. He gives himself permission to force his daughter into sex by 'allow[ing] himself now to advance into a charade that it is not she, she is a stranger in her black dress and her little beaded evening purse' (O'Brien, 1996, 83). Again O'Brien's theme of compromised female subjectivity is familiar but in this instance the compromise is specifically explained. As James is faced with prosecution he contemplates and subsequently commits suicide. O'Brien is careful to construct him throughout this process as a sentient being. Insight is offered into his state of mind:

⁴ Sheila's narcissism -- that is, the pleasure which she takes in 'finery' and 'jewellery' -- recalls that of Kate in *Girls in their Married Bliss*, in relation to whom I cited Arp's comment that: 'Narcissism is the attempt to realize the union with one's own body ... that has been denied through the process of bodily alienation.' Relating 'bodily alienation' to consumer goods, Arp cites Beauvoir's argument that the 'subject[s] search for itself in things' is 'a way of fleeing itself' (Simons 1995, 167-169).

When did it start. Why did it start. His blood about to be dispatched to Oxford to undergo a test. Why did it start. Why did it start. Who in the wide world could answer that for him which he himself did not know (249).

It is significant that James' blood -- the crucial factor in patrilineage -- is rendered shameful and pathetic. As Irigaray argues in 'The Neglect of Female Genealogies': 'Patriarchal power is organized by submitting one genealogy to the other' (Irigaray, 1993, 16). Patriarchal domination rests on the inviolability of paternal genealogy so that the testing of James' blood calls into question the viability of the dominant order. As in *House of Splendid Isolation* the nature of this order is examined through attempted insight into the male psyche.

O'Brien's detailed characterisations of men typify her attempts throughout *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Down by the River* to place the issues examined in previous texts within their broader socio-political contexts. In *House of Splendid Isolation* the issue of terrorism can be read as the extreme form of the patriarchal nihilism identified in texts such as *August is a Wicked Month*, *Casualties of Peace* and *Night*, whilst O'Brien's engagement with abortion law in *Down by the River* is the culmination of her ambiguous representations of maternity. Mary's incestuous and under-age pregnancy is paralleled by her mother's simultaneously developing cancer. O'Brien's treatment of maternity in *Down by the River* can be read as an extension of episodes such as Kate's voluntary sterilization, the deaths of the sons of sexually active women such as Ellen and Iris and the 'immobilizing' mother-daughter relationships of *A Pagan Place* and *Night*.

House of Splendid Isolation engages immediately with the issue of patriarchal nihilism. The epigraphs place this within a colonial context. O'Brien quotes Sir John Davies' comment to the Earl of Salisbury in 1606 that the Irish were '*men full of poison*' and Lloyd George's remark -- made 'after dispatching the Black and Tans to Ireland in 1920' - - that '*We have murder by the throat*' [sic]. By analysing the behaviour and motives of police and republican. O'Brien exposes the commonality of patriarchal nihilism in Ireland and illustrates the ways in which as Gerardine Meaney suggests in her essay 'Sex and Nation':

... colonised peoples, often long after colonisation itself has ended, tend to observe or impose strictly differentiated gender roles in order to assert the masculinity and right to power of the (male) subject (Smyth, 1993, 233).

In *House of Splendid Isolation* the republican terrorist McGreevy is introduced as follows:

'Bastards ... bastards ... baaas ... tards,' he says it again and again in each and every intonation available to him, says it without moving a muscle or uttering a syllable, scarcely breathing, curled up inside the hollow of a tree once struck by lightning; cradle and coffin, foetus and corpse (7).

Imagery linking birth to death -- 'cradle and coffin, foetus and corpse' -- compounds McGreevy's nihilism, recalling the likening of Juan to an embryo in *The High Road* (171) and similarly suggesting cultural 'matricide' (Whitford, 1991a, 36). McGreevy can be read as the culmination of all O'Brien's 'shadow males' -- Eugene, Herod, Dr Flagglar, Juan, the fathers of *A Pagan Place*, *Night* and *Mother Ireland* -- yet O'Brien's construction of a

sympathetic 'shadow male' points again to her recognition of men as potential victims of patriarchy.

McGreevy's sympathetic qualities are of further significance in the light of Robin Morgan's thesis on terrorism. Analysing the attraction of the terrorist for women Morgan argues that:

[The terrorist] mystique is the latest version of the Demon Lover. He evokes pity because he lives in death. He emanates sexual power because he represents obliteration. He excites with the mind of fear. He is the essential challenge to tenderness (Morgan, 1989, 24).

McGreevy, curled up like a foetus/corpse and bound to his dead mother, wife and child certainly 'lives in death'.

Having established the nihilism of the republican O'Brien moves on to the Garda. O'Brien's implication of common ground between terrorist and Garda is significant in the light of Dworkin's comment that:

In male culture, police are heroic and so are outlaws; males who enforce standards are heroic and so are those who violate them. The conflicts between these groups embody the male commitment to violence: conflict is action, action is masculine (Dworkin, 1981, 53).

In *House of Splendid Isolation* police violence is suggested by the appearance of Rory's wife Sheila 'holding up in its bloodied bag the shins of a deer he had shot a month ago' (8). Rory 'love[s] to get up early on Sunday morning and go into the woods with his

rifle, to track and shoot deer'. O'Brien rationalises this by recounting Rory's description to Sheila of going:

... in the early morning to the wooded tracks under the purple mountains, a moistness in the air, young trees and old trees dripping, astonishment when two or three of these haughty creatures appeared and stood still, then the bang bangs, one of them felled, the remainder vanishing like wisps of smoke (10).

It is clear however that the only way in which Rory knows how to commune with nature is to kill. Rory's domination of nature is implicitly associated with his commodification of Sheila. Furthermore the shooting of the deer is juxtaposed with the shooting of 'young men coming down from up North' who in their turn have put 'ordinary folk too in dread of these faceless men with their guns and their hoods' (9). Later on their way to capture McGreevy the Garda run over a female deer which then has to be shot. The 'throb ... when the bullet enters the flesh' explicitly prefigures the shooting of Josie. After shooting the deer the men 'wash[ing] their hands and faces in the stream are like penitents ... seeking intercession for something fateful that is to be' (199-201). This suggests discomfort with patriarchal constructions of 'masculinity' which demand violence by relegating the death drives to the masculine (Whitford, 1991b, 138).

Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell cite Seidler's comments on the construction of male identity. Seidler argues that:

We [men] have learnt to pride ourselves in our struggles against our own desires and natures, to be able to identify our sense of self with our reason. If successful,

this denial can mean that we no longer have a sense of self which exists separately from our sense of male identity (Edley and Wetherell, 1995, 157).

Thus McGreevy is able to deny the 'self' that longs for peace and 'wains' just as Rory is able to subsume his love of nature to destruction (165).

As in *The High Road* O'Brien links Christianity and violence, undermining Rory's hunting prowess by revealing that he and his colleagues are known as 'the three wise men' (p. 9). Ironically McGreevy is later seen in 'a manger of straw' as a travesty of Jesus (13). This simultaneously recalls McGreevy as matricidal 'foetus' and -- paradoxically -- echoes the 'woman as Christ' analogy of *The High Road*. McGreevy is aligned with the feminine and specifically with Josie. Yet the connection between Jesus and the three wise men is not inappropriate since the Garda identify with the republican in the face of outsiders. Rory curses 'the British army' and 'the RUC' for allowing McGreevy to escape and applauds the terrorist's initiative: 'Even in his outrage he gave the fellow credit and said, "That's my boy, McGreevy, that's my baby"' (11). 'Baby' reinforces the images of McGreevy as foetus and Jesus. Furthermore Rory identifies with McGreevy as a heroic figure. Going to fetch a takeaway meal:

... he was out of the hall door with a stride, a stride in which he tried to imitate a young man who had sprung from a moving car and he remembered the hero he had once been [playing hurley] (p. 12).

Rory is by no means unsusceptible to what Morgan terms the terrorist's 'lust for the role of hero' (Morgan, 1989, 55).

The implicit comparison of the McGreevy operation to a game -- suggested also by the 'bang bangs' in the account of deer shooting -- is brought abruptly to a halt by the ensuing description of McGreevy's visit to his dead child. During the visit the police 'search[] the white habit for explosives' (13). Just as O'Brien tempers Rory's nihilism with accounts of his response to the mountains and conversations with his daughter she depicts McGreevy delivering a calf, moved by 'the love, the impossible licking love of it' (15). This birth -- and McGreevy's response to it -- form an implicit contrast with the cultural distortions of maternity which *House of Splendid Isolation* ultimately explores. The destructive impulses of Rory and McGreevy are rendered all the more shocking by the revelation of such moments in contrast to, for example, Herod and Dr Flaggler who are represented only in nihilistic mode. In *House of Splendid Isolation* O'Brien suggests an ongoing -- though usually suppressed -- susceptibility to what Dworkin identifies as the male 'memory of his origins [and of] the sorrowful or enraged calls of the woman he left behind' (50). Yet even the farmer whose calf McGreevy delivers is unable to denounce terrorism: "I'm not for them, Julia ... I'm as opposed to them as you are," he wants to say, but he can't, the words stick' (17). In his frustration, he breaks his wife's jug, 'something she loved'. In the light of Rory's commodification of women and nature it is significant that the jug was decorated with cornflowers.

With the introduction of Josie, an elderly woman living on her own and a 'casualty of war', O'Brien reiterates the fears experienced by Willa and Anna.⁵ The visiting nurse

⁵ Josie may well represent the construct of 'Mother Ireland' as *Shan Van Vocht* or 'poor old woman', which as Margaret Ward points out is 'a symbolic representation of Ireland' and the name chosen for a nationalist feminist paper 'published in Belfast between the years 1896-1899' (Ward, 1995, 8).

significantly reassures Josie that ““a *man*’s home is his castle”” (my emphasis). There is to be no security for Josie whose whose space is all too violable since her ‘castle’ is crumbling around her. This signifies her ‘homelessness’ in the symbolic order and recalls the homeless states of Ellen and Mary Hooligan (Whitford, 1991b, 125).

Josie is seen to have been subjected throughout her marriage to ‘social imperialism’ (Pelan, 1996, 51). Her reminiscences reveal the united front presented by her husband and his ‘best friends ... drinking together’ (37). The friend whom ‘she has known all her married life and the one that she dreads --the Snooper’ is the ultimate instrument of her destruction, informing the Garda that she is harbouring McGreevy (104). Like Rory the husband James and his friends hunt and bring dead rabbits to Josie as ‘trophies’:

They laid them at her feet He decided to deck her so that two were laid on her shoulders like tippets, the fresh blood warm and simmery.... her husband said she need never send off to the furriers for a catalogue, they could make her a fur at home, a grey and tawny contraption that would knock spots out of any manufacturer’s stuff (42).⁶

Interestingly, Ward in her study of women’s active involvement with Irish Nationalism cites a report from the *Irish Citizen* of 9 May 1914 which recounts Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington’s exhortations to women and the outraged response of ‘the men for whom

⁶ This passage acquires further significance in the light of Dworkin’s account of a pornographic photograph entitled “BEAVER HUNTERS” and accompanied by the information that the hunters ““stuffed and mounted their trophy as soon as they got her home.”” Dworkin argues that the woman *is* ‘a captured animal’; ‘the hunt -- the targeting, tracking down, pursuing, the chase, the overpowering of, the immobilizing of even the wounding of -- is common practice, whether called sexual pursuit, seduction, or romance’ (Dworkin, 1981, 25-27). In *House of Splendid Isolation*, O’Brien is clearly positing Josie as James’ ‘trophy’.

rifles were to be procured at the sacrifice of 'fur coats' (Ward, 1993, 42). In this context the men's decoration of Josie can be seen to suppress not only her personal subjectivity but her political instincts, which remain latent until her involvement with McGreevy. Anxious to restrict Josie to 'fur coat' mode James goes on to boast that she has been mistaken by a fellow passenger on the boat from America for Gloria Swanson.

Josie's 'tippets' might not be 'manufacturer's stuff' in a commercial sense but they signify James' own 'manufacturing' of the 'femininity' which he desires. Furthermore O'Brien posits Josie and the rabbits as fellow victims of patriarchal nihilism, linking 'the circulation of women among men' with 'the appropriation of nature by men' (Irigaray, 1985, 184).

In *House of Splendid Isolation* Josie's subservient position is further and repeatedly underlined by O'Brien's analogies between women and horses. Watching Josie on their wedding day James reflects that: 'Her haunches were what he liked best, wide and yet with a daintiness to them. A good mare' (29). James 'never trie[s] to mount her on the nights he was drunk, he just slept and roared and his knees cracked as his shins arched up and down in the mimicry of riding his favourite filly ...' (43). Thinking of James' 'nice bits', Josie concludes that: 'Horses were at the root of it, horses like concubines ...' (57). He is able to call them the 'pet names' which he denies Josie (58). Josie is also a 'concubine' trading sex for the status of chatelaine. After his discovery of Josie's relationship with Father John, James humiliates her in front of friends who include 'a knacker ... who dealt in old horseflesh'. 'Feed. Shovel. Ride. Woman and horse,' James said, remarking on the likeness but stressing that a horse had more honour (137).

James 'likes the power he has over her', 'master of her ... as he endeavours to prise her apart' (44). Josie's commodity status is emphasised by James' 'refus[al] to go to the shops for commodities' until 'he sees her pump her bicycle' to go herself in which case 'he either buys the commodities and repents or buys them and flings them down ...' (44).

Josie's position in relation to patriarchal discourse is graphically illustrated by the episode in which she approaches the local doctor for an abortion, deciding that 'She would talk code and he would talk code back'. Anticipating Doctor Tom in *Down by the River* he posits himself as "'A friend ... A lover ... And a doctor'" but affects outrage when he finds out what Josie wants, citing 'the laws of nature' and 'the Hippocratic oath' which he is all too willing to violate by engaging in sexual relations with a patient (47-48). Despite the apparent neutrality of 'the laws of nature' each of these laws is patriarchally constructed. After the encounter with the doctor Josie thinks of the oranges that James has to have squeezed for him as a hangover cure and reflects that: 'The squashed halves of the oranges on the draining board reminded her of her battered breasts' (49). This seems a sad travesty of Anna's analogy of oranges with Catalina's breasts in *The High Road* -- breasts are re-evaluated as objects for consumption rather than as 'globes to be worshipped' -- but it does recall the association of breasts with lemons and thence with stigmata and martyrdom and underline the physical suffering experienced by Josie as an inevitable part of her marriage. James and Josie become emotionally close only with the annihilation of her sexuality. 'His commandeering of her, the wallops, the vaseline he smeared on her' become 'things of the past' as she is reductively perceived as 'his nice old nurse' (59-60).

By the time McGreevy appears on the scene Josie has been reconstructed as vulnerable *Shan Van Vocht*. His intrusion recalls the realisation of Willa's worst fears in *Casualties of Peace*. Josie's response to the 'face hooded, eyebrows prominent, eyes like grit and a voice reasoned, telling her not to move and not to scream ...' is to be 'amazed that speech has not betrayed her because in all the nightmares it does'. Josie goes on to reflect 'that this is no nightmare, or rather the substantiated one, the criminal she has read of and has thought of as being chiefly confined to cities confronting her in her bed...' (61). Josie subsequently experiences the 'lucidity' of 'annihilation' (62). This prefigures her romantic attachment to McGreevy since as Morgan argues 'models [of romantic love] have strengthened cultural assumptions that hostility is inevitably linked with violence and that love's only escape is a liberation into death' (103). Josie's space is invaded and claimed much as women's space has been marked in previous O'Brien texts by lovers: 'it is difficult to believe that she is in her own room or what was her own room an hour before'. Later, observing the extent to which McGreevy has made himself at home, she reflects: 'Her dish, her wax, her primus, her house and yet not hers' (75). Josie records in her diary that '*This house will be notorious for the fact that he hid here*' (86). Like Anna she contemplates sleeping tablets but finds that she has 'not nearly enough to take a life away' (p. 64). Even her telephone is transformed into an object of menace: 'Its lifelessness conveyed itself to her, long before she reached it. A viper, grey-black, mute in her shaking hand when she brought it to her mouth to speak' (65).

McGreevy himself exudes menace even after the removal of his hood: 'He takes her by surprise coming from the back hall carrying an enamel mug and a plastic razor. His T-shirt

is short-sleeved and it is as if she is encountering someone naked' (73). The 'tattoo on his wrist, the tricolour, nestling, green, white and gold, in a circle of indigo' (74) recalls the eye tattooed on Juan's wrist in *The High Road* (171) and reinforces the 'matricide' connection. McGreevy draws Josie into conflict, telling her: "It's your war whether you like it or not" and projecting 'a chilling authority' (74-75).⁷ The widespread nature of terrorism is underlined by Josie's diary entry: '*I read somewhere that they train them in Libya*' (78). McGreevy distances himself from the results of his activities: '*They don't call it death or murder, they call it a job*' (86). When he describes his shooting technique to Josie: 'There was no tremor in his voice, no inconclusiveness, simply the reply, shooting the biggest part, like shooting a wall' (97). Metonymic representation -- which recalls the reduction of the deer to its 'bloodied shins' -- permits detachment.⁸ McGreevy's detachment from his 'job' in some way communicates itself to Josie, who writes: '*I like everything about him except what he does*' and begins to accept his quest for '*Justice. Personal identity. Truth*' without asking whose (98). Her dream of McGreevy is significant in its sexualisation of violence:

Funny, I dreamt of him. A little gold sleeper that he was trying to put through my ear He licked the sleeper then started to pierce it through. A sudden warm ejaculation of blood and his saying 'I know I'm hurting ... But it's for a good reason ... It's for the nicest possible reason (99).

⁷ Josie later reflects in her diary: '*The saddest bit is that we're the same stock, the same faith, we speak the same tongue and yet we don't*' (87). This seems to highlight, not only women's perceived resistance to terrorism and violence, but the impossibility of men and women 'speak[ing] the same tongue' within a dominant order based solely upon the phallus.

⁸ This is a return to the reductive metonymy of the poolside scene in *The High Road*, which differs from the metonymy of the meeting of Anna's and Catalina's fingers since this heightened the fluidity of their sexuality.

Like the reference to McGreevy in the manger this passage aligns him curiously with the feminine. The earring reference recalls Mary's tenderness towards Lil in *Night*:

Some goddam dreg of love welled up in me and I wanted to put my hand out and touch the earlobe, the cool, the white earlobe that just missed being chafed by the rim of the gold (46).

Yet appropriation of a female symbolic by the masculine is also suggested. 'Red blood', assigned by Irigaray to 'the mother's side', is transformed through the reference to ejaculation into semen which is a 'stable' masculine fluid (Irigaray, 1985, 186).

McGreevy's 'masculinity' seems ultimately to prevail. His effect on Rory's daughter Aoife -- whom he has told whilst on the run that 'he was starving, he'd eat a young child' -- is to make her 'feel[] as if she has no tongue at all'. Again male 'silencing' is universalised. Aoife is as her mother observes 'afraid' also of her father, telling him: "I have no tongue"(100-101). Later Josie tells McGreevy: "You've silenced us all" (111). She has been silenced also by James so that she 'allow[s] no whimper of pain or even protest to escape her lips' as he beats her (135). Communication is problematic even in her relationship with Father John: 'Between lovers there is that something to be said but what gets said is either too much or too little, never the one living-word' (142).⁹

⁹ In *I Love to You* Irigaray explains that: "The 'to' in the expression 'I love to you' attempts to 'overcome the obstacles posed by relations of appropriation or of fusion between persons and by replacing intersubjective relationships with instrumentality' 'by confounding an inertia found in both sexes and which paralyzes exchanges between them' (Irigaray, 1996, 108). Josie and Father John are subject to cultural as well as heterosexual 'paralysis'; this seems a further obstacle to their discovery of 'the one living-word'.

The relationship between Josie and Father John further emphasises male collusion in nihilism by underlining the connections between violence and religion. Morgan argues on the subject of religion and terrorism that: 'Religion is about terror' and that 'Catholic Christianity in particular ... has retained every feature of its androcentric "revolutionary character", at the heart of which has always coiled the hiss of obliteration' (Morgan, 1989, 88-100). The connection between 'Catholic Christianity' and nihilism is suggested by Father John's very appearance:

It was his eyes she first responded to, a sort of indigo colour with thick black brows which had the odd silver hair that gave them a look of marcasite, fevered eyes, which for all their modesty had had some compact with the devil (123).

Father John seems 'A shadow. A man who might come from behind a tree, embrace a person and disappear again'. This recalls the 'shadow males' of O'Brien's previous fictions. Like them Father John is a consumer -- 'his hand [is] like a web drawing itself over hers' -- whom Josie tries unsuccessfully to consume in turn as they briefly indulge in 'that infant-like glee of two people devouring each other' (141). The uselessness to Josie of patriarchal Christianity is revealed when Father John asks her: "To whom do you go for comfort?":

'Nobody ... My religion,' she said and wondered if he saw that she was lying because in fact her religion had never been a comfort, never throughout the long years of her marriage ... (129).

Later the bomb handed to McGreevy is said to resemble 'the Blessed Martin de Pores box that used to be on the school table' (161). When the bomb finally goes off in Josie's house

-- rather than in that of the targeted politician -- the result is 'an innocent mass of paint, where a picture of Christ and the virgins has been splashed and muralled into a wall' (210). As in *The High Road* woman and Christ are united as victims. In this instance McGreevy himself is aligned not with baby Jesus in the manger but with the Jesus who, as Baba reflects in *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 'snub[s his] mother' (119). After his arrest McGreevy 'l[ies] on the stretcher with the cold unswerving conviction of a Messiah' (211).¹⁰

But it is through the figure of Father John that O'Brien most explicitly links Christianity with misogyny. He is afraid of Josie who 's[ees] by the terror in his expression that he [is] smitten with her but doing everything to stamp it out ...' (130). In the end Josie is simply exchanged between men. She is beaten by James after being stood up by the priest and is subsequently driven to shoplifting, stealing commodities in compensation for having to be one. When she 'ask[s James] to hold her after being caught 'the way he [does so is] the cruellest of all. Blankness, like a blank wall, holding on to another bit of blank wall ...' (143-4). Her self-image is gradually eroded as she wonders 'How long does it take to murder first a body and then the image interred within that body, outlasting it, outliving it, refusing to give up the ghost' (144). A chance sighting of Father John who 'tear[s] off like a man who had seen a ghost' -- as in a sense he has since Josie retains 'the ghost' of love despite having been 'murdered' -- brings to her mind 'the spectre of the

¹⁰ The construction of McGreevy as 'Messiah' is a complex one. In the context of the 'woman as Christ' analogy of *The High Road*, McGreevy seems to be aligned with the powerless Josie against the Garda and ultimately against colonialism. The 'Messiah' analogy also suggests admiration for the republican cause. Yet there is the question of Dworkin's identification of 'the crucifixion of Christ' as symptomatic, along with the celebration of outlaw and police cultures, of patriarchal 'ador[ation of] violence' (Dworkin, 1981, 53). In this context, McGreevy as Messiah becomes an integral part of this continuum.

chapel house'. This recalls Anna's choice of meeting place with a projected lover in *The High Road* (146).

Josie's own house is violated not only by McGreevy -- who mocks her as '*Bhean an Tighe*' or 'Woman of the house' (76) -- but by the Garda who 'ransack' it (153). Collusion between men is emphasised once again in the 'Last Days' section of the novel in which accounts are given of the guards' conversation as they plot McGreevy's arrest whilst simultaneously paying homage to his perceived heroism. Ned, for example, recites a poem about Michael Collins, remarking that: "There'll be a poem about this soon" (177). This reinforces the patriarchally constructed nature of myth. Morgan has pointed out the links made by Yeats and Joyce -- O'Brien's literary 'fathers' -- between politics and myth (Morgan, 1989, 56). The inescapability of patriarchal authority -- legal and illegal -- is emphasised. McGreevy's soft spot for Josie is negated by his admission that if he left the 'Organisation' 'there would be another to take [his] place and another after him ...' (182). The IRA is never named in *House of Splendid Isolation*.¹¹

The exchange between Matt and Cormac suggests the techniques applied to new Garda: 'Young lads have to learn to be accommodating ...' (184). When Cormac tells Matt that his sister married an English soldier Matt replies: "Worse, if she married one of these maniacs that we're tracking". This is ironic given the Garda's overall tendency to lionise McGreevy -- Cormac likens him to Cuchulainn (188) -- and given O'Brien's

¹¹ In his transcript of an interview with O'Brien Terry Coleman points out that: 'In the book she never uses the initials IRA. It's always "The Organization." Why? "A book isn't just for the week or the year it's published. It belongs to ..." Ah, was she saying that her book would outlast the IRA? "I hope it will outlast the troubles, which will include the IRA"' (Coleman, 1994).

presentation of male violence as common to terrorist, Garda and 'hero'. As the novel reaches its climax McGreevy reveals to Josie that his 'heart' and 'home' are where 'the graves are'. This recalls his opening appearance as foetus/corpse and aligns him finally with death. But it is Josie who like Willa and Catalina is to be sacrificed. Josie, though, dies protecting a man. In the context of O'Brien's ambivalent treatment of maternity it is significant that Josie is shot wearing 'an old raincoat' and having cut her hair (204).¹² Although the text does not actually state that she is mistaken for a man this remains a possibility. In a patriarchal order Josie must die for having relinquished her feminine and maternal identities. Furthermore, in the light of the 'Rebecca' dimension of *Girl with Green Eyes* the hastily-appropriated raincoat recalls the 'borrowed' identity of Caithleen/Kate. In *House of Splendid Isolation* Josie yearns briefly to be someone else, a younger woman who could give McGreevy 'wains' (195). Like Kate -- whose sterilization is a form of death -- Josie becomes a martyr to her own quest for identity:

A shower of bullets like a swarm of crazed insects whiz back and forth around her ... her mouth opening to say, but then non-say, is struck speechless ... her legs and her lower half drops through the ceiling where she dangles like some grotesque trapeze artiste, while Guard Slattery down below, without even having to touch her, knows that it is a woman, that it is the shins and toes and bunions of a woman ... (205-6).

¹² The masculine attire which Josie is wearing at the time of her death is of further significance in the light of Eavan Boland's argument that the woman who wishes 'to feel the power of the nation as well as its defeat' must 'take on the properties of the hero' (Boland, 1996, 65).

The 'crazed insects' simile recalls the wasps which McGreevy and Josie earlier rolled around on the floor to avoid, leading to the Gardas' mistaken assumption that they are having 'an orgy' (192). Josie is finally rendered 'speechless'. Her 'shins' recall the 'gruesome' shins of Rory's deer in their 'bag fuzzed with blood' (9). The Garda and McGreevy are ultimately constructed as 'two supremos who had tracked each other like polar animals' with Josie as their common victim (210).

Issues of history and land ownership previously explored by O'Brien in *A Pagan Place*, *Night* and *Mother Ireland* are seen in *House of Splendid Isolation* to be universalising factors in patriarchal nihilism. The novel's prologue -- which like the epilogue employs the narrative voice of Josie's aborted child -- begins:

History is everywhere. It seeps into the soil, the sub-soil. Like rain, or hail, or snow, or blood. A house remembers. An outhouse remembers. A people ruminate.

The tale differs with the teller (3).

House of Splendid Isolation offers the perspectives of various 'tellers'. The first -- McGreevy -- takes up the 'history is everywhere' theme: 'War in the sky and war on the ground and war in his heart' (7). As McGreevy meets an accomplice in a dance hall car park, 'A girl with a lamenting sort of voice is rehearsing "The Holy Ground"' (18). This is a song which McGreevy later sings to Josie and which she takes 'as some kind of token' (190). McGreevy's relationship to myth is complex. He points out to his accomplice: "'I can't get down there without money ... I'm not fucking Cuchulainn'" (18). Yet in his final bid for freedom he 'waits inside a swathe of evergreen, creeping from branch to branch like mad Sweeney in the poem' (206).

The erosion of Irish culture is exemplified in *House of Splendid Isolation* by food. Faced with his wife's reluctance to cook the 'bloodied shins' Rory goes for takeaway curry and crisps, leaving the house 'with a stride' in pale imitation of 'the hero he had once been'. Teresa -- whose fast food van McGreevy hijacks -- does not speak Irish. She has 'trained over in England ... in Surrey' and is able to offer McGreevy only 'cold sausage rolls' (20-22). This food forms a depressing contrast to the cakes exchanged in the woman-centred economy of *The High Road* and as such underlines further the repercussions of patriarchal nihilism. The guards who arrest McGreevy's accomplice Cassidy are 'pelt[ed] with a barrage of slogans and poetry and patriotism'. Like Teresa they 'do not know much Irish'. Cassidy considers himself 'a far better keeper of the country's soul and the country's heritage'. The guards assume that he is saying 'something about Queen Maeve', when he 'is telling them that they are all shits, touts, maggots, informers, slaves and that they should draw their pay packet under the Union Jack and not the Tricolour'. 'Social imperialism' does of course compromise the apparent dichotomy between these positions (Pelan, 1996, 51). The guards who take Cassidy into custody are warned to "make sure he doesn't turn into a leprechaun on the way" (174). Irish history and legend are not only mocked but commodified. The pub landlord goes 'off to the bog to collect turf because the tourists go mad for turf fire and the smell it gives out, have themselves photographed in front of it' (67). However he also goes 'off in a bus with a lot of women to behold the miracle of a moving statue' (69). Sir Roland -- the English politician who is McGreevy's intended target -- lays claim to the landscape, feeling

'homesick for the place although it is not his home' (88) and 'always calling [his caretaker] Paddy even though his name was Jakko' (89).

The theme of woman and land as 'site[s] of contestation' which was introduced in previous texts is further developed in *House of Splendid Isolation* (Innes, 1993, 3). Like Mary Hoologan's mother Josie's has died 'in the hall of the hospital in a feud about land, a field of theirs that a neighbour claimed as his and which neither family could use because of this ongoing vendetta' (24). As in *A Pagan Place, Night and Mother Ireland* the landscape is named and claimed by the masculine. There are recurrent references to 'a cedar big as a house' which has '[James]' initials and his brother's initials hacked into it with a penknife' (27). Josie's adoring servant Paud tries to redress the balance through his decision to 'engrave her name on the tree next to her husband's' (52). But the memory which persists for Josie is of 'how on her wedding day [James] had marched her out there and showed her the two names, his being the first, and the most decisive, the J O'M carved into the pinkish trunk ...' (80). The tree is constructed ultimately as a vehicle for menace. James' friend 'the Snooper' calls ostensibly to tell Josie:

... that he had some bad news ... The tree with her husband's initials was rotting and would brain someone ere long ... Oh yes, he had gone across to look at the tree for sentiment's sake, to see her husband's and his brother's initials, the M and the J as clear as if they were carved yesterday (106-107).

The 'names of the islands' on James' lake recall those of *A Pagan Place* – 'Priest Island and Sheep Island and the Island of the Mad Monk' (28). Later Guard Foley points out

to his colleagues 'landmarks, waterfalls, an asylum, pubs named after famous men, hurley-players or patriots' (197).

The landscape itself is feminised by James who is 'eager[] to tell [Josie] the moods of the lake, not unlike the moods of a woman' (28). Later the landscape is defined for Josie by Father John: 'She walks listlessly through the pine grove into the fields past cattle and stone cairns, the smell of cattle dung and cattle flesh and in the humid air, the cloying smell of elderflower and she thinks this field will always carry the essence of him' (134). This recalls the 'falconer' in *Night* whose 'Niagra Falls' 'get[] into the fissures' of the surrounding 'limestone rock' (38). It is significant that whilst Father John's 'essence' pervades the landscape and becomes implicitly associated with what Irigaray terms '*rationality and a mechanics of solids*' Josie is analogised with the lake and therefore with 'unstable' fluidity (Irigaray, 1985, 107). Furthermore Father John himself associates landscape with 'national character' (125). In the context of Innes' argument about 'males as national subjects this can be read as '*male* national character'. Father John argues that the mountains 'len[d] weight' to 'national character whilst aligning himself with the significantly 'thaw[ing]' Alps (124). His reluctance to discuss his visit to the Alps with Josie -- he dismisses this episode as something which happened 'before [he] was ordained' -- suggests a need to dissociate himself from 'fluids'.¹³

In *House of Splendid Isolation* the commonality of the male instinct to dominate woman and landscape is emphasised. James and Rory both hunt and shoot and there are

¹³ In *The High Road* and 'The Mouth of the Cave' mountains are of course associated with lesbian sexuality. In *House of Splendid Isolation* the wetness of the 'thawing' Alps constructs them as more explicitly 'feminine' than the arid mountains of the Mediterranean. This highlights Father John's resistance to the unstably fluid Josie.

'maps everywhere' at the Garda station, charting the maternal body of the land (201). James' possession of land parallels Josie's commodity status since 'she envisage[s] the churchyard where her husband was and the space next to him which awaited her , the plot under the tall tomb where his forebears lay' (82). This underlines the inescapability of ancestry and history.

The personal histories of Josie and James are interwoven with the history of republicanism. James is shot on his way to fetch Paud, who is guarding a 'cachet of arms' (53). Josie recalls 'History holding them ransom, when it should all be put to rest in the annals'. Republican history is distinguished from contemporary terrorism:

Politics were one thing when brave men were shot long ago for their beliefs, or brave women hid volunteers in settle backs or churns, but politics had become a racket, hijacking, robberies, mindless assassinations (54).

Making this distinction Josie informs the local sergeant of the arms cachet, thus becoming the unwitting cause of James' death. In adopting this position, Josie is -- and this is ironic -- showing nostalgia for a period when 'brave women' such as Louise Gavan Duffy were expressing frustration at being 'sent[] up to the kitchen' to 'attend to the volunteers' instead of being allowed to fight (Duffy, 1916, cited in Ward, 1995, 60). 'The dark threads of history, looping back and forth and catching her and people like Josie in their grip, like snares' eventually bring her McGreevy, forcing her to confront 'politics' in their extreme form. 'The old days, interred in the mesh of fable' (57) and 'the sunny South where people had time for love and strawberries, forgot their brothers and sisters across the border' (63) are challenged by McGreevy, around whom

Josie weaves her own 'fairytale' as she records his grievances in her diary.¹⁴ Josie notes that:

'The South forgot us,' he said. Forlorn. Aggrieved. A likeness to those children in fable banished, exiled in lakes for hundreds of years, cut off from the homeland
(p. 99).

The northern republican male is seen -- like the southern female narrator of *Mother Ireland* -- as 'exiled' and 'longing to return to the lost home (womb) of the mother' (Jacobus, 1995, 19). Male 'longing' is manifested through terrorism. Josie wonders astutely: 'What did he and his organisation want -- was it the land, the yoke of history, or was it a rage in the blood' (66).¹⁵ Under the influence of McGreevy her own latent nationalism begins to surface. She leaves the diary of her volunteer uncle for McGreevy to read and this enables them to bond:

'A good man ... who was he?' he said as he looked up. In his eyes she felt a yield, something in it had touched him, corresponded with his own journeying (84).

¹⁴ Significantly, Rebecca Abrams comments in a review of *House of Splendid Isolation* that: 'Josie clings stubbornly to the belief that beneath McGreevy's brutish appearance lies a heart of gold; all it needs is the love of a good woman to transform him into the handsome prince he really is. Instead of political, social or psychological insight, we are offered something that teeters dangerously close to *Beauty and the Beast*' (Abrams, 1994). Abrams seems to be missing O'Brien's point; that the romance myth is, like terrorism, a facet of patriarchy and of its attendant nihilism. Similarly Ann Chisholm reveals that: 'One reviewer called [O'Brien] the Barbara Cartland of the Irish situation [and] a journalist who had interviewed her for the radio wrote that she "dangerously combines naivety with romanticism about men whom the civilised world considers murderers"' (Chisholm, 1994). James Simmons in *The Spectator* (30 April 1994) came closer to getting the point, asking: 'Is that what she says about guards and terrorists? They are what they are. Like the bad marriage, very sad, but to be expected'. However Simmons does not really attempt to engage with this issue, or to give O'Brien credit for her insights.

¹⁵ It must be admitted that O'Brien's construction of McGreevy is more complex than Morgan's stereotype since he is portrayed as fighting to rescue his 'Mother Ireland' from colonial 'rapists'. Ultimately though O'Brien reveals 'Mother Ireland' as a patriarchal construct deployed to license conflict.

McGreevy comes to represent for Josie a kind of integrity which partly answers the sergeant's question of why 'she had to die': 'For what? For Ireland? For martyrdom?' (208). In the context of Josie's 'martyrdom' it is significant that the sergeant 'slips [laurel] between the crook of her folded hands as if into a statue'. Ward cites Maud Gonne MacBride's comment to the Celtic Literary Society that they 'would have to look to their laurels' once women became involved in nationalism (Ward, 1995, 4). Josie -- constructed throughout *House of Splendid Isolation* as literary heroine and *Shan Van Vocht* -- wins her 'laurels' defending a nationalist, but at a cost. The 'statue' reference suggests the cultural 'stilling' identified by Herr (Herr, 1990, 7).

Josie's 'martyrdom' arises largely from this 'stilling'. *House of Splendid Isolation* tackles in common with its predecessors issues of socially constructed femininity and of Irish constructs of femininity and maternity in particular, but with the added dimension of women's involvement with terrorism. O'Brien's view of this seems to coincide with that of Morgan who argues as I mentioned in Chapter 5 that: '... whether [women] collaborate or beg, support or approve, always it is a case of *cherchez l'homme*' (18). Yet there is tension between this position and historical evidence of women's desire for active involvement in nationalism. Ward cites Constance Markievicz's exhortation to the Irish Women's Franchise League to:

... dress suitably in short skirts and strong boots, leave your jewels and gold wands in the bank, and buy a revolver. Don't trust to your 'feminine charm' and your capacity for getting on the soft side of men, but take up your responsibilities and be prepared to go your own way ... (Ward, 1995, 46-7).

In *Cumann na nBhan* Markievicz reveals how ‘some of the girls [of the Irish Citizen Army] had revolvers and held up bread-vans’ (Ward, 1995, 66). In this context McGreevy’s hijacking of the bread van follows a tradition which is not exclusively masculine. In ‘Sex and Nation’ Meaney argues that ‘women are not ... essentially more peaceable, less dogmatic, uninfected by bloodthirsty political ideologies’ (Smyth, 1993, 238). This is compatible with Irigaray who as Whitford suggests ‘does not attribute any special ‘natural’ virtues to women’ (Whitford, 1991b, 78). Meaney points out that:

Women have been actively involved in every possible variant of nationalism and unionism ... Women have supported and carried out violent actions If patriarchal history has portrayed us as bystanders to the political process, it has lied. We have always been implicated, even in our own oppression (Smyth, 1993, 238).

In the context of Meaney’s argument the influence of ‘patriarchal history’ upon O’Brien herself -- at least in the execution of *House of Splendid Isolation* -- can be clearly discerned. The relegation of women under patriarchy to second place is, however, acknowledged at the novel’s opening. ‘The Child’ states that: ‘A girl loves a sweetheart and a sweetheart loves her back, but he loves the land more, he is hostage to it ...’ (3). ‘Hostage’ implies an unwilling attachment yet, as the shooting activities of James and Rory suggest, the masculine relationship with the land is one of ownership and domination. The commodification of women is underlined by Rory’s reflections on ‘Women. Goods’ (8). Certainly Sheila, aligned with the accoutrements of the ‘nice

bungalow', is excluded from Rory's working life and acknowledges that: 'There were things you do not ask a policeman that you are married to' (9).

Josie too is defined by her husband's status and by that of his house. She and James are 'united for once' only when entertaining (57). Remembering her bridal days she reflects that 'Any girl would have given her eyeteeth to marry into it' (27). Exploring the dining room for the first time she 'stood on her toes and swung about the room and thought 'it is mine, mine' (31). Yet as James' friend Jacko reveals all is not as it seems:

'Never any children though' So this was the house she had married into, and in that instance she knew what a false picture she had painted of it when she saw her fiance playing cards and sipping whisky and winking at her (39).

The house quickly becomes the externalisation of Josie's entrapment in marriage. She is constructed as an Irish-American Lady of Shalott, sighing "'Oh those darned shadows'" as 'things g[et] darker, gloomier, more oppressive' (32). Josie is able to 'feel at home' 'only in the garden' (57). Yet in her childless old age she identifies herself with the house, feeling after its invasion by McGreevy that 'Her house seems so precious to her even in its decay, her house should not have to suffer this' (73). Josie's legitimate fears of attack on her own frail body are projected onto the house.

Rowing with James on the lake Josie 'ke[eps] seeing herself in [the water], her face all distorted' (29). This seems an appropriate metaphor for the effects of her marriage. After the end of her relationship with Father John 'she'd stand in front of the long mirror of the wardrobe and decide that the sockets of her eyes were filling up with blood' (140). The recurrence of the 'wardrobe mirror' metaphor for compromised female subjectivity --

employed by O'Brien in *Night* and *Mother Ireland* -- is significant. Furthermore the welling eye socket recalls *Mother Ireland's* allusion to the legend of Lough Dearg Deirc or 'the Lake of the King of the Red Eye' (69). This anticipates Josie's martyrdom to Ireland and also prefigures her sight of herself during McGreevy's stay when 'she walks through her several rooms in order to confirm them as hers':

'Good God,' she says seeing the hoar face, her own, in the gilt mirror, a reflection more pitiless than from the clouded handglass in her bedroom. 'Good God,' she says it again... (71).

With the arrival of McGreevy Josie is forced away from her bedroom and her 'clouded handglass' to be constructed from his point of view. She becomes as Irigaray puts it a reflection of his 'own mirage'. Josie's 'hoar face' embodies McGreevy's death drive (Irigaray, 1985, 207).

Distortion is suggested also by the episode on Josie's wedding night in which she dances with the servant Brid so that 'four breasts [are] walloped in the bridal suite' (33). 'Walloped' suggests ridicule, punishment and a move away from the woman-to-woman economy of *The High Road* in which breasts were 'globes to be worshipped' between women. James and his brother tell the deeply significant story of the mayfly, also called 'nymphs'. James 'describe[s] the lady, lustier by far, more appetite ...' (34):

'Do the males die too?' she asked stiffly Do the males die too? the brother repeated. They had never dwelt on that before but reckoned that the males died too, poor buggers (35).

'The brother' goes on to outline how "the fish eat ... They suck on the flat-out dead female ... They love her" (35). Again heterosexuality is associated with consumption of the feminine and distortions of maternity which signify death for the female mayfly as well as for O'Brien's protagonists.

Like the mayfly Josie is preyed upon by the male of her species. During McGreevy's stay she feels that: 'There are two hers, the one who dare not admit that in Paud's room now there is a dangerous man, a savage and the other which contends that she is mistress of the house' (72). This splitting is further indicated by the admissions recorded in her diary: '*I want before I die to be myself again*' and '*I want to die whole*' (79). In her attempt to realise 'wholeness' Josie regresses to her girlhood self. Her words to McGreevy are 'the sweet arch reminiscences of a woman wishing she was conversing with an ordinary young man' (92). Yet 'femininity' has never given her satisfaction. Meeting Father John for the first time she is:

... a woman primed to flee her own house and flee the prison of her own white body and go somewhere, anywhere, escape. When she thought of her body she thought of those large dead fish which she had seen in a fish shop in Brooklyn, smothered in crushed ice, the mottled scales a-glitter (123).

This recalls the mayfly analogy and suggests 'the neutralization of the body in [Irish] culture' identified by Herr (Herr, 1990, 5). The Brooklyn reference reinforces her response to Father John which in turn recalls an incident with an American businessman:

She had felt this restlessness once before, with a married man, a Jewish man in Brooklyn ... who had followed her into the kitchen to give her a tip, gave her a

silver dollar and rather than handing it, had slipped it into her bosom with a 'Keep it warm.' She had allowed the hand to lift one breast and hold it as if it were a cloth purse (126).

The analogy of breast and purse underscores *House of Splendid Isolation's* re-engagement with an economy in which breasts are objects for consumption. Femininity as commodity is the only 'femininity' which Josie knows. As her marriage to James deteriorates she begins to steal its accoutrements: 'She stole chocolate and pipes of licorice and fashion magazines and anything that was left in the chapel, off gloves, anything. She flung them in a holdall, like trophies' (143). These are in effect the empty 'trophies' of femininity. The chocolates recall the unsatisfying box of chaff given to Caithleen in *The Country Girls*. The 'odd glove' suggest once again Josie's split self. She is finally caught stealing 'in the drapery shop':

The smell of the new materials got into her and she fancied herself being elsewhere, a pampered woman, being fitted for a dress, back in Brooklyn The slip that she sighted had something of the same allure, turquoise with deep scallops of lace the colour of elderflowers (143).

The closure of *House of Splendid Isolation* is characterised by ambivalence to 'femininity'. After the temporary departure of McGreevy Josie's accoutrements look pathetic, mirroring her own fragile state: 'She peers out into the hall where on the bamboo table, the [significantly] artificial tea roses and an Infant of Prague statue, unite in shiver' (179). Josie is transformed along with her possessions by McGreevy's return:

Brocades and velvets seem not the ravelled relics they are, but things of beauty, and old cracked Toby jugs and shepherdesses have taken on a lustre, enshrined in the dreaming haziness of lamplight (183).

Josie -- the 'ravelled relic' of Ireland in *Shan Van Vocht* mode -- does try to claim this transformation as her own. She argues that: "I lit the fire and the lamp, because it's my house again ... You've gone' (189). Josie's final assertion of self occurs when 'she cuts her hair'. Examining her motives for doing this she attributes it to 'something he said. How when the fight was over and the country one, he would like to have children, wains'. Josie experiences 'a great lunatic fork of longing rose up in her, to be young again, to have wains' but cuts her hair as a 'farewell' to intra-uterine 'potential' (Whitford, 1991b, 169).

It is significant though that Josie's physical transformation coincides with her political awakening. Ward offers accounts of the ways in which fashion and politics were interrelated for early nationalist women, referring for example to the Daughters of Erin 'discuss[ing in 1910] the best way for dressing the hair'. They 'decided [they] would not wear [their] hair ... after the English fashion' (Ward, 1995, 18). Constance Markievicz encouraged women to adopt liberating clothes and hairstyles.¹⁶ But the price of Josie's 'defiance' is death. Josie prophetically puts a strand of her hair in a tin marked 'TO BE OPENED AFTER MY DEATH' and the desires of herself and McGreevy are overshadowed by their own dead children. The inescapability of personal and political histories is underlined not only by the appearance of the severed locks -- which 'look as if

¹⁶ Markievicz's exhortations regarding dress were not always free from restrictive constructs -- in 1909 when she was urging the Students National Literary Society to 'organize the movement for buying Irish goods more', to 'dress in Irish clothes' and to '*live really Irish lives*' she referred to 'our clever Irish colleens' (Ward, 1995, 31).

they belong to another, a forebear, those gnarled and mawkish people she had always tried to run away from' (194) -- but by the ensuing account of her abortion of the child whose narrative frames the novel (194).

In *House of Splendid Isolation* constructs of femininity specific to Irishness are placed firmly within their socio-historical context. Josie is subject to multiple constructions. The most pervasive of these is her link to 'the Colleen Bawn, the jilted woman who was drowned and whose death was traced later by the appearance of a corset on the water..' (35-6). James wonders briefly if he should have told this 'romantic' story to Josie instead of telling her about the life cycle of the mayfly. The two accounts are not, however, unconnected. Both Colleen Bawn and female mayfly are like Josie victims of the male. Though James appreciates the 'romantic' story of the Colleen Bawn he 'hate[s Josie's] corsets, pink, laced at the back, metal studs down the front, an armoury' (43). Brid speculates: 'The Missus didn't want a baby ... Wore corsets that were too tight' (45). Using an accoutrement of femininity as a means of denying James access and paternity Josie finally emerges as a distorted 'Colleen Bawn' when Paud fetches in the corset that she has taken off in anticipation of Father John (52):

'Darn it,' she says of the new corset that pinches and ridges her stomach. Being new, the hooks are slow to separate so that she must start with a bottom one, then the top one and gradually ease them away. Flung there, the pink broderie anglaise looks like a cloth spread out for a picnic in the dusk (132-3).

Like the Colleen Josie is 'jilted' and later beaten by James when Paud fetches the corset and reveals 'the note tucked in at the top of the spiral' on which Josie has played

‘the love-like-hate-adore-marry game’ with her name and Father John’s (134-5). The corset is ultimately a symbol of cultural paralysis and of the immobilization of women under patriarchy identified by Irigaray (Irigaray, 1981, 60-67).

Through Paud, Josie is specifically linked to a feminised Ireland: ‘Now he had two loves, Ireland and the Missus ... God forbid that he would ever make her cross, that he would ever let her down. He had two loves, two women to die for, Ireland and the Missus’ (52). Josie significantly aligns herself with Ireland by expressing her wish ‘to die whole’, ‘the word [McGreevy] used about the country’ (79). Furthermore Paud is himself the indirect cause of Josie’s death since he directs McGreevy to her house. McGreevy initially mocks Paud’s adoration of Josie: “‘So this is the woman you raved about, Queen of the Munster Fairies,” he says and laughs, quietly and bitterly...’ (62). He imposes yet another construct on Josie: ‘How little that woman up in the bed knew with her wild, staring, Virgin Mary eyes’ (63). This is for McGreevy a significant encounter in terms of his terrorism. Morgan posits ‘the hero’s encounter with the *Magna Mater* ... as part of initiation’ (67) and McGreevy later reveals his allegiance to nationalism as ‘his oath ... drunk at the breast’ (164). In this instance Josie represents *Magna Mater* in dual guise -- Virgin and ‘Mother Ireland’ or *Shan Van Vocht*. To ‘the Snooper’ who assumes along with the Garda that her relationship with McGreevy is sexual Josie’s femininity and Irishness take on a more threatening aspect: ‘... if she was a younger woman maybe, but hunt her orchid and a man would find what -- ‘*Sheela-na-gig*’ (109). Josie does try briefly to make nationalism her own. Attempting to escape from McGreevy, she ‘hums loudly, a Fenian song, the only one she knows, about a woman gathering nettles’. But the song

goes: 'Glorio ... Glorio to the bold Fenian *men*' (my emphasis) and 'very soon she is winded' (80).¹⁷

So Josie is constructed variously as mythical heroine, 'Virgin Mary' and 'Sheela-na-gig'. The latter two modes relate most closely to O'Brien's examination throughout *House of Splendid Isolation* of social and national constructs of maternity and of the distortions which these effect.

Distortion is signified primarily by the novel's narrative framework. The voice of Josie's aborted child in the prologue and epilogue anticipates O'Brien's treatment of abortion in *Down by the River*. As I have argued the description of McGreevy 'curled up inside the hollow of a tree ... cradle and coffin, foetus and corpse' specifically suggests cultural matricide (7). This deathly image implies a negative view of the terrorist son of 'Mother Ireland', rotten in the womb. As such it explains Josie's need to abort her child and anticipates Bridget's cancer/pregnancy in *Down by the River*. The swans on James' lake 'which as he informed [Josie], mated for life' recall the 'unpropagating' swans at Coose in *Night*, anticipating the sterility of Josie's marriage (29). Still on the infertility theme James aligns Josie with: 'Wet fields, brown clay through the blades of grass, fields like graveyards, undug. She was nine months married and nothing doing' (43). In the wake of the foetus/corpse analogy this can be read in the context of nationalism which is seen to affect mother country and Josie as potential mother. As Meaney argues:

¹⁷ O'Brien's reference this song seems significant in the light of the objections raised by Louise Gavan Duffy's in 1916 to being relegated to the kitchen to cook for volunteers (Ward, 1995, 60).

The images of suffering Mother Ireland and the self-sacrificing mother are difficult to separate. Both serve to obliterate the reality of women's lives. Both seek to perpetuate an image of Woman far from the experience, expectations and ideals of contemporary women (Smyth, 1993, 230).

When Josie does become pregnant she feels unsurprisingly that 'it was not a normal child': 'It cried inside the walls of her womb. It was more like a banshee than a child' (46). Josie records in her diary: '*I was not ready for a child. The crib that [James] brought up from the cellar was the most forlorn looking thing. it had belonged to his people. It felt alien. I couldn't see myself rocking it*' (195). Matrilineage as well as patrilineage seems to be against her. She becomes convinced that 'This child and her mother were one, in league against her' (48). Josie exemplifies Irigaray's identification of the condition of maternity under patriarchy:

You look at yourself in the mirror. And already you see your own mother there. And soon your daughter, a mother. Between the two, what are you? What space is yours? In what frame must you contain yourself? (Irigaray, 1981, 63).

Within the context of *House of Splendid Isolation* maternal failure is historicised. In keeping with 'the Snooper's' perception of Josie as 'Sheela-na-gig' James perceives her as devouring. In view of O'Brien's construction of Josie as *Shan Van Vocht* this echoes O'Brien's Joycean identification in *Mother Ireland* of the construction of Ireland as a 'sow' implicitly devouring 'her' young (O'Brien, 1976, 11). Again this is set in a socio-historical context as Josie and James argue over Paud's involvement with the arms dump:

How they fought over it, he resurrecting every bit of Fenian feeling that he ever had and she saying that it was out of the question and his slapping her and hating her not only for Paud's sake, but because of the way she had won out with everything ... (53).

But Josie's victory is an empty one. She has to endure 'the vacant, shriven years of it' and eventually replaces James' own mother.¹⁸

Because her maternal instincts thwarted by James Josie focusses instead on Father John, who gives her instead of a living child 'two pale concave discs of wood, saucer shaped, wedged against each other at a peculiar angle'. Josie's response is: 'he has given me a gift, Father John has given me a gift' and the thought grew bigger and sturdier each time she said it, like a child swelling up in her'(131).

Sensing that the sculpture is for Josie a substitute child James suggests that they 'christen it, give it a name, a boy's name or a girl's name' (130). Yet it is Father John who most effectively warps Josie's self-image. Seeing him in his car after the 'Colleen Bawn' episode she feels that their affair is:

Not rose-memory now, but ugly things, lumpen, brutish, that awful depletingness, like a big goose egg being skewered with a knitting needle, the juices leaking and dripping out of her ... (134).

Like Flagglar in *Night* and Pirate in *The High Road*, projects his 'disgust' with 'emissions' onto Josie (Beauvoir, 1949 [1993], 406). Josie herself is 'skewered' during the abortion

¹⁸ Significantly this echoes syntactically O'Brien's description of the birth of the calf ('the impossible, licking love of it' (15). This reinforces the implicit contrast between human and animal experiences of maternity.

and is given -- somewhat grotesquely -- '*a thing to hold. It was a mesh basket with a false eggshell inside it and when pressed the shell parted and a chicken popped up and squeaked, a yellow cloth chicken. I tried to imagine that the wire was skewering its gullet instead of me*' (195). O'Brien's egg imagery anticipates Bridget's aversion to eggs and implicitly to social and cultural constructs of maternity in *Down by the River*. The 'false' eggshell suggests the falsity of a culture of maternity constructed upon a virgin. Josie herself is driven by cultural matricide to infanticide.

Despite her own ambivalence towards maternity Josie holds on to the notion of its importance, reassuring her self with the idea that '[McGreevy] has a mother ... he would not kill me' (76). This is borne out by McGreevy's admission that 'he hated to upset his mother' (97). He later reveals that his dead wife and child are not 'the nearest to' him: "'Ah no ... You see the mother ...'" (193). Idealisation of the mother figure is implicitly analogised with idealisation of the mother country. Josie tells McGreevy: "'The Ireland you're chasing is a dream ...'" (193). This recalls O'Brien's reference at the end of *Mother Ireland* to 'Ireland insubstantial like the goddesses poets dream of' (O'Brien, 1976, 144). The actual effect of the 'social imperialist' idealisation of maternity is signified in this passage by the burnt-out lamp oil, 'a bit of crimson jellied scum clinging to the glass base' which recalls Josie's pregnancy and abortion (194) (Pelan, 1996, 51). Maternity is seen once more as distorted by patriarchy, and by women's collusion in 'social imperialism'.

Like the conclusion to *Mother Ireland* the epilogue of Josie's child seems to reiterate the need for a new symbolic order:

... to be close in body or bayonet is not enough. To go in, within, is the bloodiest journey of all. Inside you get to know. That the same blood and the same tears drop from the enemy as from the self To go right into the heart of the hate and the wrong and to sup from it and to be supped ... That is the future knowledge. The knowledge that is to be (216).

This conceptualises 'the radical innocence of the moment just before birth' not as 'time out' from patriarchy but as a maternal symbolic which offers potential for men and women. *House of Splendid Isolation* argues ultimately that men and women cannot achieve 'closeness' under social and symbolic orders which posit them as 'enemies'.

O'Brien's examination of femininity and maternity under 'social imperialism' is continued in *Down by the River* through her exposition of incestuous rape and pregnancy. In her essay 'Rape: Myths and Reality' Madeline Leonard refers to the case on which *Down by the River* was based, that of 'the fourteen-year-old girl who travelled to England for an abortion in February 1992'. Leonard points out that this case 'catapulted the issue of rape into the centre of public consciousness in Ireland [and] simultaneously challenged and reinforced myths regarding rape in modern society' (Smyth, 1993, 107). Leonard goes on to argue that:

One of the most frequent assumptions about rape is that it is a rare and random act committed by strangers usually in dark, deserted streets and alleyways. The girl in this case not only knew her attacker but he was a trusted family acquaintance and the father of one of her school friends (107).

By making the rapist in *Down by the River* the girl's own father O'Brien moves the threat of rape even closer to home. This helps to reinforce the point that Leonard ^{makes} 'Interacting with other patriarchal social structures, rape functions as a mechanism of social control to keep women in their place' and that ultimately: 'Through rape myths, the state and male ideologies legitimate and conceal male violence against women' (Smyth, 1993, 107).

As in *House of Splendid Isolation* the concept of patriarchal nihilism is introduced at the opening of *Down by the River*. The landscape is aligned instantly with the masculine through O'Brien's reference to the 'foxglove highest and lordliest of all' among the vegetation (O'Brien, 1996, 1). This recalls the episode in *August is a Wicked Month* in which Ellen 'christens [Hugh] foxglove because it too grew high and purple in a secret glade' (24). In the context of O'Brien's implicit analogy of penis and foxglove it is interesting that Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell cite Beeson's and Genet's 'use[s] of flowers to symbolize the penis' as 'exceptional cases where something of the exquisiteness and softness of the male genitals is symbolized' (Edley and Wetherell, 1995, 179). In *August is a Wicked Month* O'Brien does seem to be suggesting 'exquisiteness', but in view of that novel's exposition of 'nihilism' it is interesting that she uses the analogy of a poisonous plant which in *Down by the River* becomes an unequivocal symbol of patriarchal power. James Macnamara's motto is revealed as 'Might before right'. This anticipates not only his rape of his daughter Mary but the motto which appears in the 'state room' where her case is discussed: 'Non mutare' or 'We shall not change' (3 & 163).

James' capacity to induce fear -- a capacity which aligns him with the southern Irish patriarchs of previous O'Brien texts -- is indicated by Bridget's notion of getting a lodger because 'another person to sit with them at night would mean there were fewer rows' (7). This recalls McGreevy's revelation: "'I've been in houses where the woman is glad to have you there ... It keeps the man from harming her'" (O'Brien, 1994, 189). When James forces Mary into oral sex he silences her:

She would not speak Her tongue was gone. It lay there like the tongue of an old shoe. It was stiff and defiled. Her tongue had become an enemy (28-29).

Mary's situation exemplifies the extent to which as Irigaray argues 'women' and 'language' constitute 'home[s] for men' (Whitford, 1991b, 125). When Mary finally communicates her story to her lawyer 'her tears [are] her way of telling him, her only way' (203). Her guardian Fitz remarks: "'She's like a mute'" (213). A policeman explains Mary's silence: "'Shame. I've seen it before ... Often ... they feel dirtier if they tell it ... They feel they're to blame in some way'" (227). Mary herself tells Mrs Fitz: "'I talk to myself'" (239). Mary's silence is a response not only to events but to James' denial of her identity. When James learns of Mary's pregnancy he denies responsibility, responding to her only as his property and threatening to 'de-fuck that bastard out of her' (105). Leonard points out that: 'If forced incest takes place between father and daughter, it is classified as incest rather than rape' (Smyth, 1993, 114). This seems implicitly to sanction the daughter's position as property, since rape is legally classified as such only when perpetrated by a male other than the father. Legalities aside James, in breaking the incest taboo, violates the laws of exchange between men. As Irigaray points out 'exogamy

is an economic issue, perhaps even subtend[ing] economy as such' (Irigaray, 1985, 172). In this context James' destruction of the symbolic order is significant. Although I do not wish to suggest that O'Brien sanctions incest, let alone rape, she does posit James as a victim as well as a perpetrator of patriarchal law. When Mary uses this against her father in threatening him with 'the guards' he appears 'like a man awakening from a dream and finding the monster he has dreamed, agape, beside him on the pillow'. He responds 'with madness, a madman's frenzy to obliterate the substance of what she had just said' (105):

'I'll make short work of it,' he said, grabbing the broken and splintered broom handle which might have been waiting for this grotesque rite (106).

'Rite' suggests once again the interconnectedness of religion and violence. As Mary is violated with the broom handle 'the madness passe[s] from him then and into her'. This underlines the extent to which as Irigaray argues patriarchal fear of women leads to the projection of 'this madness which is not ours' (Whitford, 1991a, 42). Mary's subjectivity is compromised throughout this process: 'The pain was being converted into something other, so that she was all wound, only wound, and she could shout a wound sound and did so and he heard it' (106).

It takes a metaphorical 'storm wind' -- which recalls the scirocco in *The High Road* -- to empower Mary when James injures his leg (124). But even when incapacitated he manages to exude menace and Mary tells Betty "He'll kill me" (125). James continues to assert his ownership of Mary, telling Noni "I'm her father" when she tells him of Mary's escape to England. Though James focuses his fears on the likely product of incest -- 'There would be no freaks ... in his bloodline' -- his real concern is for the preservation of

his property (192). James' position is reinforced by the law; cousin Veronica tells Mary: "You're staying right here ... We have your father's authority" (189). Her solicitor says: "We need your daddy on board" (201). Commenting on James that "He was the wrong father .. That's all" Mary is missing the point (235). Despite James' expressed resentment of the law -- "You're the lawyer ... Homo sapiens" -- she remains subject to collusion between men (217). As in *House of Splendid Isolation* O'Brien is using an extreme form of patriarchal nihilism to expose the position of women in 'social imperialist' southern Ireland. Mary is caught between the competing discourses of 'social imperialism' and state law.

At the end of the opening chapter an alternative patriarchy is offered to the 'social imperialism' operated by Mary's father:

In the City far away men ... move through the great halls, corporeal figures of knowledge and gravity ... powerful men, men with a swagger, a character personified by the spill of a gown or the angle of a coiffed wig ... the whole paraphernalia of the law in motion ... (5).

The men's 'corporeal[ity]' is the binary opposite of Mary's ongoing desire to elude her body. Like Portia/Charlotte in *The High Road* Mary is divided into 'two irreconcilable "bodies": her "natural" body and her socially valued, exchangeable body' (Irigaray, 1985, 180). Violating the law of exogamy/economy James has simultaneously violated each of Mary's 'bodies'. Mary is reassigned to this 'law' in being forced to 'await orders' from 'the guards from home, the Attorney General [and] the department of public prosecution' (153). As in *House of Splendid Isolation* O'Brien's explicit characterisations of men offer

insights into patriarchal discourse. The chapter entitled 'Power' outlines an exchange between PJ and his mistress Geraldine. Though Geraldine attempts to undermine PJ's power -- "Oh, his eminence, our leader, singing a rebel song or a humble ballad" (155) -- she is constructed like Mary as a possession: 'What he thinks is no other man should see that alabaster arc of thigh, edible, smackable, his. His' (157). Called by the Attorney:

Suddenly he is not Jock, or rather he is the other Jock, the one Geraldine recoils from The smiling blushing gallant put to one side now like a photograph overlaid with another; cold, pugnacious, asking without words why in feck's name she has come out of the bathroom, why she is standing there in her slip, shoeless and stockingless (158).

Geraldine is the medium through which PJ's authority is questioned: "Hundreds of girls go [to England for abortions] ... Including me ... Why one law for us and one for some poor girl" (159). Yet she realises her insignificance in the face of 'Power ... Power ... The mighty ambrosia.' The extent to which literary authority reinforces the power of the law is revealed by Geraldine's suspicion that PJ will send her 'a poem, Yeats, who else' (159).¹⁹ In the context of Herr's argument the 'photograph' reference does however signify that PJ is subject as well as Geraldine to cultural 'stilling' (Herr, 1990, 7).

Patriarchal authority is further questioned by the judge's daughter Molly. The judge himself declares that "The law is the law" and implicitly compares abortion to terrorism. This links the themes of *Down by the River* and *House of Splendid Isolation*: "Molly, if I

¹⁹ Significantly Morgan, pointing out that: 'The terrorist mystique is twin brother to the manhood mystique [and that] the mythic father of both is the hero', argues that because 'myth is simply another form of history, the encoded history of human beliefs' the links made by Yeats and Joyce between politics and myth help to reinforce the 'terrorist mystique' (Morgan, 1989, 53-55).

heard that someone was going across to England to bomb Parliament, I would have to stop him, wouldn't I?" (240). Insight into the judge's background and motives reveals that he experiences 'mastery' in the handling of his cases and that, like Rory in *House of Splendid Isolation*, he recalls his boyhood self-perceptions: 'Sometimes ... he got up and went out into the garden and in the moonlight hit a few balls with a hurly stick and re-imagined himself in the fields, the stony fields of long ago, his mind like the leather ball itself, an acceleration to it, spinning out of sight' (241). Again the operation of the law is implicitly compared to a boy's game. Molly tells her father:

... you're not fourteen years of age and sick and vomiting and a thing inside you put there against your will ... no, you're men, you're dignitaries, you hold the reins. Good men ... Wise men, pillars of society; and you go to mass and the sacraments every Sunday, Daddy, and you meet that actress in the lane at night (242).

In the light of the failure of Christian discourse to help Mary it is significant that Molly invokes her father's religious observances as evidence of his hypocrisy. Visiting a shrine with Lizzie Mary leaves a coded message for a god who does not speak her language: 'Please cure my father's epilepsy'. Mary and Lizzie have first 'to touch the private part of their bodies with [holy] water to banish all stain of past or future sin' (68). The visit to the shrine reinforces the policeman's comment that Mary's silence is likely to have arisen from shame. She cannot articulate her father's actions and she must behave as if she herself had sinned. Her later comment to Betty that "God can't be this cruel" seems ironic. This also recalls Baba's response to pregnancy in *Girls in their Married Bliss*: 'Oh, God, who does

not exist, you hate women, otherwise you'd have made them different' (O'Brien, 1964 [1967], 119).

The 'read[ing] by the priest' when Mary is taken to church by Veronica reinforces the omnipotence of the patriarchal God: 'I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end...' (194). Yet Christianity can be rejected as well as promulgated in the name of patriarchal control. Manus the reporter tells one of the anti-abortion campaigners: "'We don't give a shite about the Bible'" whilst attempting to harrass Mary's protector (198). Mary continually finds herself a victim of competing patriarchal discourses. Her protector Hennessy tells her 'without looking at her': "'I'm glad it's to me you came ... Some of the others might not have been up to it, but I am ... I love a good fight'" (199). Mary's body has become as Innes puts it a 'site of contestation' (Innes, 1993, 3). 'Doctor fathers' and 'lawyer fathers' participate along with 'religious fathers' in the 'contest.' Bridget's doctor perpetrates discourses of exclusion: 'Hunting talk, horse talk, snob talk' (44). Mary's doctor is threatening, 'turn[ing] as if he might strike her' and causing her to 'dread[] the power of his hands' (114-115). He is unable to 'examine [her] without [her] father's permission' (116). Betty's doctor -- echoing Josie's doctor in *House of Splendid Isolation* (142) -- tells her: "'You needed a friend, a lover and a doctor and I was all three to you ...'". Judges are aligned with male saints as Mary studies in the evening paper 'the five judges who will hear her case and decide' (238):

They remain for a long time staring at the faces, trying to reach them, talking to them with the same kind of secret and prone hope as when talking to the statues of

saints in the chapel, repeating the five names, Frank, Terence, Ambrose, Malachi, Diarmuid ... (239).

Similarly O'Brien refers to their work as 'legal magic', positing patriarchal law as yet another myth (168). As Morgan argues: 'myth is simply another form of history, the encoded history of human beliefs' (Morgan, 1989, 54). Meaney has identified the ways in which Irish mythology and law intersect in the issue of abortion:

The assumption that the law needed to intervene in the relationship between woman and foetus -- to protect the so-called 'unborn child' from its mother -- is indicative of a deep distrust and fear of women. This distrust and fear is paradoxically rooted in the idealisation of the mother in Irish culture as an all-powerful, dehumanised figure (Smyth, 1993, 231).

The construction of the mother as someone from whom the child needs to be protected belies the construction -- already undermined by O'Brien in *Mother Ireland* -- of 'mother' as 'safe' and 'best' (O'Brien, 1976, 74-75).

The ideal is upheld by the patriarchal discourses of law, medicine and academia. These are seen throughout *Down by the River* as being in simultaneous conflict and collusion with 'social imperialism'. Sent by her father to fetch 'the man with the stallion' Mary feels that 'everything and everyone is liable to attack her' (12). Her status as commodity is reinforced by O'Brien's juxtapositioning of the oral sex scene with a reference to a cattle market. When given 'a sheet of paper and a pencil' to record the events which she is unable to articulate Mary writes 'that there was a lorry parked with animals in it' (29). When Mary goes to ask her father for money before running away she finds him 'among

the men': 'She had never seen so many men herded in together. Weathered faces, not talking, not laughing, just smoking and studying the form of the animals with cold, guaging eyes' (86). 'Herded' suggests the 'animal' nature of the men whilst implicitly contrasting their position with the predicaments of the non-human animals and of Mary herself. Later one of the judges weighing up the pros and cons of allowing Mary to go to England for an abortion refers to their decision-making as 'horse-trading' (253). At the judge's dinner 'the hacked and bleeding strips of beef on a silver salver somehow impart the frenzy of the slaughterhouse' (165). This identifies Mary as a victim of the discourses of patriarchal power. The cattle market analogy is perpetrated by James and his friend assessing the sexual value of the social worker through such remarks as: "'We won't be taking her up the Congo'" and "'Wouldn't care to see her in shorts'" (72-73). Once Mary's plight becomes public, she is sent a letter by a man who exhorts her to '*Fill [her] cunt ...*' (237). Reading it she realises that:

People were awful, people were dangerous, people would crucify one, the people one knew and the people one did not know. That last admission was the most terrible of all and the most frightful. Maybe that's what people meant about getting old, it wasn't the years, it was the knowledge. She had that now (237).

This 'knowledge' -- of the operation of the current symbolic order -- contrasts sharply with 'the knowledge that is to be' suggested at the close of *House of Splendid Isolation*. The crucifixion analogy suggests once more the inevitability within the context of patriarchy of women's self-sacrifice. Morgan's suggestion that 'Religion is about terror' is as relevant to *Down by the River* as it is to *House of Splendid Isolation*.

The only male in *Down by the River* who is seen to operate outside of the dominant discourse is Luke, the busker with whom Mary stays the first time she runs away. Luke keeps a 'female Buddha' in his room and has a painting on his music case of the 'Tree of life' (91). He feels that music is 'the true scripture of the land' and is sentimental about Ireland in general. The Claddagh ring which he thinks of buying for Angie is invested with a value which outstrips that of the Claddagh worn by Rory in *House of Splendid Isolation* (177). It is significant that Mary constructs him as a mythical figure:

She thought that if he were to kiss her it would be like an enchantment or that even if he were to bend down and she were to feel the condensation from his lips falling onto hers that it would be a transport from the old and awful life, like the moment in a fairy tale when a person is released from damnation (95).

In the context of the dominant discourse the episode with Luke *is* a 'fairy tale'. Rejecting materialism and the commodification of women -- "It gets heavy ... Owing people ... Being owned ..." -- he is disempowered (92). Luke has resisted conventional constructions of masculinity under patriarchy, continuing instead to identify himself with the feminine. As a result Guard Fahy thinks of Luke's type as 'lice upon the locks of the nation' (172). In contrast to McGreevy -- who in participating with the guards in nihilism is venerated as a hero -- Luke is ridiculed as 'Blessed Oliver Plunkett' or 'Matt Talbot' and is ultimately unable to protect Mary (173). Women and the land remain securely under the jurisdiction of patriarchy. Luke has 'never touched [and thereby claimed] a woman ... Ever' (173).

The men who commodify women similarly commodify the land. In the opening chapter of *Down by the River* -- in which he stakes his sexual claim on Mary -- James 'vow[s] to look into his forefather's deeds and get his ownership straightened out' (1). He measures property much as he feels Mary up, applying his 'Might before right' motto to both:

He leapt to his task ... extending the metal ruler down the moist seams of black-brown soil and hurraed when it landed in the water ... Pounds, shillings and pence danced before his eyes ... getting carried away with his estimations he spun the metal tape in a wide and apostolic arc, a wand, pronouncing his claim over the deserted but fabled landscape, over furze and fern, lakewater and bogwater, bogwort, myrtle, sphagnum, the warblers' and the bitterns' cry; his empire (2).

The 'apostolic arc' and 'wand' suggest James' implication in Christianity and 'legal magic' whilst in the light of *The High Road* and its association of myrtle with witchcraft his colonising of 'myrtle' underlines his dominance over the feminine. 'Empire' suggests commonality of the desire for domination to coloniser and 'social imperialist'. The chapter which recounts the oral sex scene is significantly entitled 'A Pagan Place' (25) and Mary is forced by her father in a 'fort of trees' (28). The stock Yeatsian features of Irish landscape which were used to undermine 'social imperialism' in *Night* serve in *Down by the River* to underline patriarchal domination. As Mary contemplates drowning herself she hears swans: 'The pair of swans were not to be seen but from somewhere a shuffle of feathers or wings or maybe it was clot weed and sedge, sucking in the moistures' (107). Mary addresses a 'round tower which looked like a big grey man on stilts' and which is 'named after' a saint (108-109). When Betty takes Mary to the hospital she is instructed to

'take her to see all the stone walls, round towers, mill streams and wishing wells that there are' and 'in the museum they look at slides and photographs, read poems on exquisite parchment, poems testifying to love and a woman's long-dimmed hair' (117).²⁰ James threatens to take her to 'an unlucky wood' where 'people had met their deaths' 'if ever she told the guards' (114).

The Dublin cityscape seems as male-dominated as the countryside:

They drove down the main street, past different monuments, past a hotel with various flags flying above it, past another monument black as coal, a man's iron overcoat held out and his hand raised in an imposing salute (204).

Similarly as Mary's lawyer drives her to see her father 'the little towns they pass through all have their different emblems of pride' (214).

As in *A Pagan Place*, *Night* and *House of Splendid Isolation* there are attempts to redress the balance. Again though these attempts tend only to emphasise the inescapability of patriarchal control. Feeling that her mother's grave ought to be marked Mary offers James the money which Bridget has left her: "You know you said that you wanted to get a tombstone for Mam ... Well, I have a bit of money" (63).²¹ Thus she relinquishes her only hope of freedom. Planning her suicide Mary later leaves her 'mother-of-pearl' beads - - that poignant O'Brien symbol of female disappointment --'under a bit of loose concrete

²⁰ It is significant that Maud Gonne is remembered here as 'Kathleen ni Houlihan' rather than as militant feminist nationalist; Ward includes Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh's account of Maude Gonne's 'rich golden hair, willow-like figure, pale sensitive face, and burning eyes' among more polemical primary sources (Ward: 1995, 23).

²¹ This recalls Sethe's engagement in sexual exchange for the purchase of her daughter's tombstone in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*; in an interview with Sandra Manoojian Pearce, O'Brien expresses her admiration for Morrison (Pearce: 1996).

curbing on her mother's grave. It was supposed to mean something' (109). On a more extravagant scale the judge's wife 'has carved a name for herself in the nation's echelons by donating an Italianate figure of the Virgin to her native parish over in the west' (161) whilst the diplomat's wife is 'a Joycean scholar' (162). This suggests that women can succeed only by engaging with the dominant discourse. Indeed O'Brien has expressed her own intention of invading 'the big boy's turf' in *House of Splendid Isolation* (Brown, 1994).

In *Down by the River* Mary's cousin Veronica attempts to construct a feminine Irish history, writing: '*We must not forget our roots, our woods and our rivers and our history above all*' and telling Mary about her patchwork (178-179). But Mary's 'history' is also associated with the landscape. As Betty brings her back to Ireland for her trial 'a fillet of red cuts across the sky then, like a bullet, raw and brutal, the colour of things to be' (144). 'Fillet' anticipates the 'hacked and bleeding strips of beef' consumed by the judges (165). Tara's mother speculates on the 'night pleasures which [Mary] enjoyed; woods, bogs, callows ...' (150) whilst a newspaper report asserts that Mary's predicament 'has put the hurt into the land itself' (211). When Mary is taken by her lawyer to visit her home 'nearly everything remind[s] her of blood' (216). Mary's dual entrapment in the discourses of colonialism and 'social imperialism' is explicitly analogised with the maternal body of the land. It is possible though to read the ending of *Down by the River* as optimistic. Whilst James' 'folklore' is mocked by the Garda Mary leaves her mark in the state room as she miscarries. Maternity is used against the patriarchy which distorts it: 'The tablecloth

is soaking, a flag after battle, bloodied through and through' (257). Mary is implicitly analogised with Ireland's 'fighting women' and 'warrior queens' (Ward, 1995, 46).

Mary's 'battle' is seen throughout *Down by the River* as intrinsic to her femininity. Myths of femininity are contrasted sharply with the reality of being female, particularly in Ireland. As her father begins to rape her Mary looks at 'an old Ovaltine tin with a picture of a lady with a saffron mantilla'. Post-*High Road* this underlines Mary's commodity status whilst juxtaposing ideal and reality -- the mantilla is used by Iris in *The High Road* to construct her own 'femininity' whilst Anna longs to buy a mantilla for Catalina to construct her in her own image. Just as Mary's father is able to go through the 'charade' of pretending that she is not his daughter Mary gets through by distancing herself from the event and aligning herself with the landscape:

An empty place, a place cut off from every place else and her body too, the knowing part of her body getting separated from what was happening down there.

It does not hurt if you say it does not hurt. It does not hurt if you are not you (4).

Mary's 'bodily alienation' is compounded (Simons, 1995, 167). After raping Mary James reinvents her as willing participant: "What would your mother say ... Dirty little thing"(5). In the retrospective light of O'Brien's association of cakes with female sexuality in *The High Road* it is significant that Mary implicitly associates her own body with a cake:

An image floated up then to startle her, something she had once seen and thought of as being quite harmless, it was a cake at a party which seemed to be uncut but

when she brought her face up close to it, every piece had been severed, every severed piece, side by side, a wicked decoy (5).

‘Wicked’ suggests a self-blaming response to James’ comment. As Leonard argues, ‘... women who have been sexually assaulted frequently end up feeling that they themselves are to blame. Rape stereotypes and myths allow women to take the blame and rapists to excuse their behaviour’ (Smyth, 1993, 119).

In *Down by the River* the cake analogy and O’Brien’s use of ‘harmless’ anticipate the ‘Convent’ chapters throughout which female sexuality as an alternative to patriarchy is considered -- though it is worth reiterating Innes’ point that the convent still operates within the dominant order (Innes, 1993, 40). Mary feels that in entering the convent ‘she would become pure’. The woman-centredness of the convent is anticipated by a ‘strawberry creeper’ which Mary sees on her way there and which ‘ma[kes] her think of strawberry jam and how much she loved it and how the fruits were thick and squishy’ (32). As in *The High Road* jam becomes associated with female sexuality and an ‘economy of fluids’. Though the convent supper is an unappetising and ‘musty’ egg salad, Mary ‘thought of the strawberries while she was eating it’ (33). In the context of Josie’s abortion and *Down by the Rivers* examination of cultural distortions of maternity it is significant that remembered strawberries are used to distance the reality of the revolting egg. This anticipates her relationship with Sister Aquinas since Mary ‘live[s] for when they met’ (33). But Sister Aquinas is ultimately aligned with the family, a development which reinforces Innes’ identification of the convent as subsevient to patriarchal discourse:

No one was saying the thing which was most in their hearts. No one. Not her mother. Not her father. Not Sister Aquinas either, Sister Aquinas was sometimes curt, made fun of her in front of the other girls when she asked to be excused from drill. They thought she was a spoilsport. But it was not that. She was trying to have no body, to elude it (34).

Yet Mary's emotional suffering continues to be expressed through her body, which is significantly aligned with the body of Christ. This recalls the 'woman as Christ' imagery of *The High Road* (158). In *Down by the River* Mary experiences a 'violent and untoward' nose bleed 'during the rosary':

She believed it was a sign. The entire quota of her woman's blood was coming out now and ever after there would be no more blood, she would have shed it all, she would be clean and porous as a wafer. The red tiles would be the redder for it, it would seep into the glaze and the dye (35).

This recalls Catalina's 'stigmata' and their association with woman-to-woman sexuality in *The High Road* whilst simultaneously echoing the miscarrying nurse in *Mother Ireland* whose blood stains the bathroom tiles. The nosebleed also anticipates Mary's miscarriage which soils the judges' chamber. As in *House of Splendid Isolation* the suffering of Christ is placed on what Dworkin sees as a male spectrum of 'adoring violence' which also includes the suffering of women. After the nosebleed Sister Aquinas sends Mary:

... tinned strawberries, sweet, mushy, gulpable and they reached to the blob at the back of her throat which she had wanted lanced and then lifted out with forceps, to

remove a memory taste. It had happened. A segment of strawberry had replaced it (35).

Sister Aquinas later gives Mary not only 'holy pictures' but sometimes 'a pear or a plum' which Mary believes she has '*sacrificed* [my emphasis] from her own lunch' (47). But as O'Brien's ambiguous treatment of 'woman's blood' suggests the 'memory taste' cannot be removed. Although Mary feels that 'this is the nicest day of [her] life' Sister Aquinas is equivocal about convent life. When Mary asks her if nuns menstruate she replies:

'Oh yes ... We're women ... Fifty or sixty of us up there ... All nuns and all women, with our women's things and our women's woes and our little spites and our little victories' (36).

Sister Aquinas' sexuality is, furthermore, predatory. As in *The High Road* O'Brien illustrates the necessity for woman-woman sexuality to operate within the dominant discourse. Mary and the nun arrange romantic 'trysts' in common with Anna and Catalina in *The High Road* and Sister Aquinas tells her about the 'ladybird's life ... predators searching for a weak spot in her armour ... eating the creature from within' (47). As if the analogy were not sufficiently clear Sister Aquinas later tells Mary: "I'll make a hole in your armour and then I'll eat you from inside" (48). Mary recognises the artificiality of Sister Aquinas' game with the ladybird, protesting: "We're not the juices of leaves and flowers" but nonetheless joining in 'feeling each other's nearness, each other's excitement' (48).²² But the promise of an alternative discourse is illusory. Mary's mother

²² The consumption of the ladybird from within, when what it really needs are 'juices', highlights Mary's own position, consumed by incestuous pregnancy and deprived of a female symbolic or 'economy of fluids'.

dies and she does 'not see her idol again' (48). In the end the convent reasserts itself, not as an alternative economy but as a space within patriarchal discourse which colludes in cultural matricide (Whitford, 1991a, 36). Lesbianism in *Down by the River* is not even realised as 'time out' from patriarchy.

The tenacity of the dominant discourse is signified throughout *Down by the River* by O'Brien's emphasis on gender as 'performative act' (Butler, 1997, 403). Significantly Mary reads from her friend Tara's magazine 'as if from a school book'. Certainly the magazine is a training manual for femininity, teaching variously and contradictorily that '*The hymen ... is the gift wrapping proving that the product is untouched*', '*Get what you want in bed and more*', '*One hour's worth of sex burns off one hundred and fifty calories*', '*Get him to pull out in time*', and '*the average female orgasm lasts five seconds -- beat the record, make it ten. Remember it is one of the surest ways of getting rid of that nagging headache*' (27). Tara's concentration on their 'toilette' for a disco precedes James' repeat rape of Mary:

They have pummiced, pummelled, plucked, bickered, made up and now Tara is seated by her dressing table reading the lore about contouring make-up. Also they have fasted. Tara ... cannot refrain from using the same two words -- mainstream and couture (79).

The ritual and 'lore' of 'femininity' are intrinsically linked to James' 'grotesque rite' with the broom handle. For Mary her efforts to achieve 'femininity' result only in James' construction of her as 'a stranger in her black dress and her little beaded evening purse' (83). These accoutrements belonged significantly to Mary's mother Bridget whose photo

Mary examines as she looks for them: 'Under the glass of the washstand was that picture of her mother and father on their honeymoon on a seafront, her mother's accordion-pleated skirt billowed as if it was going to billow out and disgrace her. For some reason it was a sad looking picture' (81). Once again a cultural image of 'femininity' is seen as desirable; Mary instinctively associates her mother with 'Our Lady'.

Mary's biological functions are rendered as cause for shame yet even when pregnant by her father and wandering around the city looking in shop windows Mary 'kn[ows] when an engagement ring had been sold because of the absence of that diamond hard sparkle on a plinth of velvet and she fe[els] jealous' (90). The tension between construct and reality is illustrated by the juxtapositioning in the chemist's window of trinkets, 'various creams and lotions', and a 'poster featur[ing] a bronzed girl, Bianca, fishnet down one half of her body and nothing along the other' with 'ugly' things for babies 'and special lumpen sandals for women with foot ailments' (96).

The futility of the 'performative act' is further exemplified through Betty, whose 'clothes are laid out on a chair, arranged as for a performance, but also with a solemnity, the way a habit for the dead might be laid out' (126). There is a considerable gap between 'performance' and reality. Betty's husband has drowned and she herself has suffered repeated miscarriages. Femininity as 'performance' is further suggested by Reginald, the transvestite with whom Betty and Mary stay in England and who recalls the transvestite stripper in *August is a Wicked Month*.²³ Reginald shows Mary and Betty 'his several

²³ In Chapter 2, I cited Bristow's acknowledgement of Butler's argument that the 'flamboyant theatricality' of the drag act 'shows how all gender identities are themselves derivative copies' (Bristow: 1997, 215).

costumes, his spangly things and his leather' and performs 'a song which Billie Holiday, his heroine, used to sing'. As in *August is a Wicked Month* Reginald's grotesque parody of 'femininity' serves to expose the 'performative acts' of his audience. In *Down by the River* however the drag act is used also to highlight the inescapability of biological destiny. As Whitford has argued with reference to Irigaray 'identity' may be illusory, but men are still speaking, and speaking *for and in the place of women*' (Whitford, 1991b, 137). The point about Reginald's 'act' is that even in drag he is clearly defined as 'male:

He left the room and returned in a beaded dress that was sleeveless and skimpy His legs and knees looked buckled and underfed but he gained confidence as soon as he stepped on the pouffe which was his little dias. Up there he pouted and curled his finger at one or the other and said 'I think I'll have you ...' (140-141).

Despite the pathetic camp of Reginald's 'act' he has the 'confidence' of the male who having had his moment of glory on the 'dias' -- during which he gets to choose, in theory at least, who he will 'have' -- can cast off 'femininity'. Butler -- who like Whitford does seem to recognise the limitations of the 'deconstructive imagination' (Whitford, 1991a, 137) -- argues that:

As a public action and performative act, gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual, as some post-structuralist displacements of the subject would contend (Butler, 1997, 410).

So Reginald as a male playing with 'femininity' can choose to drop his 'act' and reclaim the privileges attendant on 'masculinity' at any time. By contrast Mary, who is subject not

only to 'public action and performative act' but to the imperatives of biology, is rendered instantly powerless by the Dr Tom's telephone call to Betty.

Furthermore Mary is subject to conflicting constructs of femininity which are all 'imposed or inscribed upon' her own 'performative act'. For her teacher she is a girl who 'could make a name for the county' (66); for her father she is simultaneously a 'dirty little thing' and a seductive 'stranger'; for Betty she is the prayed-for 'sign' that her husband drowned himself by accident (111). The compromised nature of Mary's subjectivity is made evident when Mary looks into Betty's mirror: '... the terror in the face reflected ... is not that of a little girl at all but an animal, animal eyes staring from the noose of an iron trap' (112). Mary herself identifies with 'the story of the stratosphere girl' which she discovers at an antiques market whilst on the run. The girl was 'the greatest aerial acrobat ever' but 'had fallen from her steel mat which was one hundred and twelve feet high' (102). Suddenly caught by a guard Mary feels that: 'She was the stratosphere girl, and she was climbing up onto her steel mat where she could fall from one hundred and twelve feet high' (103). The 'aerial acrobat' clearly represents for Mary the female 'spatiality' of which she is deprived by the men who 'place limits on her' (Whitford, 1991a, 170).

It is significant though that throughout *Down by the River* Mary is subject to construction by women as well as by men. Pro-lifers and liberals compete over her. The former assure her: "'We will make a true little Irish girl out of you'" (251) and promising her 'a lovely quiet wedding over in the west' (184). O'Brien is careful not to posit males as Mary's sole oppressors. Mary feels that the women who meet her on her return from England are 'all vying with each other as to who was in charge, who owned her' (151),

and the local women 'compare stories about Mary' (146), so that Tara envisages herself and Mary as 'the two Mary Magdalenes of the parish' (148). This anticipates the public's use of 'Magdalen' as Mary's pseudonym once her case is made revealed (186-187).

Female appropriation of Mary can be seen however as being done 'in the name of the father'. Cousin Veronica cites 'your father's authority' (189) and the pro-life campaigner Roisin is backed by the hierarchy of the local priest, the Pope and God (16-24).

Roisin herself is an interesting example of Irish womanhood. As Meaney comments in an argument which is worth reiterating at length:

The participation of women in the so-called 'pro-life' movement is indicative of an even more complex and contradictory response. Such women seek to perpetuate the idealised virgin/mother figure of woman so that they can *be* that figure. Such identification offers women one of the few roles of power available to them in patriarchy ... The attractions of the traditional feminine role, particularly as the Catholic Church defines it, are grounded in a deep distrust and loathing of femininity, however, and those women who identify with it are also expressing a form of self-hatred, a revulsion against themselves as women. They are unable to accept themselves as thinking, choosing, sexual, intellectual and complex ordinary mortals and instead cling to a fantasy of women as simple handmaids of the lord (231).

Meaney goes on to point out that: 'Patriarchy's strongest hold over women is its ability to promote this inner division, which inhibits women's will for change and recruits women damaged by patriarchal ideology to the cause of patriarchy itself and sets them

campaigning against their own interests' (231-232). In *Down by the River* Roisin is sanctioned by 'his Holiness' the Pope who 'ha[s] given her a sense of being right and on the right path and had implored her to spread the word of his *Evangelicum Vitae*' (22). Her femininity -- she is 'a beautiful girl with such lovely hair and such very special eyes' -- is initially 'charming' but Noni's friends become 'terrified of her' (17):

It was when she began preaching that they became afraid, they saw something else, the eyes with the hardness of enamel, outrage in her voice, insistence that they look at the gory photographs, that they read the literature, that they know how the brutal operation is done (22).

Roisin's 'hardness' is a manifestation of her 'recruitment' by and collusion in 'social imperialism' (Pelan, 1996, 51).

The novel's other Irishwomen are bound up not only by constructs of maternity but by its realities. They are therefore more complex than Roisin. It has to be said that O'Brien seems ambivalent about the liberation of women from such constructs. In the light of Meaney's comments it is tempting to attribute this to O'Brien's own conditioning. Roisin's host Noni -- who has received 'her mandate' from a counsellor to assert herself over her husband -- is hardly rendered attractive. Nor is the resultant transformation of her marriage which is revealed as 'a truce, a hating truce' (18-19). Later O'Brien refers to a newspaper article about a Naomi Wolfe-like 'raunchy miss, skirt up to her coccyx, claiming her philosophy has changed people's lives' (246). The lives of women such as Mary's mother Bridget are seen to be beyond change. After her death James says: "She could have been president of this country":

... while Mary thinks of her mother combating their poverty with the eggs she sold,
.... Her mother is present for an instant, wiping the eggs with a pinch of
bicarbonate, before selling them, estimating how much she will get ... (60).

It is significant that Bridget is able to remain solvent only by selling the eggs to which she has an extreme aversion, perhaps because she perceives motherhood as an aspect of her own commodification. After the visit of Mary's lawyer the despairing James 'looks about a room that bore all the *trademarks* [my emphasis] of a once breathless bride. Artificial tea-roses, points sharp as spears, plunged into a sudden efflorescence of sunlight. Dolls in hooped crinoline. Grinning ghosts' (223). The 'artificial tea roses' recall those of Josie in *House of Splendid Isolation*. Bridget too is subject to patriarchal nihilism or death drive. Furthermore Bridget's condition is seen as specific to her Irishness since she is specifically aligned by Mary with the Virgin:

The sun made little incursions of light, bluing Our Lady's blue cloak and emphasising the white disc of her chest ... She did not look at Our Lady. Maybe Our Lady knew. Maybe her mother knew (7).

Bridget is aligned with the 'social imperialist' ideal of maternity. Her cancer is later politicized within an Irish context. Looking around a mushroom farm and comparing the mushroom spores to 'the spores inside her' she learns about 'the losses incurred from blight and hearing that word she saw the black and rotting cavities of blighted potatoes' (45-46). Like Mary Bridget is analogised with the diseased and colonised maternal body of the land. The pregnancy-cancer parallel implicitly underlines the extent to which colonialism has raped 'Mother Ireland' and left 'her' diseased. Bridget's association of her

pregnancy-cancer with potato blight echoes Baba's comment on Kate in *Girls in their Married Bliss* that 'if you say potato famine she'll say love' (103). 'Love' leads Kate only to voluntary sterilization.

Down by the River indicts 'social imperialism' along with colonialism since the cross-denominational suffering of Irish women is identified by Mary's friend Mona whom she meets at the clinic in England. Finding out Mary's Catholic name Mona says: "'Jesus wept ... We'll be a right pair ... Me a Dub and you a Mucker ...'" (130). Mary's suffering is however linked specifically to her Catholicism, recalling the woman/Christ analogy in *The High Road*. Praying after Bridget's funeral for someone to rescue her from James Mary thinks 'of Gethsemane and of the Saviour having to drink the cup of pain' (54). Mrs B tells Mary about 'a woman who's taken on the sufferings of Christ ... Her hands and feet bleed ...' (209). Later Cathal the lawyer reads an entry in Mary's diary which recounts her eagerness for her own menstrual blood: 'I will welcome that blood. I will drink it' (221). But Mary must wait to be 'crucif[ied]' by her trial after which the bloodshed of her miscarriage is painful and spectacular (237).²⁴

It is Betty's doctor who most specifically links suffering with Irishness and maternity, remarking: "'Rosaries and ovaries, I don't know which does the most damage to this country'" (116). It is, of course, perceptions and *constructions* of 'ovaries' which 'damage' mothers and mother country. The cultural ideal of maternity -- 'the virgin goddess, born of the father and obedient to his law in forsaking the mother (Whitford,

²⁴ Going back to the McGreevy/Messiah alignment in *The High Road*, *Down by the River* does seem to posit Christ and Mary (Macnamara) as victims of patriarchy.

1991a, 37-38) -- is threatened by the bodily functions which, as Warner points out, it strives to deny (Warner, 1976, 252).

In *Down by the River* Bridget's cancer -- 'the growing, multiple, murderous cells' -- parallels Mary's pregnancy which is itself an unwanted and destructive growth. This analogy posits pregnancy as a form of cancer thereby suggesting the 'matricide' on which Irigaray argues that the social and symbolic orders are constructed (Whitford, 1991a, 36). Bridget's death is a gruesome and explicit parody of birth:

Suddenly water began to issue from her, a great cathartic gush, as if the placenta had broken and a child is coming out but they know that it augurs death ... (51).

Analogies of cancer and conflict are however at odds with the social constructs of motherhood posited throughout *Down by the River*. When Mary and Lizzie visit the shrine they are overlooked by 'the painted Virgin ... in blue and perched on cloud, pillows of blue vapour holding her up' (68). 'Vapour' suggests the insubstantiality of the construct whilst its contrast with the Virgin's pregnant namesake 'banish[ing] all stain of past or future sin' from her 'private parts'. The poem to St Bridget echoes the idealism of the 'Kitchen Prayer from Knock':

'Sweet St Bridget of the kine
Bless these little fields of mine
The pasture and the shady trees
Bless the butter and the cheese.'

Mary is later made to pray with Veronica and her allies to the '*Queen of patriarchs*'. This suggests the male construction of the Virgin and her alliance with 'religion' as 'terror'

(Morgan, 1989, 88). The anti-abortionists carry 'placards draped with rosaries' depicting 'the Virgin with 'Save the Baby'' (197). As the exchange between Geraldine and PJ demonstrates though, patriarchy is prepared to accept abortion when this is convenient for its own ends. O'Brien's juxtapositioning of the image of 'Our Lady ... her fingernails dirty from rooting in trash bins to find [aborted] fetuses and save them from dogs and human scavengers' (17) with the depiction in the clinic leaflet of the type of woman who rejects maternity -- 'a geisha, all tresses and come-hithers' -- illustrates the tension between what men find attractive and what patriarchy is prepared to sanction (131).

Abortion is seen by the campaigners as the cause of 'war': 'Because the wrath of God is unleashed because of the millions of unborn children ...' (170). Patriarchy in its highest form is cited in the apportioning to women of blame for the results of patriarchal nihilism and Roisin's graphic description of the 'curretting, suction, salt poisoning [and] Caesarian' used in abortion suggest the price paid by women who reject what Meaney terms 'the idealised virgin/mother figure of woman' (17). A feminised Ireland is invoked along with the Virgin in condemnation of Mary's plight; the senior barrister refers to her as "'Some little slut about to pour piss on the nation's breast'" (167). 'Piss' recalls Bridget's death and thereby suggests that Mary is about to 'murder' a patriarchally constructed 'Mother Ireland'. One way or another -- as Roisin's supporter Eily tells Mary -- 'women [are] defined by motherhood and singled out by motherhood' (152). In the light of the disempowerment of Mary and of Bridget before her Eily's assertion of the maxim: "'The hand that rocks the cradle'" must be read ironically. It is left significantly unfinished, suggesting that mothers do *not* rule the world. Mary's pregnancy is posited by the

campaigners as 'a gift from God' but this, in the overall context of *Down by the River*, is double-edged (152). Certainly the pregnancy is symptomatic of patriarchal domination being not only 'a gift from God' but -- ironically -- from the temporal father. Mary herself -- 'the top half of her body running and spinning but her lower part like a mummy, mummified' (118) -- epitomises the paralysing effect of maternity under patriarchy. She is liberated only by her timely miscarriage, and the judge's verdict is never revealed.

It is difficult to know whether or not to read the ending of *Down by the River* as optimistic. Certainly Mary's karaoke performance is triumphal, but it is nonetheless another 'performative act'. At best it suggests that Mary is free for the moment from the biological imperative and that she is therefore at liberty to construct her own 'performance'. However Mona's reiteration of 'She's Every Woman' -- previously played on the radio as callers debate Mary's predicament (188) -- suggests the ongoing influence of the social and cultural constructs which are 'imposed or inscribed upon the individual' (Butler, 1997, 410). This suggestion is reinforced by the disc jockey's subjection of women to multiple constructs. He refers variously to 'Mona Lisa' and 'Colleens' and advises the men: 'Take your pick' (262-263). Mona's own assertion that: "'You've got to be a babe'" indicates not so much strength as complicity with patriarchal expectation (232).

Optimism is further compromised by the Joycean tone of the novel's ending -- 'Across the land the snow is falling ...'. This reasserts not only the cultural paralysis of women identified by Herr but the inescapability of patriarchal domination, literary or otherwise (Herr, 1990, 7). Mary Macnamara, embodying the distortions of maternity effected by the

dominant order whilst being ironically named for its virginal ideal, is ultimately constrained by the discourses of a patriarchally constructed 'Mother Ireland'.

Conclusion

The novels of Edna O'Brien offer an ongoing analysis of constructions of femininity under patriarchy with specific reference to Ireland. Her recurrent themes are those of constructions of 'femininity', 'women on the market', patriarchal domination of women and landscapes -- in the guises of colonialism, 'social imperialism' and organized religion - - and cultural distortions of maternity in the absence of a coherent maternal imaginary (Pelan, 1996, 51). Throughout this thesis I have deconstructed perceptions of O'Brien as a lightweight chronicler of 'thinly disguised' autobiography, taking as starting points the arguments of recent critics such as Rebecca Pelan and Maureen L. Grogan (Grogan: 1996, 10). I have highlighted Edna O'Brien's status as defined by the National Portrait Gallery which posits her as an astute commentator on the position of 'women in society', particularly in Ireland.

It is clearly difficult to draw any definitive conclusion from the works of a living writer. I ended Chapter 6 by suggesting that the Joycean ending of *Down by the River* signifies the ultimate inescapability of the dominant [patriarchal] discourse. Yet this may be an overly pessimistic reading; it is possible to interpret Mary's song as triumphant engagement with, and adaptation to, her position in the patriarchal society of southern Ireland. O'Brien herself, asked by Sandra Manoogian Pearce whether 'a chance for redemption has begun to slip into [her] work', replied: 'What you may be perceiving in the changing characters of the women ... is a greater strength, which makes them perhaps not seem so teetering or beholden' (Pearce, 1996, 4).

According to Nicholas A. Basbanes -- who belatedly reviewed *Down by the River* for *The Gainesville Sun* -- O'Brien is planning a sequel to be entitled *Wild December*, which will deal with 'a murder over a piece of land' (Basbanes, 1997). Although it is risky to speculate about a work which is not yet written the proposed title and subject matter do suggests that O'Brien intends to develop further her theme of the appropriation of the maternal body of Ireland by 'males as national subjects'. If this is so it is likely that her exposition of women's bodies as 'site[s] of contestation' will also be continued (Innes, 1993, 3). Certainly there is no suggestion in the conclusion to *Down by the River* of 'the knowledge that is to be' which offers the possibility of *exchange* with 'the enemy' in the epilogue to *House of Splendid Isolation*:

To go in, within, is the bloodiest journey of all. Inside you get to know. That the same blood and tears drop from the enemy as from the self, though not always in the same proportion. To go right into the heart of the hate and the wrong and to sup from it and be supped (O'Brien: 1994, 216).¹

This vision suggests, not only a redistribution of the death drives so that these are no longer confined to the masculine, but an end to an economy in which Irigaray argues that 'the body and blood that are ritually consumed are the body and blood of women' (Whitford, 1991, 138 & 145). 'The body and blood' consumed by conflict in Ireland are, of course, those of 'Mother Ireland' 'her' self, as well as of Irish women in particular. In this context 'the knowledge that is to be' suggests also the freeing of Ireland from the cultural 'stilling' identified by Herr (Herr, 1990, 7). O'Brien is positing an economy of *mutual*

¹ I read 'exchange' with 'the enemy' in terms of gender as well as political alliance.

exchange, a 'culture' in which, in the words of Irigaray, 'the exchange of objects, and most particularly of women, would no longer form the basis for the constitution of a cultural order' (Irigaray, 1996, 45).

The apparent absence from *Down by the River* of 'the knowledge that is to be' -- Mary's unborn child, unlike Josie's, is not permitted a 'voice' -- need not however be interpreted pessimistically. By the end of *The High Road* O'Brien abandons her utopian quest for a parallel symbolic order, and engages instead with the dominant discourse. This move can be read not so much as an admission of defeat, but as a recognition of the need for change in the existing social and symbolic orders. Whilst Irigaray defines herself as 'a political militant for the impossible' O'Brien's position seems to be that change can be effected through direct engagement (Irigaray, 1996, 10). In *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Down by the River* change is suggested, not only through O'Brien's utopian positing of 'the knowledge that is to be' -- which is analogous with Irigaray's vision of 'what is yet to be as the only possibility of a future' -- but by her increasing emphasis on the socially and culturally constructed nature of 'masculinity' as well as 'femininity' (Irigaray, 1996, 10). Through her detailed characterisations of men in *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Down by the River* and through her accounts of Anna and Catalina playing with gender roles, of Josie dying in 'drag' and of the transvestite Reginald's easy return to 'masculinity', O'Brien examines in common with Judith Butler the 'ways [in which] gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts, and what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such acts' (Butler, 1997, 403). It is through 'the cultural transformation of gender' that O'Brien seems currently to envisage the

realisation of 'the knowledge that is to be'. Until the publication of *Wild December* however, any argument about O'Brien's continuing representations of 'masculinity', 'femininity' and maternity must remain speculative.

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