

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

“SMALL IN A WAY THAT A BULLET IS SMALL”:
THE SHORT FICTION OF EDNA O'BRIEN

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ABSTRACT

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The focus of this study is Edna O'Brien's *The Love Object* (2013), a collection of stories written and published over a period of more than forty years. The introduction reviews the critical reception of O'Brien's work. It discusses the factors that contributed to her marginalisation; only in the last two decades has Edna O'Brien's work attracted scholarly appraisal and re-evaluation. My analysis contributes to this body of criticism on the work of a writer who, in my view, has been seriously overlooked.

Chapter One provides a general introduction to O'Brien's writing. Many of her stories shed light on the plight of women in Ireland in the mid-twentieth century. I discuss her use of certain narrative techniques, including unreliable narrators and the frequent practice of not naming characters. A close reading of 'A Scandalous Woman' follows. Chapter Two discusses the impact that childhood experiences have on adult lives in O'Brien's stories. I draw on the work of Julia Kristeva to support my analysis of unresolved relationships between mothers and daughters, with particular reference to 'A Rose in the Heart of New York'. The final chapter discusses the importance of the house in O'Brien's stories. I examine the concept of dwelling, referencing *The Poetics of Space* (1994) by Gaston Bachelard. For many of O'Brien's women, the house is their exclusive domain. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's *System of Objects* (1996), I discuss the significance of the house and its contents in the protagonists' lives.

The conclusions of this study are twofold. In the hands of Edna O'Brien, the short story form is capable of delivering a compelling and irrefutable message. Secondly, it is the short story's capacity to shape and be shaped by cultural conditions that enables marginalised voices to become part of the historical narrative of the times.

Keywords: narrative, patriarchy, mothering, subjectification, home

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“SMALL IN A WAY THAT A BULLET IS SMALL”: THE SHORT FICTION OF EDNA O'BRIEN

“We might think of reading as a private, solitary activity, but all the time it is forming links between you and others in the world. Reading by yourself is, in fact, one of the most social, political activities you can do” (Eaglestone, 2002, p.123).

This statement rings true for me and probably for all who are able to read and study for pleasure. In 2008 I decided to enrol as a part-time undergraduate student to read English Literature. Looking back now, I recall how invigorating it was to discover new ways of thinking about texts. The following extract from an essay written in the first semester gives some sense of that excitement:

I feel as an artist might when, after years of painting in monochrome shades, he or she is suddenly presented with a palette of rainbow hues. I am impatient to pick up the brush and try out the colours. [...] I warm to the prospect of familiarising myself with close reading, asking questions, calling on previous experience, making connections, testing hypotheses and undertaking in-depth research. [...] I am looking at words quite differently now; words that have tumbled for centuries through time [...] written by a writer, heard by a listener or read by a reader, [...] world worn yet newly minted, old as time but ever new. ('Ways of Reading' essay, 30 October 2008)

When I came to write my dissertation in 2014 on James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), it was these skills of close reading, research and analysis that gave me the confidence to engage with this iconic text. One outcome of this study was an interest in the work of writers in exile, particularly Joyce, Edna O'Brien and Katherine Mansfield, all of whom, as it happens, are accomplished short story writers. While none chose to return to live in their native country, the homeland was a rich source of inspiration in their work. I began to look in depth at the form of the short story, and as I read more widely, I began to appreciate the writerly techniques in crafting a successful short story. The fact that I was particularly drawn to the narratives of Edna O'Brien may derive in part from my own childhood experience of Catholicism and convent education. O'Brien's body of work is impressive, encompassing novels, short stories, a biography, plays and screenplays, but the focus of this study is her

short fiction. Her nine short story collections yield absorbing insights into the lives of women. By writing these women into fiction, O'Brien brings important issues squarely into the public domain. It is O'Brien's collection *The Love Object* (2013) that forms the basis of this study.

The stories that comprise *The Love Object* were written and published over a period of more than forty years, representing a significant period of O'Brien's writing life. Many of the narratives confirm her ongoing preoccupation with her homeland even though she left for England in 1954. O'Brien made London her home and continues to live there today. While on the face of it this seems like an estrangement, Ireland has never been far from her thoughts, bringing to mind James Joyce's response when asked if he would ever return to Ireland: "Have I ever left it?" (Attridge, 2004, p.127). O'Brien freely acknowledges Joyce's influence on her as an aspiring writer. Finding T.S. Eliot's *Introducing James Joyce* (1942) on a Dublin bookstall, "I bought it for fourpence and carried it with me everywhere, [...] so that I could read it at will and copy out the sentences, luminous and labyrinthine as they were" (2012, p.96). Consciously or unconsciously, in choosing to expose the shortcomings of her home country, she may have seen herself as taking on his mantle.

Reading O'Brien's fiction, I was particularly drawn to her early stories that depict the Ireland that she grew up in, characterised by stultification and oppression. Many of O'Brien's short stories foreground the domestic, a somewhat neglected terrain for writers, but one which can yield powerful insights into family relationships. Among the stories I examine in detail are 'A Scandalous Woman' (1974), 'A Rose in the Heart of New York' (1978) and 'The Love Object' (1968). Censure of Ireland's treatment of women and the associated damage to individual lives are implicit within all three stories. Other stories discussed include 'Paradise' (1968), 'Irish Revel' (1968), 'Mrs Reinhardt' (1978), 'Madame Cassandra' (2011), 'Shovel Kings' (2011), 'The Connor Girls' (1982), 'The Rug' (1968) and 'My Two Mothers' (2011).

Chapter One of this study serves as an introduction to O'Brien's narrative style, examining certain techniques that contribute to the impact of her storytelling. The chapter concludes

with a close reading of 'A Scandalous Woman', a story which documents the crushing of the spirit and vitality of two young women.

The following two chapters explore the plight of women in *The Love Object* through a number of critical frameworks. Unresolved conflict between mothers and daughters is a recurring trope in O'Brien's fiction and forms the basis of Chapter Two. The chapter examines how a number of O'Brien's narratives approach the deeply fraught and unresolved tragedy of love and hate between mothers and daughters and the struggle for self-determination. My study owes much to the writings of Julia Kristeva, particularly her work on abjection and self-determination. Not surprisingly, a number of critics have explored O'Brien's portrayal of motherhood within a patriarchal society:

It is the most intense form of attachment which the texts focus on. Far deeper, more wrenching, and occasionally more ecstatic than specifically sexual woman-to-man connections. Sharply conflicted, it involves opposite imperatives: in one direction to escape, to form, and free the separate self and disavow the maternal other, and in the other to remain attached, to resist at all costs the process of detachment from and relinquishing of the mother, and indeed to long for total (re)union with her. (Laing, Mooney and O'Connor, 2006, p.187)

The bitter irony of a situation where, in response to external oppression, the home becomes a place of tyranny rather than shelter, putting at risk the development of healthy relationships, is poignant.

Sara Ruddick's 'Maternal Thinking' (1980) identifies three interests that govern maternal practice, namely, protection, growth and acceptability (to society). Conflict arises when the boundaries between these strands are no longer distinct. Ruddick argues that in societies where women have little power,

Powerlessness is exacerbated by [...] matrophobia [...], by self-contempt, and by numerous demoralizing, frightening physical and psychological violences perpetrated against all women. In response to maternal powerlessness, to a society whose values it cannot determine, maternal thought has opted for inauthenticity and the "good" of others. [...] Inauthenticity constructs and then assumes a world in which one's own values don't count. It is allied to fatalism and to some religious thought, some versions of Christianity, for example. (1980, p.354)

The chapter references in particular 'A Rose in the Heart of New York', which recounts the protagonist's vain struggle for self-determination.

Chapter Three acknowledges the significance of houses in Edna O'Brien's life. In exploring the nature of dwelling, a number of her stories consider exile, alienation and rootlessness. The foregrounding of women's experience as homemakers and child bearers ushers in new ways of thinking about domestic life: the true significance of the house or home becomes apparent when the contrary concepts of homelessness, homesickness and estrangement are examined. As previously stated, the focus of much of O'Brien's storyworld is domestic space. While the term 'domestic space' is unassuming and even somewhat disparaging, in *The Domestic Space Reader* Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei visualise it as a dynamic term embracing "the material, psychological, gendered, social, cultural, and political aspects of house, home and garden in the context of the everyday and of human relationships within and beyond the house" (2012, p.3).

My own reading of O'Brien endorses that view. While the house might appear as a limited and limiting world, it can act as a catalyst for articulating human emotions that struggle to be expressed. This third chapter explores the relationship between the childhood home and the memories that derive from it, drawing on Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1994) and Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1996). Testing Bachelard's claims in respect of O'Brien's fiction, in particular the nurturing qualities of childhood homes, results in a number of challenges to his thinking. Baudrillard's discourse on the significance of objects is particularly relevant in the stories of *The Love Object*. His treatise provides a useful framework within which to examine objects associated with early life experiences that refuse to be banished from memory. In 'Rose', the harnessing of memories proves difficult if not impossible for the protagonist and in many cases is given added significance through the objects of childhood.

INTRODUCTION

Edna O'Brien was born in 1930 into a farming family in County Clare in the West of Ireland. Her early novels and short stories owe much to a childhood growing up in Ireland in the mid-twentieth century. O'Brien's memoir *Country Girl* (2012) records a home life dominated by strict observance of the Catholic faith. The house was "full of prayer books and religious treasures" (O'Brien, 2012, p.52). In daily life prayers were said morning and evening: "exhortations about pride, vanity, filthy pleasures" and ever-threatening flames of Hell were impressed upon her young mind, so that: "Hell was far more real to us than Heaven" (2012, p.53). After a convent education, O'Brien, in accordance with her parents' wishes, trained as a pharmacist, all the while pursuing her love of literature and writing, "those two intensities that have buttressed my life" (2012, p.ix). Her marriage in 1954 to Ernest Gebler, together with the publishing of *The Country Girls* in 1960, created an estrangement with home that was never to be bridged. Edna O'Brien's career as a writer began with *The Country Girls* (1960), thereafter known as the trilogy following the publication of *The Lonely Girl* in 1962 and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* in 1964. Edna O'Brien has continued to write fiction, with nineteen novels and nine short story collections published to date. The early novels are set in Ireland, which has remained her muse over a lifetime of writing. However, O'Brien's later career moves beyond the Ireland of her youth. Her latest novels, *The Little Red Chairs* (2016), which addresses the atrocities in Bosnia in the early 1990s, and, more recently, *Girl* (2019), on the abduction by Boko Haram of young schoolgirls in Nigeria, demonstrate a wider concern to alert the world to the plight of others living under violence and oppression.

In recognition of her lifetime's achievement, O'Brien was awarded the 1995 European Prize for Literature, the prestigious PEN/Nabokov Award for Achievement in International Literature in February 2018 and, most recently, the Prix Femina special in November 2019 (its first ever non-French recipient). Many accolades that accompany these recent awards attest to the depth and quality of O'Brien's writing: it "is bold, her voice fearless and compelling [...] readers are brought to understand what it means to travel imaginatively and

bravely, to look clearly and dispassionately” (PEN America, 2018). Only in the last two decades, however, has her work has been seriously appraised and re-evaluated. In “‘Stage-Irish Persona’: An ‘Act’ of Resistance” (1993), Rebecca Pelan discusses the impediments to the scholarly appraisal of O’Brien’s work. Pelan suggests that the “critical indifference to the content of O’Brien’s fiction is the common experience of writers from minority discourses and reveals a familiar critical uneasiness with what is perceived to be the intrusive subject-matter” (1993, p.74). If Irish literature is viewed as a minority discourse on account of Ireland’s marginal position in relation to England then it calls into question how relative values in terms of literature are determined. Undue focus on the writer rather than the writing has presented an additional obstacle to a serious assessment of the work. O’Brien is “too ‘stage-Irish’ for the Irish, too Irish for the English and too flighty and romantic for feminists” (Pelan, 1993, p.77). Despite the fact that this article was published over a quarter of a century ago, it remains the case today that O’Brien’s work continues to attract little critical attention, while public acclaim is growing.

In a career that spans over fifty years, the figure of O’Brien herself has attracted public interest to the detriment of serious criticism of her work, which her few critics have noted: “It has become characteristic of Edna O’Brien scholarship to begin with a lament about the relatively limited selection of criticism dedicated to a writer who has produced such a considerable body of work” (Laing, Mooney and O’Connor, 2006, p.2). Amanda Greenwood (2003) suggests that O’Brien’s public persona, characterised by her celebrity lifestyle, has been sustained over the years by articles and interviews foregrounding her as a *femme fatale* and thus has influenced the critical reception of her work. There are many factors at play here, not least a perception of Irishness in the public imagination, a mix of allure and licentiousness; Peggy O’Brien describes O’Brien’s persona as “an outrageous concoction of what foreigners expect an Irish person to be – mellifluous, volatile, wanton, irrational” (1987, p.474). In their introduction to *Edna O’Brien: New Critical Perspectives*, the editors comment on the complicity of publishers in contributing to her public image by “the range of

photographs of O'Brien accompanying reviews and used on book covers" (Laing, Mooney and O'Connor, 2006, p.4). O'Brien's memoir records that her estranged husband, piqued by her success, was scathing about what he saw as "undue flattery in newspapers" since she was "perceived as glamorous" (2012, p.168). Guests at her regular Saturday night parties held in the 'swinging sixties' included celebrity figures such as Robert Mitchum, Diana Cilento and Richard Burton. Pelan argues that O'Brien's public image "has had serious implications for the reception of her work, the nature of which is most frequently considered to be a reflection of the persona – entertaining, widely appealing and faintly disreputable – and, as a consequence, judged to be of slightly inferior quality" (1993, p.77). That the nature of some of her fiction was sexually explicit only contributed to this risqué profile. Journalists and reviewers alike have fallen captive: "Edna O'Brien resembles one of her own heroines: beautiful in a subtle, wistful way, with reddish-blond hair, green eyes, and a savage sense of humour" (Guppy, 1984); "O'Brien, queenly and beautiful [...] It's as if she has cast a spell on me" (Cooke, 2011). It is fair to say O'Brien herself colluded in the creation of this profile. In the sixties and seventies, she gave numerous interviews although she professed a dislike of such occasions, stemming it seems from the inevitable focus on her private life. Before an interview for *The Irish Times* in 1972, interviewer Elgy Gillespie reported O'Brien politely asking her, "would I mind terribly if we didn't talk about her private life, only about her work which mattered most to her?" (1972, p.13). In the published interview both author and journalist are drawn into the very areas she has designated off-limits: Gillespie: "More facts. [...] Her two sons are at a co-educational boarding school, they are eighteen and sixteen and, she says, 'not ill at ease with themselves, full of curiosity and searching'" and O'Brien: "I would like to tell all the people who tell me I am a sexy woman that I work hard; I would like to take an advertisement out saying 'I have a dull life'" (Gillespie, 1972, p.15). In 2012 her autobiography *Country Girl* was published; with new insights into her eventful life, it further consolidated this public image. An inevitable consequence of this ongoing media coverage and the publishing of her memoir is that the boundary between her own life and her early fiction remains blurred. It is important to point out, however, that while media interest has not

always been welcomed, O'Brien has courted the media on her own terms, which has certainly kept her in the public eye.

It is important to acknowledge the unpropitious times in which O'Brien was writing. The publication of her first novel, *The Country Girls* (1960), which was written in London, caused such a furore in her home country that it was banned. "The few copies purchased in Limerick were burnt after the rosary, one evening in the parish grounds, at the request of the priest" (O'Brien, 2008). She was not the only writer to be banned in Ireland; John McGahern's second novel *The Dark* (1965) fell foul of the Irish Censorship Board for its portrayal of an abusive father. While clearly one cannot conceive of that happening today, general attitudes to Irish women's writing have been slow to change, not least in O'Brien's home country; as a consequence, the #OBrienFest held at University College Dublin in September 2018 to celebrate the life and works of Edna O'Brien was very much to be welcomed. That she is a woman writing about women's lives in the social, political and cultural context of mid-twentieth century Ireland has seriously impacted on the reception of her work. Fellow Irish writers, for example Frank O'Connor and William Trevor, have not been similarly slighted. The fact that there have always been detractors in respect of her early writing is in marked contrast to what seems to have been the unreserved acclaim for her contemporary, William Trevor, who wrote about his native Ireland from a position of exile in England. Trevor received awards and accolades from across the Atlantic as well as from Britain and his home country, including an honorary CBE in 1977 for services to literature and a knighthood in 2002.

This apparent indifference to the quality of her work seems harsh for a writer who, in an interview with Shusha Guppy, says she regards writing as "a vocation, like being a nun or a priest. I work at my writing as an athlete does at his training" (1984, p.27). In the same interview O'Brien acknowledges her complex relationship with Ireland: "I felt oppressed and strangulated from an early age. That was partly to do with my parents, who were themselves products and victims of their history and culture. That is to say, alas, they were superstitious,

fanatical, engulfing. At the same time they were bursting with talent” (p.31). When Guppy raises the autobiographical dimensions of her work, O’Brien readily accepts that her early years in the west of Ireland have influenced her fiction:

But any book that is any good must be, to some extent, autobiographical, because one cannot and should not fabricate emotions: and although style and narrative are crucial, the bulwark, emotion, is what finally matters. With luck, talent, and studiousness, one manages to make a little pearl, or egg, or something ... But what gives birth to it is what happens inside the soul and the mind, and that has almost always to do with *conflict*. And loss – an innate sense of tragedy. (Guppy, 1984, p.31)

O’Brien’s choice of words resonates strongly with the lives of a number of her protagonists. In her stories ‘A Scandalous Woman’ and ‘A Rose in the Heart of New York’ (hereafter ‘Rose’), women’s lives are blighted by the conflicts arising through religious strictures and family expectations, the result of which is a breaking of the spirit and a hollowing out of “the soul and the mind” (Guppy, 1984, p.22).

Cleary points out that in the literary field, “the cultural dominant in Ireland during the decades between independence and the end of the twentieth century was not modernism at all but rather naturalism” (2004, p.233). The Revivalist period, dedicated to the restoration of Irish culture, which included reinstating the Gaelic language, gave way to the more pragmatic naturalism, which “negated this utopian idealism by insisting on the dreary provincial squalor of Irish life” (Cleary, 2004, p.233). O’Brien’s writing is part of this Irish naturalist tradition:

Born of the blighted dreams of the Irish revolution, this naturalism was, in essence, an aesthetic of diminished expectations [...] Irish naturalism has been concentrated (with important exceptions) overwhelmingly in small-town and rural Ireland, the fictional territory of writers such as Kate O’Brien, Liam O’Flaherty, Sean O’Faoláin, Edna O’Brien, John McGahern, Tom Murphy, and William Trevor. Like its French counterpart, Irish naturalism was also in its inception a dissident and reformist aesthetic: it measured the distance between the official state ideology of Irish Ireland and its tawdry reality. The naturalist writers probed—with an intimate knowledge of the local terrain conspicuously absent in much of the literature of the Revival—the social and sexual traumas that official Irish culture would not acknowledge, and in so doing many incurred the wrath not only of state censors but of the reading public for scandalizing their own society before an allegedly hostile Anglo-American audience. (Cleary, 2004, pp.233-234)

Positioning O'Brien within the naturalist movement underscores the context from which her fiction emerges, and which by her own admission continues to dominate her thoughts. Running through many of her stories are the voices, or more often the thoughts, of women who were silenced by the prevailing social climate brought about by the state and by the Catholic orthodoxy.

Poverty, together with lack of social mobility, drove many young people to emigrate. In her book *The Best are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture* (2015), Clair Wills writes, "Four out of every five children born in Ireland between 1931 and 1941 emigrated in the 1950s" (p.xii). While England was the choice for many young women with nursing qualifications (more often from more affluent homes, since their families were able to pay for their training), a number of young women grasped opportunities to work in America, arranged either through family members or through the auspices of the Catholic Church. The experience of working in the fashionable department stores of New York in the land of the free, as depicted in Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (2009), could not have been a greater contrast to home. While some women made their lives across the Atlantic, those returning to a life of drudgery after tasting the fruits of capitalism might be forgiven for thinking that life had dealt them a hard hand.

One of O'Brien's more trenchant critics is Peggy O'Brien. Her article 'The Silly and the Serious: An Assessment of Edna O'Brien' (1987) might alert readers to the author's predispositions, not least a likely suspicion that her attention, like that of other early critics, is fixated on the author, Edna O'Brien. Peggy O'Brien's stated aim is "to understand rather than to judge an author's psychology" (1987, p.474), but her analysis of O'Brien's work demonstrates that while she is critical of those beguiled by the woman behind the writing, she herself falls victim; in her view, O'Brien is "open and roguish", and "her egoism robs other characters and events of their individuality and usually their stature" (1987, p.475). Peggy O'Brien seems unable to distance the writing from the writer: "The prose unquestionably makes this powerful gesture of appeal to us, demanding reaction, either to

affirm or reject the author" (1987, p.488). The women's lives that Edna O'Brien chronicles are not easily disentangled from O'Brien's own early life, but, importantly, the author writes herself into her fiction not as a *celebrity* but as a champion of a generation of women without a voice. O'Brien the critic takes it upon herself to predict the reader's likely response to writing that she regards as flawed. Her extraordinary phrase "a detached but secure reader" introduces a mystifying, arbitrary classification by which she presumes to know how readers will react to writing that, she claims, can leave some readers "disgusted and cold, dismissing the work as an artistic failure" (1987, p.488). I argue that the critic O'Brien grossly underestimates the importance of reiterating the plight of these women, since the climate in which the author O'Brien was writing called for courage in continuing to challenge the status quo.

While I challenge many of the critic's assertions, on the importance of foregrounding female identity our views converge. Peggy O'Brien acknowledges the challenge that women face in achieving differentiation: "this struggle for self-objectification gained through the process of narrating gives a psychological immediacy and urgency to the prose that compels our attention and respect" (1987, p.487). Furthermore, she finds "great poignancy" in O'Brien's handling of the mother/daughter estrangement in 'Rose', recorded with "unflinching honesty" (O'Brien, P., 1987, p.477). However, the tenor of her comments fails to recognise the nuances of O'Brien's narrative style. She castigates the author for what she sees as "an avoidance of emotional honesty that places the value of her work in question" (O'Brien, P., 1987, p.477), an assertion that is as disparaging as it is perplexing. Edna O'Brien's candid admission to being a "searching, somewhat fractured adult" leads her critic to confidently assert, "The creation of fictions is part of an effort to redeem herself, become whole" (O'Brien, P., 1987, p.484).

While Peggy O'Brien cautions against using interview material, in this instance 'A Conversation with Edna O'Brien' by Philip Roth (1984), her conviction nevertheless is that the voice of O'Brien, given her "irrepressible, perverse humanity, [...] is even more fictional

than that of her fiction" (1987, p.477). Time and again in her article, the critic O'Brien seems unable or unwilling to critique the text in its own right. Writing about the protagonist in the short story 'Paradise' (1968), she asserts, "the author seems complicitous in the self-destructive behaviour" (O'Brien, P., 1987, p.478). Now, thirty years on, we look askance at such assertions. These disparaging comments confirm the focus on the author rather than the narrative. The tenor of her article denies the significance of chronicling the stories of women who hitherto were unrepresented. My sustained engagement with this critic is indicative of the fact that Peggy O'Brien's analysis of Edna O'Brien's writing formed the dominant view in the late twentieth century.

While Peggy O'Brien recognises O'Brien's strengths as a writer, in particular "her penchant and capacity for descriptive writing [...] the subtle interaction of emotion and description" (1987, p.482), she censures what she sees as O'Brien's fixation with flawed family relationships: "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" (1987, p.483). For Peggy O'Brien, the repetitive theme makes it wearisome for the reader. In my view this is to ignore the social climate of the day; by writing against prevailing cultural conventions, O'Brien threw down a gauntlet to the establishment, exposing herself to the wrath of family, church and state. Her writing is testament to her courage as well as to a long-held determination to be a writer. But what her critic fails to recognise is that the term 'obsessiveness' might be more accurately identified as the manifestation of trauma. It would be fair to point out that our understanding of trauma in people's lives has broadened since it was first identified as 'shell shock' in the First World War. While a domestic setting of course does not equate to a battlefield, for the lives of those born into a prevailing atmosphere of impending violence, it can and does have enduring consequences.

Mary Salmon's article 'Edna O'Brien' (1990) does acknowledge the compromised position of women in a patriarchal religious and secular society, but as Greenwood points out, it was the

Special Edition on Edna O'Brien published by the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* in 1996 that “marked a turning point in criticism of her works” (2003, p.8). The contributing essays address a range of texts and employ several theoretical perspectives drawing on the work of Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, and their contributions to feminist thinking.

Greenwood argues that despite a number of challenges to earlier reductive readings of O'Brien's work, “Her charisma still threatens to preclude objective assessment of her work, and not just within the realm of media response” (2003, p.10). Summarising the criticism that existed at the time of writing, Greenwood concludes that O'Brien's writing falls foul of critics from whatever quarter they represent: “It seems that O'Brien cannot win. Writing about ‘women's emotional problems’ she is dismissed as narrow in scope; addressing political issues she is branded a poseuse” (2003, p.2).

Why there has been such a dearth of critical interest is not easy to explain. Mooney argues that despite her prolific output, “a certain confusion still attends the question of precisely what kind of writer she might be” (2018, p.245). It would appear that a mid-career shift in subject matter seems to have done little to temper the approach of early reviewers, and of course it is hard to gauge the extent to which the less favourable climate of the late twentieth century in respect of women's achievements is significant.

A shift in society's approach to women's rights and expectations causes us now to look askance at reviews that focus on superficial aspects of a serious writer. While critics have been particularly harsh in O'Brien's case, she is not alone in the struggle for critical recognition. The collective indignation on the part of Irish women writers at the publication of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vols I and II* (1991) edited by Seamus Deane and others, with its striking under-representation of women, took the editors, it seems, by surprise. Only two women featured in the section ‘Irish Writing: Prose Fiction and Poetry 1900-1988’. In an article in the *Irish Times*, Nuala O'Faolain voiced her outrage:

When that sank in – when I brought myself to believe that they'd really done this – I began to question the whole book. How sensitive is it to any history if it's this insensitive to the present? [...] Seamus Deane says in his introduction to the anthology that "what we show is an example of the way in which canons are established and the degree to which they operate as systems of ratification and authority". Well, exactly. That's the danger. While this book was demolishing the patriarchy of Britain on a grand front, its own, native, patriarchy was sitting there. Smug as ever. (1991 cited in Crowe, 2003)

Eleven years later, in order to redress this omission, *Volumes IV* and *V*, subtitled 'Irish Women's Writing and Traditions', were published. But the struggle for equality is far from over. Irish women novelists have always struggled for parity, and in the view of the novelist John Boyne they are still marginalised. In a 2017 article for the *Irish Times* and the *Guardian*, Boyne attacked the 'literary tea towel' depicting 'Irish Writers':

It's an Irish phenomenon that can be found hanging in half the pubs of Dublin and all the tourist shops. Also taking the form of a calendar, a beer mat, a T-shirt and a poster, the tea towel features images of 12 great Irish writers [...] Twelve writers, supposedly our greatest ever, and not a vagina between them [...] A man is treated like a literary writer from the start, but a woman usually has to earn that commendation.

More recently, *Edna O'Brien: New Critical Perspectives* (2006) welcomes a move towards new critical approaches that challenge "existing hostile and repetitive readings of her work" (Laing, Mooney and O'Connor, 2006, p.2). The edition grew out of the 2005 conference 'Edna O'Brien: A Reappraisal', held at The National University, Galway, which set out to re-evaluate O'Brien's oeuvre, introducing broader critical frameworks. A number of critical analyses delve deep into the unsatisfactory mother/daughter relationships that dominate O'Brien's fiction. That many of O'Brien's women protagonists fail to achieve emotional fulfilment reinforces the view that cultural impediments inhibit the process. Patricia Coughlan argues,

Ultimately, we need to remind ourselves that Edna O'Brien, writer, is more and other than the sum of all the protagonists. [...] it is the *heroines* who lack, and struggle for, agency, and who over and over again realize their states of abjection [...] The *author* must be distinguished from them, by the very fact that she attains agency in the act of imagining and writing them. (2006, p.191)

Coughlan's argument is clear. Distancing O'Brien 'the writer' from the unfavourable elements of O'Brien 'the celebrity' allows the texts to speak for themselves, which they do with an extraordinary power. My consideration of O'Brien's writing acknowledges these new approaches and seeks to build on this critical engagement.

My study argues that, laying aside any autobiographical aspects of the fiction, O'Brien's short stories constitute a compelling commentary on the patterning of women's lives within a patriarchal system. While I regard this study as a feminist project, it is fair to say that O'Brien never positioned herself as a feminist writer and in many ways disappointed the movement by depicting women's collusion in their own powerlessness since it was seen as a disinclination to challenge the status quo. The writer herself suggests that feminist critics saw her as "too preoccupied with old-fashioned themes like love and longing" (Guppy, 1984, p.28). Sinéad Mooney suggests that O'Brien's position on the margins and her fiction depicting the lives of other culturally disadvantaged women somehow resulted in critics giving her a wide berth. It seems that it was precisely because her stories involved the lives of embattled women at the sharp end of domestic existence that critics were reluctant to engage with her work.

Coughlan challenges the rejection by some feminists of O'Brien's work, arguing,

On the one hand, it confirms the existence, and plays out the specific operations, of Irish social exclusions and prohibitions: those of personal freedoms including that of religious *dis*belief, women's social and sexual agency, sexuality as pleasure and play, for instance. On the other hand, it simultaneously disrupts and subverts them in the very act of representing them. (2006, p.180)

In highlighting the lack of agency that Irish women suffered, rather than emerging as a force that will not be denied, O'Brien and her protagonists were kept at a distance.

Writers and critics have defined the short story in various ways, but for me, the title of my thesis, 'Small in a Way That a Bullet is Small', taken from A.L. Kennedy's speech at Edge Hill University in 2006, vividly conveys the essence of the short story. Kennedy goes on to

say, “There are defining moments in anybody’s life, which mark them forever, which don’t actually take an awful long time; that’s what the short story is about. It’s this hugely powerful form but no, it’s defined as being miniature” (2008, p.3). My own experience of reading short stories confirms the short story’s potential for delivering a knock-out blow.

The origins of the short story can be traced back through Biblical parables, moral fables, folk tales and fairy stories. Allan Pasco argues, “The subject matter may be different, the devices at variance, but no substantive trait or quality distinguishes them from the products of nineteenth- and twentieth-century practitioners” (1994, p.114). Stories, whether anecdotal, handed down through generations or purchased from Amazon, remain a significant part of our diverse lives and cultures. The short story form is particularly accessible to those on the fringes of mainstream society. In *The Lonely Voice* (1996), Frank O’Connor argues that the short story is the best form to express human loneliness.

A modern-day instance of the vital role that storytelling can play in the modern world can be found in *Gaza Writes Back: Narrating Palestine* (2014), in which fifteen young writers contribute stories: stories that keep alive the tradition of storytelling in Palestine but also form a creative act of resistance to ongoing oppression. The editor, Refaat Alareer, comments, “*Gaza Writes Back* proves that sometimes a homeland becomes a story. We love the story because it is about our homeland and we love our homeland even more because of the story” (2014, p.535). This reciprocity resonates with the fact that the home country often continues to exert a powerful hold on the consciousness of writers in exile. This is certainly the case for James Joyce and Edna O’Brien, both of whom freely acknowledge their attachment to Ireland, the land of their birth. Much has been written about O’Brien’s self-imposed exile. Marriage to Ernest Gebler and the family’s subsequent move to London severed any remaining ties with her family and with Ireland but gave, in her own words, “the freedom and the incentive to write” (O’Brien, 2012, p.128), allowing her to complete her first novel, *The Country Girls*, in 1958 in just three weeks. Certainly, Ireland was her muse and remained the focus of her early writing: “Before my eyes, infinitely clear, came that former

world in which I believed that our fields and hollows had some old music slumbering in them, centuries old” (O’Brien, 2012, p.129).

In ‘The Aesthetics of Exile’ George O’Brien comments on the sheer numbers of Irish writers in exile: “It seems only a slight exaggeration to say that without exile there would be no contemporary Irish fiction” (2000, p.35). I argue that in O’Brien’s writing, a state of exile is manifest both in a physical and in a psychological sense. Estrangement is a recurrent motif, whether it is generated by the Irish Sea crossing, a move from rural village to the city or, as many of her stories attest to, the incomplete severance of family ties that leaves an individual in a state of perpetual limbo. The particular qualities of the short story make the form eminently suited to expressing marginal, physical and psychological states. The insecurity and loneliness of the protagonist, or more accurately, the sense of being alone, are themes in much of O’Brien’s short fiction.

In privileging the domestic, O’Brien’s narratives shine a light on life in mid-century Ireland, adding a particular dimension to our understanding of Irish history. Karen Sayer refers to McRae’s term ‘folkhistory’ (McRae, 1994, p.221), as opposed to history, which, she suggests, shines a light on the lives of ordinary citizens often living under constraint, for example, colonisation or patriarchy:

the realm of anecdote where the contents of history are detached from external events, from distant dates and dry facts; “whereas *history*, concerned with precision and rational interpretation, is *intellectual* in its apprehension of events, folkhistory relies on an intuitive, impressionistic organization of the same material” (McRae, 1994: 221, original emphases). (Sayer, 2006, pp.65-66).

The author argues that in folkhistory “the past becomes part of the immediacy of the intimate present. Here the past is made to make sense in the narrator’s own terms and remains real; ‘it is another way of knowing’ (McRae 1994: 219-21). This is the past as it is lived, not as it is written” (Sayer, 2006, p.66). In detailing the intimate lives of citizens at a particular period in time, the mid-twentieth century, O’Brien’s stories bring substance and significance to historically based accounts. The collected stories were written over a period of forty-three

years, years in which Ireland has enjoyed rising prosperity and the ongoing benefits that accrue through its membership of the European Union. This expansion of the country's economic status was not initially matched by significant societal change; however, in 2015 Ireland became the first country to legalise same-sex marriage. Three years later a further referendum overwhelmingly endorsed women's right to abortion, at the time creating the anomaly that abortion was still criminalised in Northern Ireland.

While the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 granted the vote to both men and women, Weekes points out that this did not usher in a new era of equality:

In the words of Margaret Ward, the 1922 Constitution was "the last piece of progressive legislation concerning women that would be passed until a new generation of Irish feminists began to raise insistent voices fifty years later". [...] During the early years of the new state, the civil and religious authorities were closely allied in the formulation and enactment of repressive legislation which effectively denied women a full public and political identity. (2000, pp.101-102)

The prevailing view was that women's place was in the home, the implications of which I discuss in Chapter Three. It was not until the 1960s that a period of social and cultural reform began with the establishment of a national television service, in 1961. Global news and images as well as public debate on topics that previously would have been censored were brought directly into the home. The impact of television cannot be overestimated; living rooms all over Ireland were now exposed to the free thinking of an increasingly secular outside world and the opportunities it offered. Wills points out that as well as the advent of television, the "back-and-forth movement" of emigrants "had a huge impact on a still relatively isolated society" (2015, p.9). No longer could the institutions of government and church remain unchallenged as people began to see themselves as part of a global community. That the narrator of O'Brien's 'The Love Object', Martha, is a television announcer confirms this watershed moment, but since the role involves reporting on more enlightened communities, the irony of her own situation is apparent. Martha may be liberated from the home, but she is still subject to Ireland's repressive cultural regime. Her character

challenges the stereotype of 'the angel in the house'. Separated from her husband, who has custody of their two children, Martha has a career, a disorganised house and an older lover.

The authors of "Betwixt and Between": Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian and British Short Fiction' claim that "the short story can be considered the liminal genre *par excellence*" (Achilles and Bergmann, 2015, p.3). The concept of liminality is important both in the "aesthetic composition" of a short story and in the "cultural message" a story conveys (Achilles and Bergmann, 2015, p.24). They argue that the term is ubiquitous in "the arts and in scholarship", because "pivotal situations are indeed not only frequent but decisive in human lives and in social, cultural, political and aesthetic contexts" (Achilles and Bergmann, 2015, p.3). However, many of O'Brien's women who find themselves at crossroads are unwilling or powerless to make a choice; a deeply embedded inertia, the result of cultural conditions, effectively immobilises them.

In what George O'Brien refers to as "a state of psychological exile", a woman is "at once remote from, yet attached to, the man who ruins her inner life" (2000, p.43). This limbo-like state of non-engagement together with the lack of any means to redeem the situation might be described as a state of liminality. O'Brien's short stories are compelling despite the sense of opacity and inexactitude that often pervades the stories. Unreliable narrators and the fact that O'Brien's early stories are suffused with her experience of growing up in Ireland blur the line between fact and fiction and speak to this sense of liminality. The Reinhardt texts (1978) and 'Madame Cassandra' are short stories in which the protagonists are at critical points in their marriages, forced to confront "transitional situations and fleeting moments of crisis" (Achilles and Bergmann, 2015, p.22). In the face of her husband's blatant infidelity, Millie, the protagonist in 'Madame Cassandra', seeks reassurance from a clairvoyant, unable or unwilling to confront her husband or to assert her rights.

Mary Louise Pratt highlights the influence of the short story on the development of "a basic literary identity for a region or a group" (1994, p.105). There is a wealth of evidence to

support this premise: the works of writers such as Joyce and O'Brien, and Alice Munro and Sherwood Anderson, among others, are major contributors in drawing attention to a group or community, often attracting harsh criticism from their communities. Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), a series of tales of small-town people published in 1919, drew intense criticism from reviewers. An anonymous article in the *New York Evening Post* (1919, III. 3) castigates Anderson for his lack of humour and a preoccupation with "misdemeanors and crimes of sex", arguing that all those "reared in a small Middle Western town" will recognise "the partial element of truth and the huge element of mendacity in Mr Anderson's book" (Anon., 1919 cited in Anderson, 1996, p.164). *Winesburg, Ohio*, a book that was burned publicly in a New England town, finally achieved recognition and became a valued textbook in college programmes. Anderson wrote in his memoirs, "it brought the short story in America into a new relation with life" (1996, p.155). For a writer to portray a community, warts and all, was seen as an act of betrayal. In the cases of Joyce and O'Brien, since their work was banned in Ireland, it initially challenged rather than affirmed any national identity. After battling for ten years with publishers who balked at his candour and refusal to substitute fictitious names for people and places, James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) was finally printed. Unsigned reviews of the book suggested that three of the fifteen stories "would have been better buried in oblivion" and "the power of genius is in every line, but it is a genius that, blind to the blue of the heavens, seeks inspiration in the hell of despair" (Johnson, 2008, p.ix). In foregrounding the lives of ordinary characters, their short stories run counter to grander narratives, giving form and identity to what O'Connor has called "a submerged population group" (1996, p.155). The common thread in the case of all of these writers, Palestinian, American or Irish, is exile, from region or country.

For writers, the experience of exile brings the past into particular focus. Mavis Gallant, an exile born and brought up in Canada but later living and writing in Paris, writes in her introduction to *Home Truths* (1987) that the early childhood years contribute to a sense of culture and that culture "is contained in memory [...] and it is inseparable from language"

(1987, p.xv). This resonates with much of O'Brien's fiction, which, as this study reveals, is concerned with women whose lives are compromised by the past. In shining a spotlight on the unsung lives of women in Ireland, O'Brien's short stories position their oppressed and diminished lives as part of the public record. Alison Lee underlines the vital role that stories play: "Story-telling provides the link between private and public history since, while all historical events are direct experience to *someone*, to everyone else, they are simply stories" (1990, p.45). The permeability of boundaries serves to illuminate the fluid territory of 'storyland', suggesting that stories can harbour inherent truths but not necessarily universal ones. But stories transcend the particular, as in Joyce's story 'The Dead', where, in what Jeri Johnson describes as "one of the most famously lyrical endings in English short fiction", the narrator takes up the story again, drawing us into a sense of shared common humanity (2008, p.xxxvi).

The fact that memories can take the form of vivid internal images may be a contributing factor in the affinity between memory and the short story. As María Jesús Hernández Lerena suggests, the short story deals in visual images; the reader or character are "onlookers" rather than "knowers" (Patea, 2012, p.176). This comment seems particularly relevant to O'Brien's short fiction, where the characters' feelings stay hidden and much remains unsaid. In the short story the visual images that flow from the text filter through author, narrator and character before the reader interprets them. This process exemplifies what Rignall describes as "the conditioned nature of all seeing" (1992, p.4). Seeing is not tantamount to knowing, and certainty is further undermined by the presence of a narrator. For Georg Lukács, the existence of a narrator denies any possibility of an objective rendering of a real event:

whatever he does, it is his own subjectivity that singles out a fragment from the immeasurable infinity of the events of life, endows it with independent life and allows the whole from which this fragment has been taken to enter the work only as the thoughts and feelings of his hero [...] only as the mirroring of a reality having its own separate existence. (1971, p.132)

This is clearly the case in O'Brien's 'A Scandalous Woman'. The narrator is recalling a life-changing incident in her youth, but since her memories are conditioned by the passage of time and by her own maturation there can be no certainty as to how events actually unfolded.

A number of O'Brien's protagonists exemplify Ernst Cassirer's concept of 'mythic thinking', which might be explained as an experience, or the memory of it, surging into the conscious mind so that nothing can exist alongside it (1946: p.32).

Charles May sees a similarity between 'mythic thinking' and the particular power of the short story, with its origins in myth and storytelling. The effect, May argues, is not one of expansion but rather "an impulse towards concentration" (1994, p.139). The onslaught of memory for the protagonist in O'Brien's 'Rose' works exactly in that way; it occupies her waking hours and invades her dream world to the point where the rest of life is put on hold. It is the imagery associated with this state of mind as well as the exacting parameters of O'Brien's storyworld that contribute to this story's sustained intensity.

While a protagonist's state of mind might be under serious assault from her memories, it is fair to say that there can be no 'story' without memory. Gertrude Stein argues that memory underpins the state of knowing: "the fact that knowledge is acquired so to speak, by memory; but that when you know anything, memory doesn't come in. At any moment you are conscious of knowing anything, memory plays no part. [...] You have the sense of the immediate" (1974, p.155). Stein seems to be suggesting that a moment of awareness or knowing, even if it seems free and spontaneous, is nevertheless embedded in memory. O'Brien's narrators certainly bear that out; incapable of withstanding the onslaught of memories, they are unwilling hostages to a past that continues to dictate the present.

As discussed, O'Brien's early work has not universally been recognised as a contribution to furthering the cause of women: some have seen it as a capitulation to misogyny rather than a challenge. Ingman and Ó Gallchoir point out that while the demand for women's rights was

seen as confrontational, so too were “voices that either challenged the national narrative, or whose primary focus simply lay elsewhere” (2018, p.4). I argue that in promoting a discourse on the domestic, O’Brien’s scrutiny of a neglected domain draws attention to the gendered nationalism of a country. It is a hand that writes back to patriarchal Ireland. For the most part O’Brien’s women tread a precarious path to adulthood. As a consequence of their own headstrong actions, her protagonists, like O’Brien herself, are judged harshly by family and community since uncompromising family conventions disallow the possibility of forgiveness or compassion. They are effectively outcasts from home and society; in a sense a secular excommunication.

My study examines O’Brien’s engagement with the issue of women’s self-determination and the struggle to achieve it in the unfavourable social climate of rural Ireland. Subject to the dictates of the Church, the lives of the women in her stories are characterised by drunken or violent fathers, compliant mothers and, for some, a taste of life in America etched in the memory, now only to be dreamed about in a life of hardship back in Ireland. Cleary’s term “tawdry reality” (2004, p.233) challenges the concept that this was a society occupying the moral high ground. Drawing on her experience of growing up in Ireland, Edna O’Brien’s concern is women’s psychological struggle for self-determination. As I have previously suggested, her narrators are suffering what is best described as psychological trauma; they are hostage to memories that will not be quieted. Embedded within her short fiction is a tumult of deep-seated emotions, some of which find expression in behaviours that are obsessive, brooding and at times reckless. Heather Ingman’s essay ‘Edna O’Brien: Stretching the Nation’s Boundaries’ (2002) examines how reductive readings of O’Brien through a parochial focus on autobiography and romance have reinforced rather than challenged the nation’s inherent form of gendered nationalism:

Fixed constructs have always been central to Irish nationalism. On a symbolic level, going back to eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry Ireland was constructed as a woman, victimised by the colonising English male. She was Hibernia, Mother

Ireland, the Poor Old Woman, the Shan Van Vocht, Cathleen ni Houlihan, the Dark Rosaleen – images taken up a century later by Anglo-Irish poets. (p.253)

The role of women was further implicated in the gendered construction of Ireland through the popularity of the Marian cult, intense devotion to the Madonna, which increased rapidly in Ireland in the early twentieth century. Women were trapped within an ideology that on the one hand held up the Virgin Mary as an emblem of purity and goodness and on the other held strictly to the view that, as enshrined in the 1937 Constitution, a woman's role was that of wife and child bearer: "Irish men were expected to, and often did, fight for their country while Irish women, with the example of the Virgin Mary set before them, were to embody the purity of the Irish nation" (Ingman and Ó Gallchoir, 2018, p.9). This echoes the Victorian attitude to women exemplified in Coventry Patmore's poem, *The Angel in the House* (1854), which sentimentalises women and consigns a married woman to a role meekly subservient to her husband. This image of a sacrificial woman was to be famously challenged by Virginia Woolf in her essay *Professions for Women* (1931) in which she declares that: "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (1975: p.235).

Early critics castigated O'Brien for her continual preoccupation with downtrodden, defeated women. Others hold the view that the relentless nature of this existence, and not least the importance of setting the record straight, demands such reiteration. Mooney argues,

repetition, far from being an abiding flaw, is crucial to the political and aesthetic effects of O'Brien's *oeuvre* [...] Characters, settings, motifs and images are repeated and reinterrogated [...] The effect of such dense intertextuality suggests [...] that she was engaged in a consciously post-Joycean creation of a recognisable fictional world, the stultifying rural west of Ireland of the mid-twentieth century and more specifically, in a recovery of the previously unvoiced female experience of that world. (2018, p.252)

O'Brien's mode of writing reflects the ongoing trauma of these women's lives. When customs and attitudes are so deeply entrenched, hearts and minds resist new thinking; I argue that this insistent approach was essential for there to be any possibility of change. History has for

the most part ignored the plight of women trapped in domesticity; O'Brien's fictions have been instrumental in redressing that. The mothers and daughters depicted in many of her stories, including 'A Scandalous Woman', 'The Rug', 'My Two Mothers' and 'Rose', affirm and reaffirm women's struggle against a repressive patriarchal society. An unexpected outcome of reading O'Brien has been to realise the extent to which her fiction, written against the grain of what was deemed admissible, now constitutes part of the historical narrative of Ireland: a forceful challenge to the public record of women's lives in mid-twentieth-century Ireland.

Chapter One of this study provides an overview of O'Brien's short fiction style. It discusses the dominant themes that feature in the selected stories. For the most part the stories are domestic in setting and the characterisations family and community based. O'Brien's choice of narrative techniques is discussed. I examine in particular the ways in which they impact on meaning. A number are explored in some detail and then, more specifically, in a close reading of 'A Scandalous Woman'. Building on this introductory chapter, the following two chapters employ specific theoretical frameworks in further analyses of the stories.

CHAPTER ONE: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN *THE LOVE OBJECT*

In this chapter I identify key elements of O'Brien's narrative technique. My purpose in doing so is to provide an overview, highlighting the strengths of O'Brien's writing style, and to lay the foundation for the two subsequent chapters, both of which adopt a theoretical approach. The chapter begins with observations on O'Brien's characterisations in *The Love Object*. I make particular reference to 'Paradise' as I explore reasons as to why O'Brien frequently chooses not to name her characters. I go on to discuss how unreliable narrators, which feature in a number of her stories, make any certainty difficult to establish. This is particularly the case in 'A Scandalous Woman', a story I examine in detail later in the chapter. While there may be some difficulty in gleaning from the narrator the true facts surrounding certain events, 'A Scandalous Woman' presents a devastating condemnation of the Irish establishment. The story content, powerful in itself, is made more vivid by O'Brien's use of metaphor and imagery.

The selected narratives are representative of O'Brien's concerns: mothers and daughters, the precarious pursuit of love, and tragic unfulfilled lives. The stories chart the hopes and dreams of women who against the odds seek true love. The title of the collection, *The Love Object*, is a fitting one; whether the object be male, female or inanimate, powerful feelings of desire are aroused, with the capacity to destroy rather than comfort. Deception is present in many guises; there are cheating husbands, a spiteful schoolmistress and wily associates. O'Brien's characters are framed against the backdrop of this repressive society. Husbands and fathers are often brutal and violent and mothers overprotective so that the normal modes of adolescent growth are stunted. O'Brien's women are variously loving, pious, hypocritical, judgemental, vengeful, rebellious, wanton, hardworking and resourceful but, it seems, short on happiness.

The texts reveal a dichotomy: on the one hand is an all-seeing God and his agents, a censorious church and its parishioners; on the other, as a possible result of living under this regime, is a culture of concealment and evasion. Self-appointed sharp-eyed parishioners,

like Mrs Bolam in 'A Scandalous Woman', scrutinise the behaviour of the young. But the young are not the only ones under surveillance. As I discuss later in the chapter, O'Brien's omniscient narrators mirror this conundrum; facts are difficult to establish, and much remains unsubstantiated. In 'The Widow' (1990) O'Brien portrays an unsympathetic, judgemental society where a widow, Bridget, falls victim to rumour, prejudice and small-mindedness. Local suspicion that she may have a hidden past ruins Bridget's chance of happiness and blights the future of her fiancé Michael.

O'Brien's fiction articulates a generation of women whose voices were silenced by the prevailing culture of mid-twentieth-century Ireland. It is significant therefore that in a number of stories, in particular 'Rose' and 'A Scandalous Woman', there is little direct speech. Women seem incapable of expressing their feelings. In 'Cassandra' the preoccupations of the narrator are revealed not through dialogue but through indirect speech, as she confronts the ruins of her marriage. In 'Paradise' social intercourse is unnerving for a protagonist who is wracked by a dread of not saying the right thing: "She tried to remember something she had read that day. She found that by memorizing things she could amuse them at table" (O'Brien, 2013, p.349). The suppressed emotions in 'Rose' lead to estrangement and despair; in their occasional meetings in hotel lounges, mother and daughter talked about "recipes, patterns for knitting [...]. But they said none of the things that they should have said", filling the time instead with approved women's discourse, a form of phatic communication (O'Brien, 2013, p.154). In 'A Scandalous Woman', when the bank clerk is summoned to be told the plans for his marriage to Eily, Eily's mother remains in the kitchen, refusing to sit down at the table spread in his honour: "She talked aloud to herself about the folks 'hither' in the room and what a sorry pass things had come to" (O'Brien, 2013, p.81).

The lives and experiences of the women in O'Brien's stories press urgently on the reader. The context in which they lead their lives is defined by power structures which they are powerless to change; subjection to the land and to the Roman Catholic Church are determining factors. Women who challenged the status quo were dealt with harshly,

effectively making them outsiders in society and, in times of crisis, prone to resort to alternative practices such as clairvoyance or witchcraft. In 'Madame Cassandra' the protagonist, Millie, distraught at her husband's philandering, seeks out a fortune teller in a forlorn bid to save her doomed marriage. On their honeymoon, this young, bookish woman "had brought a stack of books", and through her passion for Greek mythology, Millie learnt of the "art of clairvoyance" (O'Brien, 2013, p.431). In true classical fashion, this act of desperation had effectively been 'foretold'. When the clairvoyant refuses to open the door of her caravan, the futility of her action is doubly underlined: silenced by non-admittance, she is denied an opportunity to unload her care, and she must face the inevitable humiliation in respectable society. The caravan steps are emblematic of her position in the world.

In a number of stories, the plight of women is amplified through references to America. Weekes points out that in early-twentieth-century Ireland, "[t]he refusal to dower more than one daughter and the lack of economic opportunity greatly impoverished rural women, forcing many to emigrate" (2000, p.102). In 'Rose', 'A Scandalous Woman', 'Irish Revel' and 'The Rug', we learn of time spent working in Brooklyn before returning to Ireland and marriage, of stylish dresses sent back to Ireland from friends or relatives settled there and, more poignantly, of a letter sent to New York from Ireland but returned unopened.

Most women in *The Love Object* lead solitary, hardworking lives, shouldering more than their share of responsibility. They do not appear to have any sense of kinship with other women. There is little evidence of mutual care or support, although in 'A Scandalous Woman', when Eily's transgressions become known, the narrator's mother, Mrs Brady, is sensitive to Eily's distress at being jilted. She asks Eily for some help with her knitting, a skill that Eily excelled at. When Eily is found to be pregnant, Mrs Brady offers practical help to the family. Other women retreat into themselves; Eily's mother, Mrs Hogan, was "a backward woman and probably because of living in the fields she had no friends, and had never stepped inside anyone else's door" (O'Brien, 2013, p.78). Her isolated existence is in marked contrast to the lives of the convent nuns, who as sisters within a community live, work and pray together.

O'Brien's women recall the hard, incessant labour of working the land and caring for livestock, the intensity of mother/daughter relationships, the anguish of separation and the trauma of adolescence. The troubled women narrators of 'The Love Object' and 'Rose' yearn for love, but both are compromised by their pasts. In 'Rose' the daughter stubbornly searches for romantic love, while her mother vehemently denies its existence: "there was only one kind of love and that was a mother's love for her child. There passed between them such a moment, not a moment of sweetness, [...] a moment dense with hate – one hating and the other receiving it like rays" (O'Brien, 2013, p.162). The yawning gulf between them cannot be bridged.

Men are in positions of power over women, instilling fear into wives and children or using women for self-gratification. In 'Madame Cassandra' both the father and the husband of the protagonist, Millie, are shown to be conspiratorial and chauvinistic. Gerhardt, an eligible barrister, courted Millie, who was much younger and by her own admission "younger still for my actual years", becoming "bosom friends" with his future father-in-law (O'Brien, 2013, p.429). For Millie, falling head over heels in love with Gerhardt seems yet another youthful passion to add to her love of classical mythology and "a yearning for the stage" (O'Brien, 2013, p.428). The dissolute men depicted in stories such as 'Tough Men' (1982), 'Irish Revel' and 'Rose' fail to show any respect for women. Irascibility and drunkenness characterise many husbands and fathers. There are no kindly grandfathers or protective brothers. The characters in 'Tough Men' are scheming and dishonest. A shopkeeper, Morgan, and his friends Hickey and John Ryan are expecting a visit from a sales representative from the North. They hope to secure the franchise for an anti-rust treatment for hay barns. As an apprentice Morgan "began to get wise to fiddling money and giving short weight" until he was able to buy out the owner of the shop (O'Brien, 2013, p.42). The culture seems set to continue with "the squint-eyed shopboy whom he'd hired but did not trust" (O'Brien, 2013, p.43). A chicken is cooked to seal the deal using "a new saucepan that afterwards would be cleaned and put back into stock" (O'Brien, 2013, p.45). Morgan finds

that he himself has been duped after handing over a deposit of a hundred pounds to a fraudster.

In 'Irish Revel' Brogan's retirement party gets off to a late start as "the men were late getting back from the dogs in Limerick" (O'Brien, 2013, p.12). Brogan is a weekly lodger in the Commercial Hotel, owned by a widow, Mrs Rodgers, returning home each weekend to his wife. The implication is clear: "'Two old married people,' Brogan said, as he put his arm around Mrs Rodgers [...]. He said he'd go away with happy memories of them all, and sitting down, he drew her onto his lap" (O'Brien, 2013, p.18). In the morning she "stumbled out in her big nightgown from Brogan's warm bed" while "Brogan snuggled down for a last-minute warm and deliberated on the joys he would miss when he left the Commercial for good" (O'Brien, 2013, p.23). The clergy are not exempt from notoriety. There are oblique references to Mrs Rodgers' brother, "the flaccid-faced cleric over the fireplace", now in Australia (O'Brien, 2013, p.13). It seems likely that he has brought disgrace upon himself: "'That's him, poor Charlie,' Mrs Rodgers said proudly, and was about to elaborate, but Brogan began to sing unexpectedly" (O'Brien, 2013, p.13). In 'The Rug' an unfrocked priest is given shelter as he plucks up courage to face his family. In 'The Love Object' and 'Paradise' older men indulge in short-term affairs with women who continue to cling to a romantic notion of love. The wealthy lover in 'Paradise' is unpredictable, with a low boredom threshold. Snide remarks are lobbed at random in the protagonist's direction: "Again she spoke to herself, remonstrated with her hurt: [...] 'It would seem that I am here simply to smart under your strictures'" (O'Brien, 2013, p.344). While their professional careers might suggest otherwise, these women are lacking in confidence, susceptible to the predatory advances of men committed only to seeking cheap thrills.

A characteristic of O'Brien's style is that a significant number of her protagonists are unnamed. There are powerful messages embedded in her decision not to name characters. An unnamed protagonist is compromised in a way that diminishes them as an individual. The practice of disallowing names is particularly striking in 'Paradise'. While the story is narrated

in the third person, the tale is told from the perspective of the protagonist. The story relates the trials of a young woman holidaying with her older lover and his guests at his luxury Mediterranean villa. The protagonist's lover is subject to capricious moods. The fact that no Christian names are used in direct speech between the couple dispels any sense of affection between them. Only through a telegram from a recent guest, "Adored it, Harry", does the reader learn the host's name (O'Brien, 2013, p.350). Since the protagonist remains unnamed, it serves to confirm her position as temporary. When the name of a boy does emerge, there is a suggestion of sly precocity, possibly encouraged by the general tenor of the company: "A boy who called himself Jasper and wore mauve shirts received letters under the name of John" (O'Brien, 2013, p.354).

The protagonist's days at the villa are spent in idle chatter, eating and drinking and sailing on her lover's yacht. This bleak tale depicts a world of privilege and excess. In her refusal to name the guests, O'Brien denies them individual status. Instead they present a united front: a hostile clique representing a world that allows no chink or crevice that the protagonist can penetrate. Where the text does name a guest, because he shares his name with another, his status is immediately demeaned. Both men are called Teddy, a word no longer simply related to a child's toy but that now has a number of sexual connotations: "[m]ore than one guest was called Teddy. One of the Teddys told her in that in the morning before his wife wakened, he read Proust in the dressing room. It enabled him to masturbate" (O'Brien, 2013, p.346). But by choosing to name 'Iris', a woman who swims out to the party's yacht to invite them for drinks, O'Brien presents the protagonist with a cruel personification of this exclusive world. Iris is the technicolour version of this nightmare universe. Her radiance is dazzling: "She dangled in the water and with one hand gripped the sides of the boat. Her nail varnish was exquisitely applied and the nails had a glow of a rich imbued pearl. [...] Her personality was like that too – full of glow" (O'Brien, 2013, p.344). When the protagonist queries her lover's remark that Iris has "incredible willpower", asking, "For what?", "For living" is the

cutting response, insinuating that this 'life' is one that she will never measure up to (O'Brien, 2013, p.344).

In O'Brien's fiction the use of unnamed characters inscribes a world where individuality is not welcomed or encouraged. (This is also a feature of Anna Burns' Booker Prize-winning *Milkman* (2018), in which people are identified only by their roles, "maybe boyfriend" or "third brother-in-law", and not named as individuals.) The exceptions to this practice stand out.

One is the naming of the mother in 'Rose'. Her name, Delia, does slip out, but not overtly. It emerges in a whisper in the daughter's imaginings as she dresses up in her mother's jacket: "Her mother's three-quarter length jacket she would don, [...] and say the name 'Delia,' her mother's, say it in different tones of voice, over and over again, always in a whisper and with a note of conspiracy" (O'Brien, 2013, p.149). Her whispered 'Delia' has a remote, haunting quality, as if the name had been trapped, along with her mother's hopes and dreams, within the folds of the garment, a remnant of the Delia of long ago.

A further exception is the naming of the protagonist in 'A Scandalous Woman': the wild and spirited young woman Eily. By naming Eily O'Brien intends us to be close to her, to identify with her and care about her. The text tells us that Eily was "swift as a colt" (O'Brien, 2013, p.59). Horses are routinely named (though not in this story), but the inference is that here is a girl who needs to be tamed. It is a blatant case of naming and shaming. The effect of O'Brien's decision not to name characters is to suggest their spirits have been broken like Eily's. It is impossible to avoid the sense that these women are diminished, their sense of self-worth crushed.

The difficulties associated with first-person narration are evident in 'The Love Object', 'Shovel Kings' and 'My Two Mothers' in that the information the narrators give us is necessarily limited. Since the 'I' can never be privy to all the facts, their accounts are incomplete. Reliability is further undermined by the fact that the narrators tell only that which they choose. In these stories, all three narrators struggle to lay to rest the ghosts of the past,

effectively adding yet another layer of uncertainty. I suggest this lack of certainty is exactly what the author intended; a selective account points to a painful past and a fragile state of mind.

The unreliability of the narrator of 'A Scandalous Woman' opens up the story landscape, revealing extra-textual nuances that cast doubt on a *prima facie* account. The effect of this is not to dismiss the text as untrustworthy but rather to underline the conditions from which these narratives spring. The community itself is characterised by its secrecy and the reliance on hearsay. In 'A Scandalous Woman' determining meaning is made more problematic still by different focalisations.

This is a narrative defined by evasion and ambiguity. The reader's role in interpreting the text is continually frustrated through obfuscation and the withholding of information. Different types of narration contribute to a sense that the account is selective and unreliable. The unreliability arises principally because the focalisation in 'A Scandalous Woman' is fluid; the perceptual focaliser of a young, impressionable girl caught up in a web of deception gives way to her older, more experienced self but with a degree of ambiguity between the two. In his founding text, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983), Wayne Booth highlights the importance of the "moral and intellectual qualities" of the narrator "whether he is privileged or limited [in his knowledge]" (Booth, 1983, p.158). In this narrative the use of a young focaliser raises the issue of trustworthiness and the extent to which we can rely on her account. The general absence of free, indirect thought surely indicates both her immaturity and an inability to penetrate the thoughts of the adult characters. While the ecstatic response to the surprise gift of perfume is entirely that of an infatuated young narrator, it is a voice of experience that asserts, "There are moments in life when pleasure is more than one can bear, and one descends willy nilly into a wild tunnel of flounder and vertigo" (O'Brien, 2013, p.67). This duality echoes Booth's description of Pip in *Great Expectations* as "a narrator changing as he narrates. [...] The mature Pip, in *Great Expectations*, is presented as a generous man whose heart is where the reader's is supposed to be; he watches his young self move away

from the reader and back again” (1983, p.157). In contrast, the narrator of ‘A Scandalous Woman’ gives little information about her later years, and no sense of fulfilment or wellbeing emerges.

Almost without exception the motifs that are woven into the narratives signify the domestic dimensions of these narratives. Among the most telling is the imagery of packages and string, which feature in a number of stories. In ‘Rose’ a daughter struggles to sever the ties to home as her mother, unable to let go, sends parcels “once a fortnight, bound in layers of newspaper, and then a strong outer layer of brown paper, all held with a hideous assortment of twines” (O’Brien, 2013, p.153). Red sealing wax is liberally applied to the parcels in “great spatters”, and old newspaper sheets evoke the “three back numbers of the weekly paper” of many years past, put to use then by the midwife after the confinement to dispose of the “mess and the unnecessaries” (O’Brien, 2013, p.153, p.139). The trauma of this daughter’s birth continually hovers over the text, emerging at an equally traumatic time when mother and daughter are on holiday together. Deeply wounded by her daughter’s bitterness, the mother retires to her room, where she assumes a foetus-like position curled up on the bed. Feelings remain unexpressed; as mother and daughter become estranged, hate and resentment are internalised in both women. In a number of stories cords, knots and stitches of various kinds serve to signify a state of bondage; protagonists are beholden to both family and Church. In ‘A Scandalous Woman’, knotted rosary beads, “as dazzling as necklaces”, are a daily outward symbol of the Church’s hold over its members (O’Brien, 2013, p.75). In ‘The Rug’ a woman is disappointed but not surprised when a surprise parcel containing a black sheepskin rug turns out to have been delivered to her by mistake. When its rightful owner claims it, the woman reties the rug and hands it over. In a hopeless gesture she ties her apron strings tighter, as if to underline her state of subjection.

Wholesome and delicious home-baked delights lovingly created by mothers and daughters or nuns and pupils constitute a spirited defiance of the Church and the Holy Sacrament. These confections are the preserve of women; in stories where men are involved in

preparing food, the results are inedible or tainted. Food is employed as a motif in several stories, with a range of subtexts. In 'Irish Revel' a goose is served undercooked, and a present of cream from a farmer's wife is thoughtlessly wasted. In 'Tough Men' a chicken is boiled without its innards removed. In 'The Love Object' a couple embarking on a late summer affair eat figs at dinner, suggestive of forbidden fruit. The inference in this story, as in 'Paradise', is that these sordid, short-lived affairs with older men are doomed to fail; they are about as far from Paradise as it is possible to be. The numerous references to bodily sustenance in O'Brien's stories serve to emphasise a dearth of emotional nourishment, not least in 'A Scandalous Woman', where the fate of the protagonist is sealed at an elaborate supper as the family confronts her seducer.

'A Scandalous Woman'

'A Scandalous Woman' tells the story of Eily, a girl growing up in the west of Ireland. The text is a crushing indictment of Irish society in the mid-twentieth century. It subverts the accepted conventions of Church and family, revealing hypocrisy, double standards and the brutal oppression of women. The story's narrator is recalling an episode in her life as a young girl on the verge of puberty. The narrative captures the thrill of a secret tryst between Eily, an older friend from the neighbouring farm and her suitor, Jack, to which she, the narrator, becomes the accomplice. The affair with the young Protestant bank clerk challenges the authority and conventions of the Catholic Church that govern this rural community. The girls fabricate excuses to enable Jack and Eily to meet in secret, "Sunday after Sunday, with one holy day, Ascension Thursday, thrown in" (O'Brien, 2013, p.65). When Eily becomes pregnant retribution is swift. A marriage is hastily arranged to protect the family's reputation. A job transfer is negotiated for Jack, and the couple move out of the area. After relating the intensity and drama of this episode in her life, the narrator goes on to describe two subsequent encounters involving Eily now that they are adult women.

The story appears to be set in the mid-twentieth century. It has the aura of a tale that must be told, bringing to mind Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Marlow's chilling

narrative in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Pilar Villar-Argáiz points out that, as in many of O'Brien's stories, there is "a striking absence of contemporary references which enhance the timeless (and almost ahistorical and mythical) effect" (2012, p.92) and, I would add, a pervading sense of stasis. There is a sense that this particular tale is part of a long litany of similar stories of women living within a Catholic, patriarchal Irish culture. 'A Scandalous Woman' offers a thinly veiled condemnation of the oppressive male-dominated society which, scandalously, in the twentieth century, denied women the opportunity for self-determination. In 'A Scandalous Woman' deeply entrenched religious and cultural conventions are reinforced by the women themselves, who seem powerless to break the mould. Even Mrs Brady, the narrator's mother, who is ready to offer sympathy and understanding when Eily is jilted, falls into line once the pregnancy is confirmed; when the narrator says to her mother that she thinks Eily will die, Mrs Brady responds, "if only such a solution could occur" (O'Brien, 2013, p.75). An interrogation takes place in the Brady house. As if taken by surprise, the narrator records that her mother "was the most reasonable but also the most exacting" (O'Brien, 2013, p.76).

The structure and form of 'A Scandalous Woman' is such that establishing any certainty about the events of the story is problematic, but in a sense this lack of clarity is fitting, since the community itself is characterised by secrecy and a reliance on hearsay. In a narrative defined by evasion and ambiguity, the reader's task of interpreting the text is continually frustrated through obfuscation and the withholding of information. Different types of narration contribute to a sense that this account is selective and unreliable. Unreliability arises principally because the focalisation in 'A Scandalous Woman' is fluid; the perceptual focaliser of a young, impressionable girl caught up in a web of deception gives way to her older, more experienced self, but with a degree of ambiguity between the two. My reading of 'A Scandalous Woman' suggests that this is a story about the narrator's childhood experiences as much as it is about Eily. The trauma of events that the narrator recalls from her early years has left a legacy of self-reproach. The telling takes on the semblance of a

confessional, not least concerning her obsession with Eily. I sense that it is this obsession that drives the narrator to seek Eily out years later: "It was the very same as if we'd parted only a little while ago" (O'Brien, 2013, p.86).

In the opening paragraph of 'A Scandalous Woman', the focalisation shifts from the adolescent fawning admiration of the village beauties to a more rueful adult reflection of the painful process of growing up. It is possible to read this as evidence of 'schoolgirl crushes' or a sign of emergent lesbianism. While Eily's story is the one that is about to be told, the narrator immediately reveals aspects of herself:

Everyone in our village was unique and one or two of the girls were beautiful. There were others before and after but it was with Eily that I was connected. Sometimes one finds oneself in the swim. One is wanted, one is favoured, one is privy, and then it happens, the destiny, and then it is over and one sits back and knows alas that it is someone else's turn. (O'Brien, 2013, p.59)

Her choice of the word 'unique' is puzzling; it may be that the word has recently been added to her vocabulary and has a certain cachet for her, or she uses it to describe a rural community that includes within it a quick-tempered and foul-mouthed teacher, "a madman who had taken up residence in a bog-hole", "Peter the Master, one of the local tyrants" and the prying Mrs Bolam and her ilk, who "were always prowling and turning up at graveyards, or in the slate quarry to see if there were courting couples" (O'Brien, 2013, p.66, p.60, p.72). It seems that, in her own eyes, the narrator was no beauty, reconciled to being part of the 'unique' rather than the 'beautiful'. 'Beautiful' appears to mark out those whom she finds attractive, suggesting that her own sense of self-worth is lacking, a state which may have been exacerbated by Jack's words to her on their first meeting, "Run along Junior" (O'Brien, 2013, p.65), a crushing remark for a nascent young woman.

Since there is little direct speech in the text, indirect speech and the narrative reporting of speech characterise the narrator as a controlling voice: the dialogue and events she has chosen to narrate and interpret result in imprecise knowledge and a suspicion that events may be misremembered or misunderstood while other actions are disregarded or passed

over. Diegetic narrators have a capacity to engender confidence since the setting is familiar to them and generally they are able to offer particular insights into the characters. But conversely, as Rimmon-Kenan points out, "The knowledge of an internal focalizer [...] is restricted by definition: being part of the represented world, he cannot know everything about it" (2009, p.80). As the narrative proceeds the young narrator's limitations become apparent. The expression "we got wizard" and the description of Miss Macnamara as "an old crank" are those of a young adolescent (O'Brien, 2013, p.65). Rimmon-Kenan suggests that the internal child-focaliser can be indicated through the use of a "non-sequitur formulation" (2009, p.85). This is borne out in the case of this narrator. At the buffet, when Jack is presented with the family's response to Eily's pregnancy, the child narrator notes the number of cherries in the fruit cocktail while a more perceptive narrator comments on the flippant responses that Jack makes to the serious issue of his future: "They kept asking him was that clear, and he kept saying 'Oh yeh,' as if it were a simple matter of whether he would have more fruit cocktail or not" (O'Brien, 2013, p.81).

O'Brien's use of metaphor and imagery makes a major contribution to the intensity of this story. The events that unfold in 'A Scandalous Woman' are presaged by the image of the hazelnut tree, laden with nuts about to fall: "They were just ripe, and they tasted young and clean" (O'Brien, 2013, p.63). Jilted by her lover, Eily seeks Jack out under the bridge where he is fishing. The fact that he ignores her implies that Eily is beached; she is left floundering on the bank while he casts around for a fresh catch. When Eily's pregnancy is evident, a room off the family kitchen is cleaned in readiness for the meeting with Jack. There are oats to be swept up from the floor, a telling reference to the 'wild oats' that have been sown so wantonly. Eily's act of whitening and re-whitening her buckskin shoes is a symbolic gesture of atonement as she seeks redemption for her sins.

There are numerous instances where two related concepts are set against one another. In 'A Scandalous Woman' Eily's glamorous dresses are hidden from view under an old black dirndl skirt, while shoes and love letters are concealed in hedges; money is tucked behind

ornaments in 'Irish Revel'; an envelope is secreted above the mantelpiece in 'Rose'. The texts foreground the bleak state of the protagonists' lives by references to adornment in the form of trinkets, lipstick, perfume and "an exotic gauze rose of the darkest drenchingest red" (O'Brien, 2013, p.167). These secular delights are conflated with the range of religious articles on sale, including brightly coloured rosaries and gilded prayer books. Holy Water and seductive perfume vie with each other, powerful symbols of the sacred and the secular. A little bottle of the perfume 'Mischief' is a present from Eily, who instructs her young accomplice to close her eyes and open her hand, then "see what God would give [her]" (O'Brien, 2003, p.67). Embarking on this risky adventure, the narrator of 'A Scandalous Woman' lurches giddily between the sensual pleasure of 'Mischief' and atoning for the sin by starving herself and gargling with salt and water. In 'Irish Revel', in lieu of perfume Mary's mother "had sprinkled her with Holy Water" before she set out for the party (O'Brien, 2013, p.2).

Where direct speech occurs, it is often at significant moments, significant, that is, to the narrator. As girls the narrator, Eily and her sister Nuala had acted out gruesome medical procedures that foreshadow the despoilment and disparagement of women and their bodies. Nuala's grim promise that "there would be nothing but a shell by the time she had finished, and that one wouldn't be able to have babies, or women's complaints ever" imagines a scenario that is as bleak as it is disturbing, a foreshadowing of the adult Eily, a mere shadow of her earlier self (O'Brien, 2013, p.65). The image of the narrator stretched out on the kitchen table recalls a sacrifice on an altar presaging the "strange sacrificial women" in the final coda. This 'hospital' play-acting, a deeply formative experience in her young life, is remembered as a terrifying ordeal. The narrator is always the patient 'under the knife', with Eily as nurse and Eily's older sister Nuala as the surgeon issuing authoritative observations. The preoccupation with sexual organs and the names Nuala adopts, "Susies for breasts, Florries for the stomach, and Matilda for lower down", consistently reinforce negative images

of the female body. More a ghastly ritual than a game, it is chilling evidence that the gratuitous violation of women's bodies is already culturally embedded in their young lives:

She would comment on what she saw and say "interesting", or "oh dearie me" as the case may be, and then when she got at the stomach she would always say "tut tut tut" and "what nasty business have we got here". [...] I would also have to make a general confession. I used to lie there praying that their mother would come home unexpectedly. (O'Brien, 2013, pp.62-63)

Equally disturbing is the narrator's passive acceptance of her role in this grisly procedure:

For some reason I always looked upwards and backwards and therefore could see the dresser upside-down, and the contents of it. There was a whole row of jugs, mostly white jugs with sepia designs of corn, or cattle, or a couple toiling in the fields. [...] But most beautiful of all were the little dessert dishes of carnival glass, with their orange tints and their scalloped edges. I used to say good-bye to them, and then it would be time to close my eyes before the ordeal. (O'Brien, 2013, p.62)

There is little doubt that the narrator experienced these ordeals, but it is uncertain as to whether she was present at other events in the narrative. She was not admitted to the interrogation of Eily, resorting to listening at the door; neither did she witness the scene in the bank when Eily's father confronts Jack, his daughter's seducer. In the bank the sense of menace is heightened by the presence of two customers who, in a note of surely intended irony, happen to be the undertaker and the butcher. It is not clear whether the narrator was present at the marriage; details of the wedding breakfast and the new lodgings are filtered through her mother. After the wedding news "comes in snatches" conveyed through arbitrary sources: a family renting grazing land and a "private nurse who had to give Eily pills and potions", overheard in conversations between the two mothers (O'Brien, 2013, p.85). Much of her story is based on what she has overheard or been told, and the narrative is coloured by the probable source of that information. Horrified by Eily's situation, the narrator's choice of words, such as 'sham', 'sodality' and 'damned', reflects the sermonising of the priests and missionaries and the unforgiving culture of family and community. The word 'jewel', a euphemism for virginity, has inevitable associations with the bejewelled trappings of the Catholic ritual:

[Eily's] most precious thing was gone, her jewel. The inside of one was like a little watch and once the jewel or jewels were gone the outside was nothing but a sham. [...] she had joined that small sodality of scandalous women who had conceived children without securing fathers and who were damned in body and soul. (O'Brien, 2013, p.74)

As he leaves the narrator's house after calling to see Eily after the affair has been uncovered, the missionary pats her on the head, and the narrator, "watching his sallow face and his rimless spectacles, and drinking in his beautiful speaking voice, thought that if I were Eily I would prefer him to the bank clerk, and would do anything to get to be in his company" (O'Brien, 2013, p.77). The fact that the narrator finds the missionary attractive suggests in one sense that fixating on the safe, unattainable patriarchal figure of a priest implies a rejection of the role ordained for women in her society. But one could also argue that this is in essence capitulation to the established order. The hypothetical focalisation of the phrase "If I were Eily" reveals her lack of sexual maturity; she appears to be still at the stage of schoolgirl crushes. The play-acting ritual may account for the repulsion the narrator feels at the prospect of Eily's swollen belly: "The one thing I could not endure was the thought of her stomach protuberant, and a baby coming out saying 'ba ba'" (O'Brien, 2013, p.74).

The excitement of being singled out as Eily's accomplice promises to lift the narrator out of her humdrum rural existence, but the reality is that she becomes wracked with guilt not just on her own accord for disobeying God and deceiving her mother but also for Eily, who is unrepentant. While she clearly dotes on Eily, she finds Jack repellent, "a right toff in his plus-fours with his white sports bicycle. [...] I could see his snout and his lock of falling hair coming towards me on the road" (O'Brien, 2013, p.63). At the first meeting she is mesmerised by Jack's advance on Eily, until he tells her to make herself scarce: "I went and adhered to the bark of the tree, eyes closed, fists closed, and every bit of me in a clinch" (O'Brien, 2013, p.65). Anxiety over the affair reaches Shakespearean proportions: "I used to say 'Is this a dagger that I see before me? ... She [Eily] flared up. 'Marry, did I or did I not love her?' Of course I loved her and would hang for her but she was asking me to do the two hardest things on earth – to disobey God and my own mother" (O'Brien, 2013, p.66). As with

the macabre hospital game, the adventure causes anguish. The narrator oscillates between penance and guilty pleasure: "I used to shudder at night when I went over the number of commandments we were both breaking" (O'Brien, 2013, p.66), while not eating and gargling with salt and water became regular forms of atonement. The surprise gift of her favourite perfume, 'Mischief', compensates somewhat for the torment; the precious liquid effectively anoints the girls in a ritual that seals and sanctifies their alliance.

A further instance of direct speech concerns the somewhat surreal conversation when the 'terms' are presented to Jack at Eily's house, an occasion that seems a cross between Sunday tea and a kangaroo court. Eily's father, nonplussed by the transformation of his house for the occasion, "took off his hat to it and said 'Am I in my own house at all mister?'" (O'Brien, 2013, p.79). Mr Brady, the narrator's father, opens the proceedings: "Well Mr Jacksie, you'll have to do your duty by her and make an honest woman of her [...]. The bank clerk said 'Why so' and whistled in a way I had heard him whistle in the past [...]. He didn't say a word to Eily, or even look in her direction" (O'Brien, 2013, p.80). Jack, with his sullen responses and monosyllabic delivery, compares unfavourably to the "strange priest with a beautiful accent, and a strong sense of rhetoric" (O'Brien, 2013, p.75). The missionary inhabits a different world: his eloquence, rhetoric and godliness captivate the narrator so that she almost "swoons" as she spies him through the glass-panelled door (O'Brien, 2013, p.76).

These exchanges invite scrutiny of the men in this narrative. Neither Mr Hogan nor Mr Brady can be viewed as an acceptable father figure. Eily's father, Mr Hogan, is prone to thrashing his offspring and is known as "a very gruff man [...] an old man with an atrocious temper" (O'Brien, 2013, p.69). Mr Brady commands the respect of Eily's father, but the narrator tells us that "he was the only person who called my father Sir" (O'Brien, 2013, p.73). For a man to have "gone to bed in a huff because [Mrs Brady] had given him a boiled egg instead of a fry for his tea" (O'Brien, 2013, p.72) suggests petulance and self-indulgence. The wild side of Eily's character emerges through comments such as "She was swift as a colt" and would

work “like a horse to get to the main road before dark to see the passers-by” (O’Brien, 2013, p.59). In his rage, her father “wanted to put a halter round her” (O’Brien, 2013, p.72). The narrator’s use of animal imagery is most likely prompted by the adult conversation around her; horse fancying was part of their lives, with scarce money often squandered on new stock. The father in ‘Rose’ goes off on a batter, and on his return the contrite man “shook in the bed chair for five days, eating bread and milk” (O’Brien, 2013, p.142). He asks to be taken to see his yearlings: “Over in the fields he patted the yearlings and said soppy things that he’d never say indoors, [...] and the yearling herself became fidgety and fretful as if she might bolt or stamp the ground to smithereens” (O’Brien, 2013, p.142). The foregrounding of equine qualities inevitably references the practice of ‘breaking in’ young horses and is doubly demeaning to a young woman as it forcefully insinuates the need for control. Clearly this athleticism impressed Mr Brady as “he never stopped praising this quality in her” (O’Brien, 2013, p.59). Does Mr Brady harbour a closet admiration for Eily, and if so, does it account for his assuming responsibility for dealing with the practical aspects of her situation? Whatever his motives, Mr Brady takes it upon himself to restore the neighbourhood’s respectability through adherence to the strict moral code that governs their lives. Jack, a man of few words, callously rejects Eily when she seeks him out on the riverbank: “He kept telling her to beat it, beat it. She sat on the little milk stool, where he in fact had been sitting, then he did a terrible thing which was to cast his rod in her direction and almost remove one of her eyes with the hook” (O’Brien, 2013, p.59).

Throughout, the narrative aspects of Roman Catholic ideology and iconography are juxtaposed alongside aspects of the secular, an obvious example being the conflating of two powerful symbols of the sacred and the secular, Holy Water and the seductive perfume ‘Mischief’. Ironically, the dress dance where Eily meets Jack can hardly be described as a secular occasion since it is a fundraising event for “the new mosaic altar” (O’Brien, 2013, p.59). Lustrous fabrics are transformed into glamorous dresses and, symbolically if not actually, challenge the richly ornate robes of the Catholic clergy. Eily’s

dresses are cerise and green, seemingly inappropriate colours for someone who, in the narrator's view, had "the face of a madonna" (O'Brien, 2013, p.59). In the text the sensuous delights that offer some respite from life's drudgery are conflated with religious articles designed to offer spiritual succour, "rosary beads that were as dazzling as necklaces [...] bright scapulars, and all kinds of little medals and beautiful crucifixes [...] beautiful prayer books and missals, some with gold edging and little holdalls made of filigree" (O'Brien, 2013, p.75). There is an unmistakeable ersatz quality to this religious merchandise: the jewel-like beads of imitation paste and the simulated 'gold' edging. In contrast, Eily's mother's brooch that Eily surreptitiously borrows for an assignment with Jack hardly seems an adornment at all, despite the fact that this gold is genuine, "a plain flat gold pin with a little star in the centre" (O'Brien, 2013, p.64). This image is laden with significance; it confirms Eily's youthful innocence as well as exemplifying simple purity, set as it is against the tawdry commercial artefacts. Eily flaunts her beauty for Jack, but once the affair is discovered, attendance at chapel services requires her head and face to be veiled to make her acceptable in the eyes of God. Perversely, the theatricality of this ritual contributes to the narrator's view that Eily is even more beautiful, despite the fact that her face is hidden: "Never did she look so beautiful as those subsequent Sundays in chapel, her hair and face veiled, her eyes like smoking tragedies peering through" (O'Brien, 2013, p.74).

The missionary's ministry in the parish involves sermons delivered nightly to a packed church:

it was better than a theatre – the chapel in a state of hush, scores of candles like running stairways, all lit, extra flowers on the altar, a medley of smells, the white linen, and the place so packed that we youngsters had to sit on the altar steps and saw everything clearer, including the priest's adam's apple as it bobbed up and down. (O'Brien, 2013, p.75)

This performative aspect of the Catholic ritual, steeped in sensuous imagery, conjures a manifestation of Heaven on earth, designed to rouse passion and devotion in the faithful. But human vulnerability is exposed in the reference to the "priest's adam's apple" (a

spectacle that only a child would notice), creating a sober reminder of the Fall from Grace.

Christianity has not displaced folklore and superstition in this rural community, and the Church's doctrine is but one of the disciplines governing the young protagonists' lives. It is difficult to understand how young, impressionable girls might differentiate between the exotic and mystical elements of Roman Catholic ritual, long-established superstition and gypsy folklore. Eily and the narrator, encouraged by the narrator's mother, resort to all forms of supplication, including fortune-telling. In spite of all the prayers and ejaculations, ironically it is the fortune teller's prediction that proves right. "Ah, sure, you'll end your days with him" brings the hoped-for relief and presages one of the few instances in the narrative of unrestrained delight: "Cycling home was a joy, we spinned downhill, saying to hell with safety, to hell with brakes" (O'Brien, 2013, p.72). On another occasion, Eily assures her accomplice that "we would never be found out, that the God Cupid was on our side, and while I was with her I believed it" (O'Brien, 2013, p.67).

What is so distressing about Eily's plight is that it is a natural desire for excitement and romance that incurs the wrath of the establishment and eventually seals her destiny. Eily's skills in dressmaking, most likely seen as a worthy accomplishment for a young woman, are subverted as she uses her talent to create glamorous and revealing dresses. The girls set out for the first assignation, Eily in "her cerise dress with the slits at the side" (O'Brien, 2013, p.64). Instead of continuing towards the hospital on the pretext of visiting a sick relative,

we crossed over a field, nearly drowning ourselves in the swamp, and permanently stooping so as not to be sighted. I said we were like soldiers in a war and she said we should have worn green or brown as camouflage. Her bright bottom, bobbing up and down, could easily have been spotted by anyone going along the road. (O'Brien, 2013, p.64)

Soldiers, ironically, is what they are, engaged in their own version of a holy war. The undercover nature of this adventure and the importance that they are "not to be sighted" underline the overbearing surveillance as they challenge established codes of conduct and

beliefs. The tragicomic style of writing in no way diminishes the plight of Eily and others like her; rather it adds poignancy to their tragic situation. They are young, passionate women whose sexual awakenings are punished by a repressive society. When the meeting to agree the marriage terms is held at Eily's home, the house is transformed out of all recognition, as if the fabric of the house itself must acknowledge momentous change. Eily is present in a physical sense only, "as she sat on a little stool staring out of the window" (O'Brien, 2013, p.81).

The discussions on the doorstep of the Brady house are heavy with symbolism. This liminal space is neutral and uncontested, straddling the outside where public opprobrium rages and the inside where family relationships are fraught. It offers a space where disclosures might be made safely. That Mrs Brady, sympathetic to Eily's distress at being jilted, comes to sit with the girls on the doorstep alarms the narrator "since my mother never took the time to sit, either indoors or outdoors" (O'Brien, 2013, p.69). This suggests a lack of intimate moments between mother and daughter. Her mother lets drop the idea of visiting a fortune teller and, importantly, goes on to disclose her own such visit in the recent past, certainly since her four children had been born. No reason is given for her visit; perhaps a past lover had reappeared in her life or she sensed a rival. Possibly Eily's situation resonates with her own life experience. After the wedding, when Eily's mother brings news of her daughter to the Brady household, she refuses to come inside, preferring to sit on the back step. The doorstep has an uncanny association with the Catholic concept of limbo, a place for lost souls between Heaven and Hell; perhaps a suitable place to read a letter from Eily.

The narrator describes life as "getting back to normal", but normal life involved the ongoing penance of gargling with salt and water. She courts approval from her teacher by covering her books ready for Monday mornings; the teacher moralises while at the same time indulging herself in inappropriate behaviour, giving out contradictory messages to her pupils:

Ever since the scandal she was enjoining us to go home in pairs, to speak Irish and not to walk with any sense of provocation. Yet she herself stood by the fire-grate,

and after having hitched up her dress petted herself. When she lost her temper she threw chalk or implements at us, and used very bad language. (O'Brien, 2013, p.83)

There is a lack of consistency too in the action of her mother on her return from the wedding: "my mother let me put on her lipstick, and praised me untowardly for being such a good, such a pure little girl" (O'Brien, 2013, p.83). Contrasting the sinful, in this instance the subtext of the red lipstick, with purity and innocence is a trope that occurs throughout the narrative. The purifying qualities of lime are conjured up by the lime kiln, where Eily and the bank clerk are caught by her father in flagrante delicto. Subsequently, Eily is "kept under lock and key", allowed out only to attend Mass, "with a mantilla over her face", most likely to be black since white was traditionally reserved for single women (O'Brien, 2013, p.74). In the sanctity of the chapel, emphasised through the profusion of flowers, candles and white linen, Eily is "hemmed in by her mother, and some other old woman, pale and impassive" (O'Brien, 2013, p.75). Eily's repetitive whitening and re-whitening of her shoes evokes the image of Lady Macbeth trying in vain to rid her hands and conscience of Malcolm's blood (Act V.1. 37). When the couple leave the supper where their fates have been sealed, they walk in silence, the moon like a spotlight announcing their plight to the world: "The stars were never so bright or so numerous, and the moonlight cast as white a glow as if it were morning and the world was veiled with frost" (O'Brien, 2013, p.82). A multiplicity of meanings is embodied in this image. In one sense the heavens seem to be equally judgemental as the elders, but unlike Eily's family, who seek to quietly bury the sorry affair, they shed their light on this hapless young couple, perhaps as a lesson to others. More convincingly, I think it is an image of reassurance; whatever the vicissitudes of life, unlike 'God's Heaven', the natural universe is unchanging and non-judgemental.

Glimpses of the narrator's relationship with her mother point to a lack of openness between them. Cross-examining her daughter over the affair, the narrator's mother is met with hot denials. Her explanation that but for the fact that her mother was "so busy cogitating and surmising, she would have suspected something for sure" (O'Brien, 2013, p.74) is

disingenuous. Most probably, Mrs Brady knew the truth, but her response suggests that to pursue the uncomfortable truth would risk unleashing a father's fury. Since her involvement in the affair does not come to light, there can be no closure, and by accepting her daughter's protestations of innocence, the mother sidesteps the issue, putting their future relationship at risk. On Eily's first visit home after four years, the fact that the narrator is mortified that Eily hardly remembers her suggests that Eily has never been out of her thoughts. Daydreaming offers a means of escape: "When I daydreamed, which was often, it hinged on Eily" (O'Brien, 2013, p.83). One effect of this is to blur the distinction between fact and fiction in the narrator's mind. There is considerable uncertainty over the narrator's next sighting of Eily:

I was pregnant, and walking up a street in a city, with my own mother, under not very happy circumstances, when we saw this wild creature coming towards us talking and debating to herself. Her hair was grey and frizzled, her costume was steelish, and she looked at us and then peered, as if she were going to pounce on us, and then she started to laugh at us, or rather to sneer, and she stalked away and pounced on some other persons. My mother said "I think that was Eily," and warned me not to look back. (O'Brien, 2013, p.86)

The "not very happy circumstances" are unexplained and open to conjecture. Since the mother is uncertain, the reader cannot be sure it was Eily. If she is right it offers graphic evidence of the ruination of a spirited young woman. But it may have been a vindictive gesture on the part of her mother. Unable to lay this unhappy period in their lives to rest, she takes a chance opportunity to drum home the consequences of wrongdoing. It may have been a figment of the narrator's imagination; the sighting has a dream-like quality, particularly in her vision of Eily: "I saw her lithe and beautiful as she once was, and in the street a great flood of light wrapped itself around a cock of hay that was dancing about, on its own" (O'Brien, 2003, p.86). It is difficult not to draw comparisons with the miraculous sightings of the Virgin Mary reported by visionaries over the years. The possibility that this is a vision of Eily daringly subverts such phenomena, an audacious attack on Catholic ideology. Reading it as a dream invites speculation on what the vision might signify, the most obvious possibility being the union of Jack and Eily. But I see this rather as confirmation of

the narrator's obsession with Eily; remembering Eily serves to enliven a life lacking emotional fulfilment.

When they meet again years later, the exchanges between them suggest unwillingness on Eily's part to dredge up the past. It is difficult to read much into Eily's greeting, "Talk of an angel", when this expression is commonplace, but it is highly significant for the narrator (O'Brien, 2013, p.86). Any awkwardness resides with the narrator, who cannot find the right words or tone; she seems taken aback by Eily's composure. Her comment, "It seemed the right moment to broach it, but how?", confirms both an urgent need to talk and the yawning gulf between them (O'Brien, 2003, p.87). She does not disclose the fact that her husband, clearly unwilling to meet his wife's old friend, will be waiting impatiently for her, attending to his cherished vintage car. As in the case of Eily's shotgun marriage, exactly what compromises have been made in this partnership is an open question. Has the narrator been beguiled by a sweet-talking older suitor, a secular version of the missionary who with his "beautiful accent and a strong sense of rhetoric" (O'Brien, 2003, p.75) captivated her years before?

'A Scandalous Woman' holds a mirror up to a mid-twentieth-century Ireland riddled with hypocrisy and retribution that consistently failed its women. The narrator's bleak assertion that "ours was indeed a land of shame, a land of murder and a land of strange sacrificial women" (O'Brien, 2003, p.88) holds out little hope of change. One consequence of this systemic failure is the problematic relationships between mothers and daughters that feature in many of O'Brien's stories. This aspect is discussed in Chapter Two.

CHAPTER TWO: DAUGHTERS IN DESPAIR

This chapter explores O'Brien's writing through a number of theoretical frameworks, including Kristeva's theory of 'abjection' and Iris Murdoch's 'Sovereignty of Good' (1970). Kristeva's theories are relevant to any consideration of O'Brien's women protagonists in the sense that much of Kristeva's work is concerned with the body, in particular, the maternal body. Noëlle McAfee (2004) and Kelly Oliver (1998), both of whom have written extensively on Kristeva, draw attention to the importance that Kristeva attaches to literature, often citing the Bible, in presenting her ideas. For Kristeva a text is a means, for both author and reader, to address "some of the maladies that afflict their souls" (McAfee, 2004, p.50). The work of Kristeva is particularly relevant since the writers are writing contemporaneously; the Kristeva, Murdoch, Edna O'Brien and Peggy O'Brien texts were all published within a twelve-year period.

In nearly all her writings, even the most psychoanalytic ones, she [Kristeva] continually turns to literary texts, both as a literary critic seeking to understand the "nocturnal power" of writing and as an analyst trying to understand the author as a subject who is working through his or her crises. (McAfee, 2004, p.50)

At first sight this might seem to imply a common interest between Peggy O'Brien the critic and Kristeva the philosopher, but this is not so. Peggy O'Brien's concern is the way in which the texts reference aspects of O'Brien's psyche. Kristeva's interest is in the complex textural composition of words, as Kelly Oliver explains:

For example, words have referential meaning because of the symbolic structure of language. On the other hand, we could say that words give life meaning (non-referential meaning) because of their semiotic content. Without the symbolic, all would be babble or delirium. But without the semiotic, all signification would be empty and have no importance for our lives. Ultimately, signification requires both the semiotic and symbolic; there is no signification without some combination of both. (1998, p.1)

McAfee points out that for Kristeva, literature "may also involve not an ultimate resistance to, but an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection through the Crisis of the Word" (2004, p.50). I argue that Kristeva's understanding of the

object is particularly significant in O'Brien's writing, especially in her depiction of the protagonist in 'Rose'.

Oliver endorses Kristeva's view that "we don't have adequate discourses of maternity. Religion, specifically Catholicism (which makes the mother sacred), and science (which reduces the mother to nature) are the only discourses of maternity available to Western culture" (Oliver, 1998, p.2). This is of particular interest to an analysis of O'Brien's fiction. Kristeva suggests that we need not only a new discourse on maternity but "also a discourse of the relation between mothers and daughters, a discourse that does not prohibit the lesbian love between women through which female subjectivity is born" (Oliver, 1998, p.2). As Jennifer Radden points out, "Male development in a heterosexist culture reflects the easier adaptation: The boy eventually replaces the mourned maternal object with an opposite-sex (female) substitute. But were the girl to seek such a replacement, it would be a homosexual love choice" (2002, p.336). In Kristeva's view women who fail to successfully drive out the original love object, the mother, are at risk from depression and melancholy. My earlier reading of 'A Scandalous Woman' raises questions over imperfect subjectification and certainly does not rule out the possibility of the narrator's latent homosexual love for Eily.

Elizabeth Gross elaborates on Kristeva's view that pregnancy is not integral to a woman's identity as a woman:

Pregnancy, for example does not involve the mother's agency or identity. If anything, it is the abandonment of agency. 'Becoming mother' implies an abrogation of subjective autonomy and conscious control. Pregnancy occurs at the level of the organism, not the subject; it 'happens to' women [...] The woman-mother finds that it is not her identity or value as a woman which maternity affirms, but her position as natural or as a hinge between nature and culture. (1990, pp.95-96)

Excessive emphasis on the maternal is liable to thwart the necessary process of abjection, a process generally understood as the elimination of anything that poses a threat to successful subjectification. Kristeva suggests that in cases where women have been reduced to the maternal function it can become instead a negative development in terms of self-

determination. In her essay 'Powers of Horrors' (1982), Kristeva argues that subjectification is dependent on successful abjection: "I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and instead of what will be 'me.' Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be" (1982, p.10). For autonomy to be securely established, dependence on the mother must be terminated. Kristeva's view is that this process "is more difficult if not impossible" for women since the "specular identification with the mother as well as the introjections of the maternal body and self are more immediate" (1989, p.29, p.28). She argues that when the natural matricidal drive is hindered, this results in "its inversion on the self; the maternal object having been introjected, the depressive or melancholic putting to death of the self is what follows, instead of matricide" (Kristeva, 1989, p.28). Moreover, Kristeva insists, "One cannot overemphasize the tremendous psychic, intellectual, and affective effort a woman must make in order to find the other sex as erotic object" (1989, p.30). It is significant that for a number of O'Brien's women this process is compounded either by an absence or by the inadequacy of male role models in their formative years. In her paper 'Maternal Thinking' (1980), Sara Ruddick argues that patriarchal cultures implicitly compromise the wellbeing of both women and children:

Children confront and rely upon a powerful maternal presence only to watch her become the powerless woman in front of the father, the teacher, the doctor, the judge, the landlord – the world. A child's rageful disappointment in its powerless mother, combined with resentment and fear of her powerful will, may account for the matrophobia so widespread in our society as to seem normal. (1980, p.357)

Under a patriarchal system the essential being of a woman is focused solely on her role as mother, suppressing her own unique womanliness and femininity. Victor Burgin points out that Kristeva sees women in a patriarchal system as located

perpetually at the boundary, the borderline, the edge, the 'outer limit' – the place where order shades into chaos, light into darkness. This peripheral and ambivalent position allocated to woman, says Kristeva, has led to that familiar division of the field of representations in which women are viewed as either saintly or demonic –

according to whether they are seen as bringing the darkness, or as keeping it out. (1990, pp.115-116)

If one accepts this analysis of the symbolic aspects of motherhood, it clearly presents a dilemma for feminist thinking. Referencing Kristeva, Alison Ainsley writes,

The *rejection* of motherhood in its symbolic forms, as for example, in the figure of the Virgin Mary or as bearer of the sanctified values of the family, may position a woman as apparently counter or marginal to the central social and economic forces, leaving her trapped in the very oppositional structure which profits from this dichotomous form of dissent. Conversely, the *celebration* of motherhood as a positive aspect of women's experience which omits consideration of its constraints, may yoke it to the patriarchal reduction of women to mother. (1990, p.55)

Categorising women as saints or sinners, their location at the margins and the positioning of mothers on the threshold of nature and culture are all recognisable tropes in O'Brien's fiction. Her stories set in mid-twentieth-century Ireland reflect a perverse reality where natural, intimate relationships become warped or fail to flourish, undermined by the fear and dogma promulgated by conventional Irish society. My reading of *The Love Object* leads me to argue that while the stories may be about individuals, the series presents as a collective memoir, an elegy for Irish everywoman. Many of the narratives are intentionally equivocal where narrators withhold information and suppress emotions that fester below the surface with damaging consequences. Women in 'My Two Mothers', 'The Love Object' and 'Paradise' suffer from night dreams and indulge in daytime reveries that point to disturbed minds. Incomplete, at times incoherent and always painful, their stories might have emerged from the psychiatrist's couch. The narrator in 'Shovel Kings' (2011) openly admits to seeing an analyst regularly, while the protagonist in 'Paradise' is taking prescription tranquillisers. My own view is that, as in 'A Scandalous Woman', these narratives have a therapeutic dimension; these are tales that by their telling attempt to lay to rest the ghosts of the past.

More than thirty years separates the publications of 'Rose' and 'My Two Mothers', a fact that seems to testify to ongoing anguish and trauma in women's lives. The later story might almost be an adjunct to the earlier text; a narrator returning obsessively to probe yet again

the conflict of emotions associated with her mother. 'My Two Mothers' is the account of a woman trying to make sense of a life where she and her mother had once "lived in such a symbiosis that there might never have been a husband or other children" (O'Brien, 2013, p.444), only to become alienated in her adult years. Of all her stories, 'My Two Mothers' resonates most clearly with O'Brien's childhood. A mother who views literature as "a precursor to sin and damnation" (O'Brien, 2013, p.446) becomes predatory, searching through her daughter's belongings, outlawing books that she sees as "foul and degenerate" (O'Brien, 2013, p.446). In what the protagonist calls a dream but others might call a nightmare, her mother is brandishing a cut-throat razor with the intention of cutting out her tongue. She awakes shaking, "having escaped death not for the first time" (O'Brien, 2013, p.443).

O'Brien's earlier story 'Rose' explores the relationship between a mother and daughter and the chasm that grows up between them. My reading examines the many references in the story to satiation and its antonym, emptiness, arguing that these two states are symbolically entwined in the narrative, evidenced in both physical and psychological dimensions. The narrative opens as a fourth childbirth is imminent after the deaths of the two previous deliveries. A daughter is born, with whom, contrary to the mother's expectations, an intense and loving bond develops. In their early years together, intimate physical and emotional contact nourishes both mother and child. As the daughter grows to adulthood, the relationship stalls, and an irreconcilable gulf emerges between mother and daughter. As in other stories of hers, 'Rose' owes much of its dramatic impact to O'Brien's use of metaphor and imagery. Since the text refers to Delia only as "the mother", the text denies her agency as a person; even when her name emerges, it is in a whisper. As previously discussed in Chapter One, choosing not to name the protagonists both diminishes them as individuals and universalises their situations.

As with other O'Brien stories, different narrative voices colour the text. The narrator who describes the grim conditions in the mental asylum is most likely the daughter, but her

knowledge will have been gleaned from other sources, probably her mother. It may have formed part of the “verbatim account of what had happened” (O’Brien, 2013, p.41) after the threatened hatchet attack. In the recounting of the labour and delivery, the narrative voice is shared between the mother, the midwife and the husband. As she approaches the house, the midwife begins “to hear the roaring and beseeching to God. Poor mother, she thought, poor poor mother”, and her thoughts turn to the trauma of other deliveries she has attended (O’Brien, 2013, p.135). Infrequent instances of direct speech create the impression that this is an all-too-familiar ritual with well-rehearsed roles. Direct speech occurs in the form of wails and appeals to Jesus from the mother, exhortations to push from the midwife and an exasperated “Blazes” from the husband (O’Brien, 2013, p.137). In her stricken state the mother presents as guilt-ridden, as if in shame at bringing another unfortunate child into the world: “At intervals the woman apologized to the midwife at the untoward commotion, said sorry in a gasping whisper, and then was seized again by a pain that at different times she described as being a knife, a dagger, a hell on earth” (O’Brien, 2013, p.136).

In general, literature seems to sidestep the subject of pregnancy and childbirth, despite it being such a fundamental part of human experience. Pregnant and postpartum women are wholly under-represented. Jacqueline Rose’s book *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2018) challenges the accepted concept of motherhood in contemporary culture. In an interview for *Guardian Review*, Rose refers to what she calls the “saccharine idealisation of the mother as protector of the child, who makes the world safe for the child, and who is good and who is virtuous” (Clark, 2018). What is missing, she argues, is the “experience, say of giving birth. And of having a baby, which is at least a large part about mess, bodies, viscousness, mucus, shit and then touching, holding, smelling, feeling. [...] And none of that mess is part of the public official discourse on mothering” (Clark, 2018). The absence of any discourse might suggest that society has yet to break the taboo of seeing the maternal body as unclean. The foundation of maternity hospitals in the mid-eighteenth century was in order to protect other patients, not specifically to care for pregnant women. In the case of a home

birth, a room other than the bedroom was set aside for the delivery. When she first considered making pregnancy a focus for a novel, Jessie Greengrass had the feeling that “To write about pregnancy – to try to articulate the desire for it, its uncomfortable realities, its disorienting aftermath – felt transgressive”. Her article ‘Why does literature ignore pregnancy?’ argues that in much of literature, pregnancy and childbirth is “something out of shot, a business of hot water and towels despatched elsewhere while in the centre of things a man paces a carpet” (Greengrass, 2018). The reason why so few writers have written on pregnancy, she suggests, is because “we regard women’s bodies as absolutely strange. They are the mysterious other, going about their peculiar processes. What could we possibly learn from something so alien?” (Greengrass, 2018).

The imagery of the opening paragraphs in ‘Rose’ has a grotesque quality reminiscent of Bakhtin’s ‘carnival’, where the refined and spiritual aspects of life are degraded to the basest level. The brutal primitivism of childbirth is expressed through graphic images: “she coiled into a knot and felt the big urgent ball – that would be the head – as it pressed on the base of her bowels and battered at her insides” (O’Brien, 2013, p.137). With the birth comes “blood gushing out of her, like water at a weir” (O’Brien, 2013, p.139). Giving birth is painful and messy, but the description of this woman’s labour and delivery is invested with particular misery by the wanton neglect of the husband; as the birthing fluids flow out of her body, the alcohol flows into his, rendering him “paralytic” (O’Brien, 2013, p.137). A gross image of him brandishing a piece of “pink flesh on a fork” that he describes as “unappetising” is conflated with his wife’s torn and mutilated body (O’Brien, 2013, p.137). The only succour available to the mother is spiritual, but in her hour of need, “The crucifix that had been in her hand” (O’Brien, 2013, p.138) falls from her bony grasp. The image of the newly delivered mother as she “bit into the crucifix and dented it further” is deeply symbolic. Like the crucified Christ she is suffering, but the battered figure suggests her anger is directed at Christ himself for ignoring her plight. While the midwife clearly condemns the husband’s callous indifference to his wife’s suffering, this “overweight midwife” with “neither kith nor kin of her own” (O’Brien,

2013, p.135) regards the ruination of the undercooked goose as “a crying shame” and regrets there is no time to stay for “hot sweet tea” (O’Brien, 2013, p.139). There is pity for the mother but no sense of solidarity. She may feel herself to be overworked, but the midwife’s physical wellbeing has not been undermined by unwanted pregnancies, unlike that of the newly delivered woman, who “wished to be nothing, a shell, devoid of everything and everyone” (O’Brien, 2013, p.138). Uncannily, this is in reality what she is. Neither of these two women’s lives bears any resemblance to that of the “saucy-looking lady” (O’Brien, 2013, p.136) depicted on the chocolate box lid in the fireplace. The juxtaposition of such different female images is a graphic reminder of how Irish patriarchal society categorised women. Alongside the physical evacuation of giving birth comes an outpouring of verbal rage from the mother: “Curses and prayers combined to issue out of her mouth, and as time went on, they became most pitiful and were interrupted with screams” (O’Brien, 2013, p.137).

The house in which this drama takes place is described as “solemn” and “lonesome” (O’Brien, 2013, p.135). Situated alone on the outskirts of the village, its rooms were cold, rooms “into which no one had stepped for days”, and “The room with no furniture at all – save for the apples gathered in the autumn – was called the Vacant Room” (O’Brien, 2013, p.135). The house and its furniture seem complicit in the woman’s predicament: the empty “bottom drawer” a reminder of what she might have hoped for and the “huge lumbering beast of a wardrobe” pressed into the service of concealing liquor. A sense of unproductive fecundity pervades this house, with its “heady” smell of rotting apples that “were all over the place” (O’Brien, 2013, p.135). A house “with a strange lifelikeness, as if it were not a house at all but a person observing and breathing” (O’Brien, 2013, p.135) that has, over time, witnessed childbirth trauma and the loss of two babies and is now facing the uncertainty of another delivery.

After the birth a bond between mother and daughter grows; that such a bleak beginning should result in a dramatic turnaround seems an outcome to be welcomed. So close are mother and daughter that it seems that the child has never left the womb, the “mother’s body

was a recess that she would wander inside forever and ever” and, chillingly, “a sepulcher, growing deeper and deeper” (O’Brien, 2013, p.141). But as Kristeva has pointed out, the intensity of a mother/daughter relationship can put at risk successful individuation. In this family the relationship frustrates and inhibits the long-term wellbeing of mother and daughter. The violence of the father, witnessed by his daughter on one occasion as he “took a hatchet to her mother and threatened that he would split open the head of her” (O’Brien, 2013, p.141) after demanding money from her, seriously impedes the daughter’s successful abjection of the mother. When she is a child, at home, the only reported incidence of light-hearted fun between both parents and child centres on the “most beautiful lipstick in a ridged gold case” (O’Brien, 2013, p.149) acquired by the mother after a deal to raise credit on some land. The lipstick, “like fresh fruit, so moist was it, and coral red” is a supremely secular image, immediately evoking the “saucy-looking lady” on the chocolate box (O’Brien, 2013, p.149, p.136). In this context the sensual image of the lipstick’s red moistness is clearly titillating: it forms a wry comment on the reality of their lives, and poignantly, the lipstick seems not to have been much used: “As the years went on, it dried out and developed a peculiar shape” (O’Brien, 2013, p.150). The depiction of the mouth as alluring and sexy is in strong contrast to the dramatic representation of the mouth as the means to express pain and anger, graphically illustrated by the mother’s screams and curses during childbirth. Images of moisture pervade the text and, for the most part, contribute an unhealthy, foetid element. There are comforting substances such as jams, blancmange, carrageen soufflé and iced cakes lovingly made by mother and daughter together, but ironically these sweet confections are symbolic of the unhealthy bond that has trapped them. More often the imagery is gruesome, as in “a bowl with her mother’s menstrual cloth soaking in it” (O’Brien, 2013, p.155). In the drawing of a chicken, the innards or “the undesirables” included “a certain little pouch [...] with its tobacco-coloured fluid [that] could ruin the taste of the bird” (O’Brien, 2013, p.153).

A number of unsavoury images in the text harbour associations with womanhood. Burst pipes that spew out pools of water resonate with the breaking waters of childbirth and create a palpable sense that the women in 'Rose' are effectively drowning. The fact that the daughter's first boyfriend is a "bakery man" (O'Brien, 2013, p.152) suggests safe, familiar territory, a comforting link with her childhood. The relationship fails, as courtships do, but here is an early implication that she remains tied to her mother. When the daughter does marry, it is to a man whose "specialty was vegetation in pond life" (O'Brien, 2013, p.153). The clear impression of falling into a pond, inert and stagnant with weeds, presages the eventual failure of the marriage.

In 'Rose' the numerous references to food and ingestion are significant, and food remains a contested theme throughout the narrative. Bodily needs for food and sustenance are conflated with emotional needs. The term 'consumption' once referred to the wasting disease, tuberculosis, and there are many instances in the narrative of the hollowing-out of the physical body, whether through childbirth, the lancing of a growth or a refusal to eat. In 'Rose', the request of a man named Daniel O'Connell that on his death his heart be sent to Rome elevates him effectively to the status of a saint. The kitchen is woman's domain. Warm, safe and womb-like, it offers a safe haven from violence and irascibility that can flare up at any moment. As if to expunge the purging effect of childbirth, mother and daughter cook together, making jam and baking cakes, sweet delicacies that both challenge and subvert the food of the spirit, the bread and wine of the Blessed Sacrament. Intimate experiences between mother and daughter are symbolically invested with healing properties, effective at keeping the harsh realities of life temporarily at bay but inadvertently creating an impediment to the emotional health of mother and daughter.

Two identities are effectively fused; the boundaries of their bodies are blurred. When the child cuts herself on a razor blade and the mother responds by sucking her bleeding fingers, it seems part of an ancient rite that will unite them until death. The lancing of the growth on the child's neck results in an outpouring of fluids, a symbolic hollowing-out that resonates

with her mother's experience of childbirth, forming another strand in their union, a union nourished daily by the intimate sharing of food and bed: "They liked the same things – applesauce and beetroot and tomato sausages and angelica" (O'Brien, 2013, p.146). This preoccupation with foods and fluids resonates strongly with Kristeva and her writing on the processes of ingestion and discharge, which she associates with the decline of the physical body towards death. As the distance grows between mother and daughter, the gulf can no longer be breached by sugary delights; the daughter rejects her mother's enticements. In puberty, as the daughter becomes aware of new bodily sensations, she chastises herself for masturbating; it was "as if some devil were inside her, touching and tickling the lining of her. It was creepy. [...] as a dire punishment she took cups of Glauber's salts three times a day, choosing to drink it when it was lukewarm and at its most nauseating" (O'Brien, 2013, pp.148-149). Clearly, she already sees her body and pleasuring herself as sinful.

As is the case with Eily and the narrator in 'A Scandalous Woman', the protagonists in this story go on to exhibit deteriorating states of mental health. After leaving her convent school, liberation from family and from "the spell of nuns and gods [...] acts of contrition, [...] the chapel with its incense and its brimstone sermons" (O'Brien, 2013, p.167) fails to instil in her a sense of wellbeing. The courtship with the baker involves coffee and cakes and then being walked back to her digs, "to kiss against a railing and devour each other's face, as earlier they had devoured the mock cream and the sugar-dusted sponge cakes. But these orgies only increased her hunger, made it into something that could not be appeased" (O'Brien, 2013, p.152). That the cream is "mock" and the cake is "sponge" suggests this aerated food is second-rate. A pastiche of home baking, they do not measure up to the cakes of her childhood, but the irony is that neither can nourish nor sustain her in her future life.

The narrative's preoccupation with the bogus extends beyond cream cakes. While as a girl the daughter delights in decking herself out in her mother's jacket, as an adult she is painfully aware that "Never having had the money for real style, her mother had invested in imitation things – an imitation crocodile handbag and an imitation fur bolero" (O'Brien, 2013,

p.167). On visits home that she dreads but feels compelled to make, conversation with her parents involves shared memories of the family dogs, a displacement activity which reflects the strained relationships. While the women become remorseful and bitter as their relationship founders, the mother attempts to restore the father's image in the eyes of his daughter. She writes in one of her regular letters, "Your father is not so hard-boiled despite his failings" (O'Brien, 2013, p.152). Yet this only serves to underline her subservience to her husband. In 'Figuring the Mother in Contemporary Irish Fiction', Weekes draws attention to the instances where "fictional mothers and daughters" face the problem of "balancing the need to preserve with the need to nurture growth, a problem which is exacerbated as the mother attempts to shape her daughter to play an 'acceptable' role in the society in which she, the mother acquiesces" (2000, p.106). Weekes points out that, unconscious though it may be, mothers collude "in their own powerlessness" and communicate this to their daughters (2000, p.106). On the mother's death, the daughter makes her way from the airport, following a funeral cortege which turns out to be her mother's. Tears begin to flow not on account of her mother but for herself: "She cried like a homing bird. She was therefore seen as a daughter deeply distressed when she walked past the file of mourners outside the chapel gate" (O'Brien, 2013, p.165). Taking flowers that a friend had left at the car-hire desk, "she carried them as if she had specially chosen them" (O'Brien, 2013, p.165).

Balzano uses the term "neuro-narrative" (2006, p.94) to describe O'Brien's 'Sister Imelda', but it might equally apply to 'Rose'. I understand this term to refer to the widely accepted practice in psychotherapy of constructing a narrative as a therapeutic aid to bringing about change. Memories that haunt the waking hours lead to obsessive thoughts and behaviours, both of which characterise the daughter's struggle for self-determination. O'Brien's women often respond to trauma by slipping into deranged trance-like states. Bennett and Royal (2004, p.36) identify two manifestations of the uncanny that are relevant to this narrative. The first is automatism, which denotes instances of human behaviour that present as mechanical as opposed to rational and considered, for example, an involuntary act like

breathing or sleepwalking that is not consciously controlled. When a person retreats from normal functioning into a trance-like state such as sleepwalking, madness or daydreaming, it is akin to slipping back into the symbolic pre-language state. This behaviour occurs in a number of the O'Brien narratives discussed in this paper. A second feature of the uncanny, animism, when something inanimate is given life, is considered in Chapter Three in relation to the significance of the house in O'Brien's narratives.

The extent to which the daughter in 'Rose' is in thrall to her mother, albeit against her own wishes, is evident through the intimate details she recalls, "the brooch on the lapel, [...] the smell of face powder, [...] the same mole on the back of the left hand" (O'Brien, 2013, p.152). Parcels of food arrive regularly from home, "all held with hideous assortments of twines – binding twine, very white twine, and coloured plastic string" (O'Brien, 2013, p.153). As well as keeping the contents safe, contents laced with memories and feelings, the strings and twines are "hideous" since they represent bonds that cannot be severed. The assorted twines resonate with the catgut stitching of the mother after childbirth, but more tellingly they symbolise the struggles of mother and daughter; a mother seeking to retain possession and a daughter intent on but incapable of breaking away. The sending of perishable food means the parcels cannot be put to one side to be dealt with later; they insist on immediate attention, artfully reinforcing the mother's controlling presence. Unsurprisingly, the daughter's response is ambivalent: "She hated those parcels, despite the fact that they were most welcome" (O'Brien, 2013, p.153). Parcels have a particular potency in O'Brien's work, from chickens going rancid to a chance cruel deception. In 'The Rug' an unexpected parcel arrives with no details as to whom has sent it. The package brings unexpected joy, but wariness on the part of the mother; her "careful nature forced her to unknot every length of string from the parcel and roll it up, for future use" (O'Brien, 2013, p.91) as if life had taught her that a windfall such as this can never be trusted. Once the rug is claimed by its rightful owner, all that remains is the carefully rolled-up string, symbol of a continuing life of bondage. In a stoic gesture, as if to emphasise the degree of mortification heaped upon her,

she “undid her apron strings, out of habit, and then retied them slowly and methodically, making a tighter knot” (O’Brien, 2013, p.96). There are other instances in O’Brien’s stories where the imagery of strings and cords reveals a person’s fragile state. In ‘Paradise’ a woman is caught up in a dubious affair with an older wealthy man. The narrator explains that their union is based not only on passion but on

some ‘more radical entanglement’. She had no name for it, that puzzling emotion that was more than love, or perhaps less, that that was not simply sexual. Although sex was vital to it and held it together like wires supporting a broken bowl. They both had had many breakages and therefore loved with a wary superstition. (O’Brien, 2013, p.334)

Invited to join a house party in his holiday villa, she is unable to establish any sense of companionship with her fellow guests. She clings to the notion that her lover “was not really one of them, either. He simply stage-managed them for his own amusement. [...] It was as if he were bound by a knot that maybe, maybe, she could unravel” (O’Brien, 2013, p.342). A more sanguine mind might have realised that she too was being stage managed but in a more insidious way. The irony is evident; this woman, a radiographer, with professional skill in revealing the internal structures of the body, cannot see or is unwilling to see how she is being used by a man for entertainment and distraction.

Three of O’Brien’s characters are professional women, a television announcer, a librarian and a health professional. Successful careers usually promote self-assurance, but this is not the case for these women. A library with its imposed silence seems an appropriate workplace for the daughter in ‘Rose’, who, along with her mother, “said none of the things that they should have said” (O’Brien, 2013, p.154). After her marriage, her mother was “at odds with a censoring husband” (O’Brien, 2013, p.153), so they met on neutral ground, where conversation revolved around recipes and knitting patterns. Rather than helping to exorcise the ghosts of the past, the marriage effectively consolidates them: “She learned to comply. To be a wife [...] It was like being at school again” (O’Brien, 2013, p.153). Both daughter and husband are targets for the mother’s scorn. When she criticises her daughter’s

clothes there is condemnation of the husband for not requiring his wife to dress more stylishly:

“You didn’t get any new style,” the mother said, restating her particular dislike for a sheepskin coat.

“I don’t want it,” the girl said tersely.

“You were always a softie,” the mother said, and inherent in this was disapproval for a man who allowed his wife to be dowdy. Perhaps she thought that her daughter’s marriage might have amended for her own. (O’Brien, 2013, p.154)

This extraordinary exchange highlights the mother’s bitter disillusionment with men as well as her own daughter. Smouldering with resentment at her situation, she hits out at the precious daughter, who, while resisting her demands, is incapable of breaking away: “The more she tried to kill, the more clinging the advances became” (O’Brien, 2013, p.156). Since clothing is an intimate part of a person’s makeup, the mother’s criticism of the old sheepskin coat presents a challenge to her daughter’s identity. As if to drive home the distance between them, the sheepskin coat, while shabby, is the genuine article, unlike the mother’s crocodile handbag and fur bolero, which are both cheap imitations.

As in other O’Brien stories, the clothes that women choose to wear are invested with significance. The source of any style was Brooklyn, “the name of which ranked second only to Heaven” (O’Brien, 2013, p.444). Going to Mass on Sundays, the mother in ‘My Two Mothers’, who once worked in a department store in Brooklyn, “would hurriedly don her good clothes that had been acquired in those times, or later, cast-offs sent by relatives, voile dresses cut on the bias that seemed to sway over a body, over hers” (O’Brien, 2013, p.444). Sinéad Mooney refers to “the frequently misogynistic dualistic tradition within Western thought by which clothing, as opposed to the natural body, is associated with earthly vanity, feminine duplicity, and humanity’s fallen state [...] Clothes, however, become a strategy of at least partial resistance for her [O’Brien’s] heroines” (Laing, Mooney and O’Connor, 2006, p.198, p.207). Lustrous fabrics, silk, voile and lace are tactile reminders of a distant, sophisticated world mourned by women who experienced it. In ‘Rose’, after her mother’s death, the daughter searches through her possessions. The “perfume bottles, dance shoes,

boxes of handkerchiefs" (O'Brien, 2013, p.167), vestiges of her past life, seem out of place, exotica washed up on a distant shore. "There were so many hats, with flowers and veiling, all of light color, hats for summer outings, for rainless climes" (O'Brien, 2013, p.167). Like talismans, they serve to shore up the fragile inner being.

Dresses have particular significance in a number of stories. In 'The Love Object', Martha is invited to a party where she expects to have a sighting of her lover's wife. She chooses to wear "virginal attire. Black and white" (O'Brien, 2013, p.181). Oddly, she seems to feel a sense of solidarity as she identifies her rival in "a dress I quite admired, a mauve dress with very wide crocheted sleeves [...], I saw its owner's eyes directed on me. Perhaps she was admiring my outfit. People with the same tastes often do" (O'Brien, 2013, p.181). Martha appears to consider herself the wife's equal. For the protagonist in 'Paradise', a new party dress is heavy with symbolism: "Her dress – his gift – was laid out on the bed, its wide white sleeves hanging down at either side. It was of openwork and it looked uncannily like a corpse" (O'Brien, 2013, p.361). This image is one of submission and sacrifice; it foreshadows her subsequent suicide attempt, but a fragile state of mind is echoed too in the openwork fabric as it reflects the broken strands of her life. In 'Irish Revel' and 'A Scandalous Woman', as dresses are either borrowed or belong to no-one in particular they are unlikely to enhance a young woman's self-image. Except, that is, for the spirited Eily, who restyles a dress from America, creating a dance dress that speaks to her wild, romantic nature.

In 'Rose' the daughter's job as a librarian gives her time to think. After the break-up of a marriage in which "they had separate meals" and "he did not speak for weeks on end", she seems possessed by her memories (O'Brien, 2013, p.154). The distraught woman is to be seen "walking the streets in a daze and stopping strangers to tell of her plight" (O'Brien, 2013, p.155). Her actions underline both her state of mind and how estranged she is from her family. There is a certain irony in the fact that while her professional life has to do with words, albeit the written word, she is unable to articulate her feelings. Kristeva believes that

for a depressive, language fails “to insure [...] the autostimulation that is required in order to initiate given responses [...]. Instead of functioning as a ‘rewards system’, language [...] inserts itself in the slowing down of thinking and decrease in psychomotor activity characteristic of depression” (1989, p.10).

Her mother’s letter that tells her “I have only one wish now and it is that we will be buried together” confirms in her a desperate need to kill her mother (O’Brien, 2013, p.156).

Thoughts of her mother dominate her waking hours: “She was possessed by these thoughts in the library where she worked day in and day out, filing and cataloguing and handing over books. They were more than thoughts, they were the presence of this woman whom she resolved to kill” (O’Brien, 2013, p.156). Kristeva argues that, in a state of mind such as this, where matricide is thwarted, a person’s anger can turn inwards:

For man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on our way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation [...]. The lesser or greater violence of matricidal drive [...] entails, when it is hindered, its inversion on the self; the maternal object the depressive or melancholic putting to death of the self is what follows, instead of matricide. (1987, p.28)

The daughter experiences a range of emotions, hatred, love, intense guilt and nostalgia, as she struggles to let go of the past and find some meaning in her life. Aspects of her character suggest this is someone suffering from melancholia. She may be a woman who, in Kristeva’s view, “know(s) that in their dreams their mothers stand for lovers or husbands and vice versa [...]. Such a mother, who is imagined as indispensable, fulfilling, intrusive, is for that very reason death-bearing: she devitalises her daughter and leaves her no way out” (1989, pp.77-78). Kristeva uses the term ‘Thing’ for something that cannot be expressed in words. The Thing can haunt the consciousness so that a depressed person “has the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable, that [...] perhaps an invocation might point out, but no word could signify” (1989, p.13). Edvard Munch’s painting ‘The Scream’ (1893) might be said to be the pictorial equivalent of this. The daughter exemplifies the women that Adrienne Rich identifies as

casualties of mothering in a patriarchal society: “Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, ‘whatever comes.’ A mother’s victimisation does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman” (1986, p.245). In the case of the daughter in ‘Rose’, a failed marriage and short-term affairs with married men are strong indicators that she is a victim of unsatisfactory mothering.

Since O’Brien’s women for the most part struggle with self-determination, Kristeva’s call for a reappraisal of narcissism is particularly relevant to her writing. The characterisations of the three protagonists in ‘Rose’, ‘The Love Object’ and ‘Paradise’ are of damaged individuals lacking a sense of self-worth; the texts offer no evidence of psychological wellbeing or *jouissance*. In an interview with Kathleen O’Grady (1998), Kristeva’s response to ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’ underlines the value of positive self-image:

To become capable of loving our neighbor as ourself, we have first of all to heal a damaged narcissism. [...] This seems to be the primary message of Thomas Aquinas: love the other as oneself, but by being settled within oneself, by delight in oneself. Thus: heal your inner wounds which, as a result will render you then capable of effective social action, or intervention in the social plane with the other.

I interpret Kristeva’s understanding of loving oneself as it being a self-affirming act and one that can enable an individual to care for others and be generous in reaching out; for Kristeva the concept of ‘delight in oneself’ is a wholly positive aspect of self-regard. Rich agrees, arguing that

The nurture of daughters in patriarchy calls for a strong sense of *self*-nurture in the mother. [...] A woman who has respect and affection for her own body, who does not view it as unclean or as a sex-object, will wordlessly transmit to her daughter that a woman’s body is a good and healthy place to live. (1986, p.245)

Conversely, Iris Murdoch’s view that human beings are naturally selfish points to a more negative self-preoccupation. This is particularly pertinent in the case of O’Brien’s women who are casualties of a patriarchal system:

The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself. [...] The area of its vaunted freedom of choice is not usually very great. One of its main pastimes is daydreaming. It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities. Its consciousness is not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain. (Murdoch, 1970, pp.76-77)

The character of Martha in 'The Love Object' seems to fit with this description. She is obsessed with her own needs to the point where she cannot empathise with those around her. Similarly, in 'Rose' the distance between mother and daughter encourages self-absorption. The daughter openly justifies her decision to give her mother a holiday not in terms of her mother's need but to assuage her own indebtedness. She "owed it to her mother" (O'Brien, 2013, p.157), but it is a last, desperate attempt to cauterise an open wound. Her choice of a hotel on the Atlantic coast, the nearest point of Ireland to America, land of the free, points to a subtext of searching, either consciously or unconsciously, for insights into her mother's life in Brooklyn, hoping perhaps that some confession will bring them closer:

They could be true at last, they need not hide from one another's gaze. Her mother would own up. Her own life would not be one of curtailed shame. She thought of the married man who was waiting for her in London, the one who took her for delicious weekends, and she shivered. (O'Brien, 2013, p.161)

No admissions are forthcoming; the daughter hopes in vain that her mother will disclose intimate details of her American sweetheart, but the attempt at reconciliation only serves to confirm the distance between them. What the mother does choose to disclose is highly significant: "They swore they would get in touch with each other toward the end of their days. Lo and behold, after fifty-five years the mother wrote that letter! [...] The mother said that her letter had been returned; probably his sister had returned it, always being jealous" (O'Brien, 2013, p.161). On one level she does not accept the bleak reality that the Brooklyn suitor did not keep faith with her; to do so would consign him to the fraternity of heartless men and threaten the solace of her memories. But this position is undermined by her claim "that there was only one kind of love and that was a mother's love for her child" (O'Brien, 2013, p.161),

an unequivocal statement aligning her with the Holy Mother and cruelly disallowing the daughter who is childless. The emotional intensity of the following sentence is acute: “There passed between them such a moment, not a moment of sweetness, not a moment of reaffirmation, but a moment dense with hate – one hating and the other receiving it like rays” (O’Brien, 2013, p.162).

On their visit to a ruined monastery they both fall to their knees, which in years past they would have done together countless times in prayer. While the mother genuflects out of respect to a holy site, the daughter does so ostensibly to investigate a sweet-smelling herb, or for a reason that may be much more complex. The few instances of direct speech in the text exemplify the chasm that has grown up between them. Words have acquired such toxicity that the porter at the hotel becomes an unwitting accessory as mother and daughter vent their desperation. “He asked her if she was enjoying it, and the mother said, ‘I quote the saying “See Naples and die,” the same applies to this’” (O’Brien, 2013, p.160). When her mother states that this holiday has come too late in her life, “the girl produced a postcard that she used as a bookmark. It was a photograph of a gouged torso and she told the porter that was how she felt, that was the state of her mind” (O’Brien, 2013, p.160).

In the dining room the feelings between them flare up, as intense as the “bright blue flame” that “riotously spread” over the chafing dish the waiter brings to their table (O’Brien, 2013, p.162). Food is no longer a unifying trope; it now serves to illuminate the gulf between them. The mother recoils from the “undercooked lamb strewn with mint”, wishing instead for “a warm pot of tea” (O’Brien, 2013, p.163, p.162). She rises from the table and leaves the dining room:

Up in the room she locked and bolted the door. And lay curled up on the bed, knotted as a foetus, with a clump of paper handkerchiefs in front of her mouth. Downstairs she left behind her a grown girl, remembering a woman she most bottomlessly loved, then unloved, and cut off from herself in the middle of a large dining room (O’Brien, 2013, p.163)

The image of a helpless foetus is a powerful one. It suggests a reversal of the mother/daughter roles, except that the love she lavished on the daughter is not reciprocated. Her life's struggle seems to be ending in anguish and capitulation. In 'Paradise', while the mother/daughter relationship is not explicit, the mother's anticipation of a marriage undoubtedly adds to the daughter's unhappy state of mind.

These tragic situations are a result of well-intentioned 'good' mothers who have stifled rather than enabled autonomy. Rich argues that in a patriarchal society, women often feel a lack of mothering:

the power of our mothers, whatever their love for us and their struggles on our behalf, is too restricted. [...] The anxious pressure of one female on another to conform to a degrading and dispiriting role can hardly be termed "mothering", even if she does this believing it will help her daughter to survive. (1986, p.243)

A lack of power leads mothers into positions of self-effacement or, to use Ruddick's term, "inauthenticity": "In response to maternal powerlessness, to a society whose values it cannot determine, maternal thought has opted for inauthenticity and the 'good' of others" (Ruddick, 1980, p.354). This is the legacy that mothers pass on to their offspring:

Maternal thought embodies inauthenticity by taking on the values of the dominant culture. [...] inauthenticity constructs and then assumes a world in which one's own values don't count. [...] as inauthenticity is lived out in maternal practice, it gives rise to the values of obedience and "being good": that is, it is taken as an achievement to fulfil the values of the dominant culture. (Ruddick, 1980, p.354)

In her paper 'Sovereignty of Good', Murdoch explores the relationship between Good and Love and what she sees as the susceptibility of 'love' to debasement. "Good is sovereign over Love, as it is sovereign over other concepts, because Love can name something bad [...] Love is the general name of the quality of attachment and it is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors" (Murdoch, 1970, p.99-100).

In 'Rose' the daughter gazes down on the face of her dead mother. She is beset by "a terrible pity" as she thinks on "the love that she had first so cravenly and so rampantly given

and the love that she had so callously and so pointedly taken back” (O’Brien, 2013, p.166). Murdoch’s assertion that “Good is the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves” (1970, p.100) is hard to disagree with, but in the case of this mother and daughter, where love turns to hatred, it is surely circumstance that creates the bind that traps them.

While there is little reference to their early years, the women in ‘The Love Object’ and ‘Paradise’ both exhibit a damaged sense of self. Their respective careers in television and radiography suggest they possess confidence and self-belief, but any evidence that this is so is singularly absent from the text. The narrative identifies the unpredictable nature of the protagonists; at times feverish, they lurch within a range of intense emotions. They are characters who demonstrate a capacity for self-delusion. The use of a first-person narrator in ‘The Love Object’ reveals at first hand the insecurities of the narrator. As a media presenter Martha is part of a culture where news is by nature ephemeral, continually being displaced by new stories. Martha’s life displays a similar inconstancy. After the break-up of Martha’s marriage, the father is awarded custody of their two sons. The narrative suggests that on some level she is able to dismiss a failed marriage and motherhood, seeking fulfilment in squalid affairs which like the news have no permanence. Embroiled in yet another dismal affair, Martha persuades herself that she is both loved and in love. The opening paragraphs reveal a woman, like the protagonist in ‘Paradise’, desperate for love and romance, apparently content to be the plaything of an older man. “He simply said my name. He said ‘Martha’, and once again I could feel it happening” (O’Brien, 2013, p.169). These might well be the opening words of a Mills and Boone romance. But Martha’s description of her lover is of a physically unattractive man: “Elderly. Blue eyes. Khaki hair. The hair was graying on the outside and he had spread the outer gray ribs across the width of his head as if to disguise the khaki, the way some men disguise a patch of baldness” (O’Brien, 2013, p.169). From time to time a sober reality penetrates her self-deception. As she watches him struggle to tie his bow-tie, she lowers her guard: “I felt such a fool. Then a lump of hatred. I thought how

ugly and pink his legs were, how repellent the shape of his body, which did not have anything in the way of a waist, how deceitful his eyes" (O'Brien, 2013, p.178).

Their relationship is characterised by what she describes as "perfect" lovemaking; the intimacy of her bed is where she feels she has agency, in what is, in reality, a sordid, undercover affair. Finally given "her walking papers", she admits to "sitting on the edge of madness" and daydreaming (O'Brien, 2013, p.182, p.186). She conjures a fantasy scenario where his family have perished and, like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, they can dance into the future together: "Then we danced divinely on a wooden floor that was white and slippery. At times I thought we would fall, but he said, 'You don't have to worry, I'm with you'. [...]The dance floor was a road and we were going somewhere beautiful" (O'Brien, 2013, p.182, p.186). The night dreams, far removed from the stuff of romance, are chilling. A frequent nightmare involves "being put to death by a man" (O'Brien, 2013, p.172). In what she describes as a "dream within a dream" (O'Brien, 2013, p.175) she is gripped by a sense of infirmity which resolves into the feeling of being pinned down by a man, most likely against her will and tantamount to rape. A parade of past lovers full of menace processes before her eyes like some caricature of 'The Dance of Death'. It suggests a history of abuse and violence:

I don't know which of the men it is, whether it's the big tall bruiser that's at the door every time I open it innocently, expecting it's the laundry boy and find it's Him, with an old black carving knife, its edge glittering because he's just sharpened it on a step. (O'Brien, 2013, p.176)

When her lover ends the affair, self-abuse in the form of heavy drinking and pep pills propels her into "a black patch" (O'Brien, 2013, p.187). On a day when she is actively considering suicide, only to be talked round by the plumber, her children unexpectedly arrive from their father's house to stay because the elder boy is unwell. This woman's admission of inadequacy as a mother makes uncomfortable reading: "I felt I had let them down years before. I thought – it was an unhysterical admission – that my being alive or my being dead made little difference to the course of their lives" (O'Brien, 2013, p.188). Her self-absorption

is confirmed by a lack of empathy and warmth towards the children. She does not instinctively gather the sick child into her open arms:

He put his arms around me and we both began to cry [...]. It was strange and unsatisfying to hold him in my arms, when over the months I had got used to my lover's size – the width of his shoulders, the exact height of his body, which obliged me to stand on tiptoe so that our limbs could correspond perfectly. Holding my son, I was conscious only of how small he was and how tenaciously he clung. (O'Brien, 2013, p.193)

When the boys' father visits in the evenings, alone, she lapses into drink-fuelled reveries. Dancing into the sunset is replaced by a harsher image: "I would be transported back. I enacted various kinds of reunion with my lover, but my favourite one was an unexpected meeting in one of those tiled, inhuman, pedestrian subways" (O'Brien, 2013, p.193).

Chapter One has highlighted the significance of O'Brien's refusal to name characters, with particular reference to 'Paradise'. The irony of the title 'Paradise' becomes apparent in the opening pages of this bleak story of psychological abuse. Despite the use of an omniscient narrator, the narrative voice is that protagonist. The resulting effect is to suggest that this is a woman under surveillance from all quarters. The text reveals her insecurities and self-loathing. The narrator relates an episode in this woman's life, a woman who, like her wealthy celebrity lover, "has had many breakages and therefore loved with a wary superstition" (O'Brien, 2013, p.334). Her father, who "vanished one night after supper" (O'Brien, 2013, p.348), was unlamented by mother and daughter. The wealthy lover was bullied as a child by his father, and with several marriages behind him, the lover's needs prove demanding. She has given him an undertaking that when she joins him and his other guests at his villa she will learn to swim, a decision that is to cause her anguish and humiliation. Within the text are numerous images of drowning; her daily ordeal in the swimming pool; a dependency on throwaway remarks as a means to survive in this company and her reliance on copious amounts of alcohol. After her success at swimming, she embraces the hated pool in a vain attempt to end her life by drowning.

As if the mortification she suffers were not enough, the protagonist chooses to share her agonies, with the result that the story resembles a confessional; she sees herself as a victim, engaged in a desperate attempt to turn the page on an unsatisfactory life. Her lover's sadistic streak is revealed in his penchant for throwing down new challenges. Once she has mastered swimming, it will be horse-riding. Desperate to fit in, she resorts to sharing interesting anecdotes with the group. While the guests find this entertaining, it is clear to her that "if she were to become too confident he would not want that either" (O'Brien, 2013, p.349). Like a wayward child, she resorts to snooping in guests' rooms and raids the fridge in the early evening to stave off the inevitable inebriation. Unable to find any sense of companionship with her fellow guests, the protagonist "stole into their rooms to find clues to their private selves. [...] Some had written cards which she read eagerly. These cards told nothing except that it was all super" (O'Brien, 2013, pp.342-343). This might have been a desperate move on her part in the hope of finding clues on how to fit in, a bid to reassure herself that there could be some common ground with her fellow guests. But more likely, this underhand act only serves to point up a lack of moral standards. Like Martha, this woman's fragile psyche finds a precarious comfort in the intimacy of love-making, the only level on which this relationship operates. She continually seeks reassurance in opportunistic sex with her lover, but even that begins to pall: "Do I like all this lovemaking? she asked herself. She had to admit that possibly she did not, that it went on too long, that it was involvement she sought, involvement and threat" (O'Brien, 2013, p.351).

The use of non sequiturs amplifies the superficiality of their lives and imparts a glossy, cinematic quality to the text. Like a spotlight, the glare of the sun exposes the shortcomings of the protagonists and the guests basking in their host's patronage. Like the idle snapping of a camera shutter, the narrative strings together a series of random scenes. It creates a sense of a distracted mind attempting to process unsettling experiences.

"His secretary, who was mousy, avoided her. Perhaps she knew too much. Plans he had made for the future." (O'Brien, 2013, p.343)

“Her hair got tangled by the salt in the sea air. She bought some curling tongs.”
(O’Brien, 2013, p.343)

“One woman who was pregnant, kept sprinkling baby powder and smoothing it over her stomach throughout the day” (O’Brien, 2013, p.343)

“The instructor put a rope over her head. She brought it down around her middle”
(O’Brien, 2013, p.343)

A glimpse of a more sanguine self emerges in the girl’s letter to her mother when she attempts to defuse her mother’s hopes for a marriage: *“It’s not that kind of relationship. Being unmarried installs me as positively as being married, and neither installs me with any certainty”* (O’Brien, 2013, p.356). She reveals how far out of her depth she is: *“There are jungle laws that you never taught me; you couldn’t, you never knew them. Ah well!”* (O’Brien, 2013, p.356). The letter is never posted. Success at swimming brings no sense of triumph. Instead, her response is to seek escape from a life that has never measured up to anything meaningful:

She was tired. Tired of the life she had elected to go into and disappointed with the man she had put pillars around. [...] She was sick of her own predilection for tyranny. It seemed to her that she always held people to her ear, the way her mother held eggs, shaking them to guess at their rottenness, but unlike her mother she chose the very ones that she would have been wise to throw away. (O’Brien, 2013, pp.360-361)

The act of embracing the water she so hated and feared as a means to end her misery suggests a desire to return to the safety of the womb and its protective amniotic fluid. The dismal act diminishes her further in the eyes of the guests, and the fact that she is saved from drowning only compounds her sense of failure.

These portrayals of women in ‘The Love Object’, ‘Rose’ and ‘Paradise’ bear out an important strand of Kristeva’s thinking, that narcissism, the need to love oneself, is a critical requirement if one is to become whole. How to achieve wholeness is problematic for O’Brien’s women, whose lives, for the most part, are played out within the confines of home. The importance of home in human lives and the complex ideas of what constitutes home are explored in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER THREE: THE NATURE OF HOME

Many of O'Brien's stories are set within the context of home. This chapter explores the significance of the house in *The Love Object*, referencing in particular *The Poetics of Space* (1994), a work which opened up new ways of thinking about the home environment. Its author, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, explores the interrelation between the scientific concept of space and human responses to it. *The Poetics of Space* includes a philosophical examination of the house, in which Bachelard explores how buildings shape our inner consciousness: "our soul is an abode. And by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms,' we learn to 'abide' within ourselves. Now everything becomes clear, the house images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them" (1994, p.xxxvii). The domestic house figures in many of O'Brien's stories, indeed one story is entitled 'The House of My Dreams', while many of her interviews and broadcasts confirm the fact that houses have particular significance for her.

In 'Edna O'Brien: Life, Stories' (2012), the writer talks at length of the importance that houses have held for in her life. As a successful writer she was drawn to live in Chelsea, "not because it was fashionable but because it was so full of life. We drove around and I came to this house in Carlyle Square. I said, 'Ah, this is the house I want'" (Edna O'Brien: Life, Stories, 2012). O'Brien bought the house, but fifteen years later she lost it, for reasons that are not made explicit. The effect on her was devastating: "I lost that house. It was my stronghold. Every time I go by there, I look in at it. Talk of exile... I looked at it with such yearning and such passion, and such anger" (Edna O'Brien: Life, Stories, 2012). That she chooses to use the word 'exile' is revealing; already in exile from her native country, it highlights a further estrangement. O'Brien's memories of her home in County Clare remain vivid:

I was born in a blue room in our house, which is Drewsboro House, and it was equidistant between two small hamlets or villages. One was Tuamgraney and the other was Scarriff, County Clare. I thought of Drewsboro as being a bit of a mansion when I was growing up. They'd been to America so it had some of those influences.

The bay windows, a vestibule, no-one else had a vestibule. I'm still not sure what a vestibule means. The tiled floors and the stained glass. Oh yes, it was grand. It was also beautiful. (Edna O'Brien: *Life, Stories*, 2012)

Overlaying the material details of the house are bitter-sweet memories of growing up there, the youngest child of the family:

When I go back to Drewsboro now, I think of the very early days. I think of frightened days. I think of when my mother made jam and the smell of it and licking the jam from the back of the wooden spoon. I think of rows, scenes in that house. I think of the excitement of visitors. I think of when I left it and would go back on holiday. I think of it when my mother died and her will was read out in the vacant room. I think of my father, too frightened to live in that house after she died and getting some boy to come up at night to mind him, the father of whom I had been so afraid. I think of the house shut up and the house having to inhabit the ghost of itself. (Edna O'Brien: *Life, Stories*, 2012)

The concept of home is one that O'Brien returns to in a radio interview following the publication of her novel, *The Little Red Chairs* (2015). "Home as we know is many things. It can be a country, another person, a building. Bricks and mortar, or a sort of existential inner yearning of how to be at home in the world" (2013, BBC Radio 4). It seems likely that the stories of *The Love Object* act as a conduit for O'Brien's own experiences of exile and loss.

The Poetics of Space, first published almost fifty years ago, is a highly original exploration of the interior space of the house and its context. While many of Bachelard's claims have been vigorously challenged, the text continues to generate new thinking and has remained a touchstone for academics from a range of disciplines within the humanities, including social anthropologists, geographers and architectural critics. Bachelard argues that "world-conscious" philosophers tend to focus on the universe and our place in it without necessarily considering the place of the house: to study the house gives "concrete evidence of the values of inhabited space", in effect "our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (1994, p.4). Like O'Brien, Bachelard considers the house to have an enabling role in establishing our relationship with the world: "Come what may the house helps us to say: I will be an inhabitant of the world, in spite of the world" (1994, p.46). The sheltered being

“experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams” (Bachelard, 1994, p.5). Images of previous dwelling places remain in our consciousness: “Thus the house is not experienced from day to day only [...]. Through dreams the various dwelling places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days” (Bachelard, 1994, p.5). One feeling that arises from reading Bachelard’s work is the sense of a supreme confidence in the wholesome nature of houses and memories, and in what Smyth and Croft describe as “the socio-political specificity of Bachelard’s model of domestic space” (2008, p.15); a stance that sits awkwardly with how we perceive ‘dwelling’ today. Bachelard’s vision of the all-sustaining house is informed by a Western world perspective, and now, more than twenty-five years later, some of his statements run counter to twenty-first-century values in terms of equality between the sexes and in recognising the inequalities in human conditions: “In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies [...]. Without it, man would be a dispersed thing. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life, it is body and soul” (1994, p.7).

Bachelard’s contention that the house is “the human being’s first world” (1994, p.7) does not stand up in today’s world. Migrant communities are estranged from their homelands; for families seeking a better life elsewhere, a child’s ‘first world’ is often a makeshift tent in a refugee camp. It seems helpful then to resist too narrow a definition of house, preferring less prescriptive terms such as ‘shelter’ or ‘dwelling place’. In ‘A Scandalous Woman’ Mrs Brady and her daughter are wary of an undesirable character known to be in the neighbourhood. A rap at the window one night causes much alarm: “We both trembled. There was a madman who had taken up residence in a bog-hole and we were certain that it must be him” (O’Brien, 2013, p.72). The words “taken up residence” are most likely to be the exact ones used by the narrator’s mother. The phrase mocks as it aggrandises, confirming this man an outcast from society. In place of pity or compassion for a homeless man, there is sarcasm and fear from this devout Catholic woman. Bachelard argues that imagination works to produce “the notion of home” (1994, p.5) in any sheltered space, however mean that shelter might be, but

the argument cannot realistically be applied to a bog-hole. As David Sibley points out, “The experience of the home is not necessarily bound to the physical shell of the house because it can be dreamt anywhere”, but Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* does convey the image of the home as “comforting and restorative, the intellectual equivalent of *Homes and Gardens*, a British leisure magazine” (1997, p.94).

The house as ‘building’ and the house as ‘home’ are different concepts that have attracted critical scrutiny: “If Bachelard is the great modern philosopher of ‘the house’, Martin Heidegger performs a similar function with regard to the related concepts of ‘the home’” (Smyth and Croft, 2008, p.15). In his essay ‘Building, Dwelling, Thinking’ (1951), Heidegger discusses what it means ‘to dwell’, arguing that by examining the linguistic roots of terms associated with ‘building’, we can begin to understand the nature of ‘dwelling’. He suggests that the two strands are inextricably linked in the sense that a building only exists through man’s instinct for shelter and peace:

Building and thinking are, each in its own way, inescapable for dwelling. The two, however, are also insufficient for dwelling so long as each busies itself with its own affairs in separation instead of listening to one another. They are able to listen if both – building and thinking – belong to dwelling, (Heidegger, 1951, p.25)

In discussing Rachel Whiteread’s sculpture *House* (1993), my instinct is to use the present tense, even though the sculpture no longer exists. Whiteread’s *House* is an artwork that seeks to make explicit the nature of the ‘house’ and what we mean by ‘dwelling’. The sculpture reflects and comments on Heidegger’s ideas on how the concept of ‘dwelling’ might be constituted. By removing the bricks and mortar of a house, the artist makes palpable its internal space, a space charged with the accretions of human activity and consciousness that have built up through generations of families living there. *House*, a concrete cast of the interior of a Victorian terrace house in East London due for demolition, attracted huge interest when it was unveiled. That it was loved and hated in equal measure by art critics and the general public alike is reflected in the fact that Whiteread was awarded the Turner Prize on the same day as the local authority took the decision to demolish it. After

only eleven weeks the sculpture was taken down, but it remains as with other demolished houses part of our collective memory. Importantly, in its brief existence it articulated feelings and associations about houses that are generally unrealised or overlooked. *House* made explicit a space that is often taken for granted. It was a physical manifestation of time and space refracted through human lives. As Mary Douglas asserts, “A home is not only a space, it also has some structure in time; and because it is for people living in that time and space, it has aesthetic and moral dimensions” (1991, p.52). *House* gave substance and status not only to the lives of people who had lived there, but also to the act of dwelling itself: a monument to all who occupied it, it exemplified the intimate relationship between house and dweller. In Richard Shone’s view, the sculpture is

a fragile monument, both eloquent and inscrutable. [...] for all we know any kind of unsavoury or banal life may have existed here. [...] it seems to speak, paradoxically, of reticence, of keeping itself to itself – how often were curtains twitched at these windows, how often was a knock at the door ignored? (1993, p.838)

Like the house in ‘Rose’, which, after the death of Delia the mother, seemed to be part of a vast silence, “as if the house itself had died or had been carefully put down to sleep” (O’Brien, 2013, p.168), *House* was “the death mask of a particular space and a finite period of time” (Shone, 1995, p.305). Despite or possibly because of its absence, the structure of *House* lingers as a memory, a powerful testament to the lives it sought to encapsulate.

In his understanding of the term ‘dwelling’ as a fusion between ‘home’ and ‘building’, Heidegger identifies a tension between the state of being ‘homed’ and that of homelessness: the sense of equanimity embodied in ‘home’ is challenged by the human susceptibility to alienation and estrangement. *The Domestic Space Reader* (2012) gathers together a range of contributions on ways of thinking about domestic space. Collectively they represent “the desire to peel away the layered meanings of home” (Briganti and Mezei, 2012, p.13). The editors draw a distinction between *house* and *home*; while a house is a physical entity, home is constituted through our senses, a complex weave of less tangible threads: “Whereas the house is generally perceived to be a physical built dwelling for people in a fixed location, the

home, although it may possess the material characteristics of a built dwelling, implies a space, a feeling, an idea, not necessarily located in a fixed place” (Briganti and Mezei, 2012, p.5). That there are forces at work that undermine any fixed notion of home presents a challenge to Bachelard’s thinking. Far from a fixed place, home is more usefully recognised as a complex set of ideas. While it may be described as ‘home’, a built dwelling only truly becomes home through human thoughts and feelings, which may not always be constructive. The protagonists in Edna O’Brien’s story ‘Shovel Kings’ are both distanced from the land of their birth. Rafferty, like many of his compatriots, has spent his life as a road builder in England. In his lonely retirement the closest place to his homeland is Biddy Mulligan’s pub in North London. The narrator of ‘Shovel Kings’ alludes to the itinerant nature of her own life. Overly dependent on her analyst, she has no place that could be called home. The narrative depicts the oppositional characteristics of home; a place yearned for when one is distant from it but in reality a place that is alien and confining.

Although he makes no mention of the family, Bachelard’s concept of a house and its protective qualities cannot logically be separated from the family life that goes on within it. A major problem for critics is that he does not entertain the possibility that a house can be a place of tyranny. There are houses where the balance between threat and protection is precarious. When violence threatens the household as it does in ‘Rose’ and ‘A Scandalous Woman’, it severely compromises the house’s capacity to shelter family members, particularly female children.

Mary Douglas points out, “home starts by bringing some space under control” (1991, p.51). But control suggests hierarchy, more often than not within a patriarchal system. In ‘The Love Object’ husbands and fathers are variously authoritarian, dissolute or absent, with an ever-present potential for violence towards wives and daughters. While Bachelard identifies the imagination as a prime force in figuring our concept of home, he sees it only in positive terms, ignoring the fear and anxiety it can harbour. Security can mean isolation just as a place of safety can at times be menacing. There are instances of both in Edna O’Brien’s

narratives. In 'A Scandalous Woman' the narrator remembers hearing a story about a young Eily, who, in constant fear of her abusive father, "always lived under the table to escape her father's thrashings" (O'Brien, 2013, p.59). This experience contrasts with that of the narrator in 'Rose', who like Eily is a fugitive living in fear of a violent father, but who finds refuge in her mother: "her mother's lap was a second heaven [...]. When she saw other people, [...] she would not budge, would not be lured out" (O'Brien, 2013, p.141). Both instances depict the safety of the house as compromised; Eily, concealed under furniture in self-protection, and the narrator, who cannot be prised away from her mother.

While Bachelard writes, "We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection" (1994, p.6), in 'Rose' the daughter's response to the house is ambivalent: "She loved it and she feared it" (O'Brien, 2013, p.144). This daughter's 'memories of protection' are vested in a mother who Weekes describes as a "carnivorous mother figure" (2000, p.120). Her memories live on to haunt her in her adult life. Far from a happy family atmosphere, the house is witness to gratuitous violence. In one instance when "the father had taken a shotgun to her" (O'Brien, 2013, p.143), the mother returns to her own family, causing the daughter to lodge with neighbours in her absence. Men "go off on a batter" (O'Brien, 2013, p.142), sometimes ending up in either the asylum or a monastery before returning home. In 'A Scandalous Woman', the narrator reports that a priest "came every five or ten years to say Mass in the house to re-bless it, and put paid to the handiwork of the devil" (O'Brien, 2013, p.76), a tacit admission on the part of the Church that domestic abuse was commonplace.

Bachelard argues that a complex world is opened up through memory: "The house we were born in is an inhabited house. In it the values of intimacy are scattered, they are not easily stabilised, they are subjected to dialectics [...]. But over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us" (1994, p.14). He consistently valorises daydreaming over conscious thought, arguing that the laying-down of childhood memories owes more to the world of dreaming than to any factual information: "It is on the plane of the

daydream and not on that of facts that childhood remains alive and poetically useful within us" (Bachelard, 1994, p.16). He argues that this dynamic association of memory and imagination work together to their "mutual deepening" (Bachelard, 1994, p.5). For Bachelard, the house a person is born in is suffused with "dream values which remain after the house is gone" (1994, p.17) that far outweigh the values of protection. But as Chapter Two of this study has demonstrated, O'Brien's women resort to daydreaming in their struggle to banish the ghosts of the past.

Bachelard believes that in its position deep within the imagination, the dreamt house has, just like those of its physical counterpart, rooms and spaces not regularly accessed in daily living. Attics, cellars, landings, spare rooms and even stairways are deeply significant. Repositories for feelings and memories, they often contain vestiges of earlier life and lives, making these spaces capable of innate strangeness. Although we generally accept 'home' to be a safe refuge, the home's less used and therefore less familiar spaces can feel quite the opposite, in other words, 'unhomely'. In Sigmund Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' (1919), he identifies the uncanny as an experience of something familiar yet strange. Houses have particular associations with the uncanny in the way that a house acts as a catalyst in generating feelings of unease. In literature the house has been shown to be capable of harbouring "the disturbing slipperiness of the familiar" as evidenced in the Gothic novel, "which flourished precisely during the time that saw the emergence of the nuclear family with its attendant intimacy and privacy" (Mezei and Briganti, 2002, p.841). Through the addition of the word 'private' to the generic term 'house', the house becomes territory where the family social order overrides any other. The private house becomes a space where power relations are characterised by power inequalities:

As a relatively unregulated sphere the private is a place where men have traditionally dominated their families and the privacy to do so has been jealously protected. The designation of the home as private space limits the role of political institutions and social movements in changing power relations within the family. (Duncan, 1996, p.131)

Duncan points out, 'Paradoxically the home which is usually thought to be gendered feminine has also traditionally been subject to the patriarchal authority of the husband and father' (1996, p.131). In the case of O'Brien's women, while it is often witness to violence, the house is one domain over which women appear to have some control. Husbands are idle, absent or spendthrift, traits which effectively diminish their authority over the house in terms of its fabric and upkeep. Unsurprisingly, the house and its furnishings assume great significance in women's lives.

In 'The Meanings of Domesticity', one of the definitions Bart Verschaffel ascribes to the house is "a device for articulating differences and defining hierarchy in the meanings one lives by" (2002, p.153). Verschaffel states that the house is a place where "order is protected and restored when things start wandering around or haphazardly mix, without rules" (2002, p.153), a tacit acknowledgement that flux is inherent in the concept of dwelling. This notion challenges the idea that a house is a repository for calm and repose. While he acknowledges that any intrinsic meaning of 'house' is of 'fragile construction' and open to destabilisation, Verschaffel's idea that the concept of 'house' can be constituted through representation certainly chimes with Bachelard's view of the importance of the imagination. Citing the seventeenth-century Dutch tradition of painting interiors, he argues that an artist's representation of the house is an imaginative response that helps to construct what is meant by 'house'. Dutch paintings often privilege the onlooker with views into hallways and side rooms, but vistas that open up through windows and doorways are more often the exclusive privilege of some, or all, of the figures depicted. In a similar way, fiction draws a reader into the intimacy of home while at the same time setting boundaries as to what the text is prepared to divulge and what is to remain unspoken. In 'A Scandalous Woman' the young narrator is not admitted to the front room where the adults are interrogating Eily: "though I was not admitted, I listened at the door, and ran off only when there was a scream or a blow or a thud" (O'Brien, 2013, pp.75-76). Inevitably, her account of what she heard is partial and

subjective. In upper- and middle-class houses, the library was a male preserve. The narrator in 'Madame Cassandra' recalls her fiancé and her father in the library:

A couple of nights before our wedding [...] I overheard them speak of women – how much they loved women, idealised women [...] ... my father did not mention my mother, Alannah, not once. [...] Yes I stood in the doorway half expecting my husband-to-be or my father to say, "Ah, Millie come in" but they didn't. (O'Brien, 2013, p.430)

Bachelard discusses the importance of what he calls "*intimate space*, space that is not open to just anybody" (1994, p.78), which can be understood in terms of furniture designed to secrete personal items away: "Wardrobes with their shelves, desks with their drawers, and chests with their false bottoms are veritable organs of the secret psychological life" (1994, p.78). Houses are designed around what is to be shown and what is to be concealed. In 'Rose', after her mother's funeral, the daughter resorts to "tidying and searching, [...] in drawers, she found bits of her mother's life. Emblems. Wishes. Dreams contained in such things as [...] perfume bottles, dance shoes, boxes of handkerchiefs" (O'Brien, 2013, pp.166-167). The house has witnessed both violence and loving intimacy. It is custodian of her mother's married life, harbouring keepsakes and memories, but now with her absence turns in on itself. It was "as if the house itself had died or had been carefully put down to sleep" (O'Brien, 2013, p.168).

Freud's theory of 'The Uncanny' centres on the perceived ambivalence in the German word '*heimlich*' and its opposite, '*unheimlich*': "In general [...] the word '*heimlich*' is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand, it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight" (Freud, 1919, pp.140-141). The uncanny manifests itself in both material and psychological dimensions. Disturbances of the mind can result in trance-like states, hearing voices or seeing visions. An uncanny experience is one that normally presents as safe and familiar but is undermined by, for example, a sense of *déjà vu* or a freak coincidence, or it may convey a sense of something repressed and sinister.

Material instances of the uncanny are commonly associated with buildings and settings.

Anthony Vidler points out that “Architecture has been intimately linked to the notion of the uncanny since the end of the eighteenth century. At one level, the house has provided a site for endless representations of haunting, doubling, dismembering, and other terrors in literature and art” (1992, p.ix). This capacity to unsettle is reflected in recurring dreams and fantasies akin to those experienced by O’Brien’s protagonists.

In ‘The Love Object’ Martha’s house is the setting for an affair that neither lover actually admits is “a mean and squalid little affair” (O’Brien, 2013, p.173). They stop “going to restaurants because of his being famous” (O’Brien, 2013, p.173). Martha’s house is pressed into service: “He would come to my house for dinner. I’ll never forget the flurry of those preparations – putting flowers in vases, changing the sheets, thumping knots out of pillows, trying to cook [...]. The agony of it!” (O’Brien, 2013, p.173). The house becomes complicit in this affair, a love nest, where the glow of the gas fire adds a somewhat tawdry romance to their afternoon love-making. In the fire’s “resplendent” light, “His face and the mahogany chest and the pictures [...] looked better” (O’Brien, 2013, p.174). But the house reveals its capricious nature in a nightmare-like experience that Martha describes as “a dream within a dream” (O’Brien, 2013, p.175). She feels “something [...] tugging at my bedcovers [...]. And I know that it’s not infirmity that’s dragging me down, but a man. How did he get in there?” (O’Brien, 2013, p.176). In her dream, the house fails to protect her, allowing the terror-inducing parade of past lovers access to her bed. She is only comforted by slipping into an erotic reverie of the “encounter in the gaslight” (O’Brien, 2013, p.177).

Vidler sees the uncanny as “opening up problems of identity around the self, the other, the body and its absence: thence its force in interpreting the relations between the psyche and the dwelling, the body and the house, the individual and the metropolis” (1992, p.x). Houses that are unremarkable from the outside may have spaces such as empty rooms or attics that feel alien and disquieting. Halls, landings and corners possess particular qualities. They are often places where no-one tends to linger, giving off an unnerving sense of estrangement.

Similar feelings can be associated with corners. In Bachelard's view, a corner is a place of silence: "a corner that is 'lived in' tends to reject and restrain, even to hide, life [...] the corner is a haven that ensures us one of the things we prize most highly – immobility" (1994, p.135, p.137). But this claim is open to challenge; 'immobility' emerges too through a state of fear, a sense of being cornered with no escape.

Bruno Latour's statement that "things do not exist without being full of people, and the more modern and complicated they are, the more people swarm through them" (1991, p.10) recognises the deep relationship we have with objects and, as evidenced in O'Brien's narratives, the knowledge that they are not easily displaced. In 'Rose' the landing of the narrator's childhood home is a place of passage, not somewhere to linger. Described as a "cold hall" (O'Brien, 2013, p.136), it is now the repository for a miscellany of remnants from their lives in the house, stranded like flotsam on the shore and refreshed from time to time by a new addition. Alongside the black felt dog, now with one of its amber eyes missing, were

a bowl with a bit of wire inside to hold a profusion of artificial tea roses. [...] In the landing at home, too, was the speared head of Christ [...]. Underneath Christ was a pussy cat of black papier-mâché which originally had sweets stuffed into its middle, sweets the exact image of strawberries and even with a little leaf at the base, a leaf made of green-glazed angelica. (O'Brien, 2013, p.146)

Unremarkable in its own right, each object's significance is now vested in 'time', through a person's memory and associations. Sibley refers to Rochberg-Halton's view "that they form a *gestalt*, a sense of an organised whole which is greater than the sum of its parts, for the people who live with them" (Sibley, 1997, p.94). Articles like chocolate boxes and biscuit tins invariably become containers for new items. Some are kept for their decorative value, others because of associations with people or events. Jean Baudrillard explores the status of objects whose original purpose is no longer valid, but which "answer to other kinds of demands such as witness, memory, nostalgia or escapism" (2009, p.41). An object's significance is now vested in its historicalness:

It is astructural, it refuses structure, [...]. Yet it is not afunctional, nor purely 'decorative', for it has a very specific function within the system, namely the signifying of time [...] Our everyday objects are in fact objects of a passion – the passion for private property, emotional investment in which is every bit as intense as investment in the 'human' passions. (Baudrillard, 2009, p.41, p.48)

This is certainly the case in the 'The Connor Girls' and 'The Rug'. The protagonists keep their houses spotless, and their resourcefulness in the form of rug making, embroidery and baking gives meaning to their lives. Baudrillard's comment "you can look at an object without it looking back at you. *That is why everything that cannot be invested in human relationships is invested in objects*" (2009, p.51) is particularly relevant to O'Brien's families. Objects take on a significance that outweighs any intrinsic value:

The house was stuffed with things – furniture, china dogs, Toby jugs, tall jugs, trays, tapestries, and whatnots. Each of the four bedrooms had holy pictures on the walls [...] Mantelpieces carried their own close-packed array of wax flowers, holy statues, broken alarm clocks, shells, photographs, soft rounded cushions for sticking pins in. (O'Brien, 2013, p.89)

While this is not a serious collection in the way we understand the term, it is highly significant and most likely a source of pride to the collector. In itself such a motley collection seems to offer scant consolation for the impoverishment of a woman's life, but, as Baudrillard suggests, it can be a source of comfort:

Human beings and objects are indeed bound together in a collusion in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value – what might be called a 'presence'. What gives the houses of our childhood such depth and resonance in memory is clearly this complex structure of interiority, and the objects within it serve as boundary markers of the symbolic configuration known as home. (2012, p.211)

Baudrillard argues that "the environment of private objects and their possession [...] is a dimension of our life which, though imaginary, is absolutely essential. Just as essential as dreams" (2009, p.54). We seek refuge in possession, not to ensure our immortality, but to enable us to continue with a controlled form of existence that transcends "a real existence the irreversibility of whose progression [we are] powerless to affect" (Baudrillard, 2009,

p.55). This recourse to objects as a means of shoring up unsatisfactory lives is highly relevant in the case of O'Brien's women.

O'Brien's fiction often concerns itself with the interface between inner consciousness and the physical spaces of drawers and cupboards, where personal mementoes can be secreted. In 'Rose' the daughter opens her mother's drawers after her death to find "bits of her mother's life" (O'Brien, 2013, p.167). Since they shared few confidences, it is now the only means open to her in order to learn more about her mother. Cupboards and drawers act as a displacement mechanism, a manifestation of what has been hidden and unexpressed. In 'The Love Object', after her lover brings their affair to a close, Martha is about to tip the ashes of his cigars into the grate, when instead she put the ash into a small tin and secretes the tin under some clothes in a drawer. While Martha supposes that "the even mass of dark-gray ash" is "probably like the ashes of the dead", the ash more likely represents another failed relationship (O'Brien, 2013, p.185).

Tyrus Miller points out in *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (2006) that, for Benjamin, "domestic objects, rather than standing exposed in the transparency of their functional objecthood, combine in enigmatic hieroglyphs that purport to express, as if in a dream, the private, 'interior' subjectivity of the owner" (p.246). O'Brien's story 'The Rug' reveals the intense feelings that mother and daughter experience with the arrival of new linoleum for the sitting-room floor. The opening paragraph recalls the narrator's memory of this event, now lodged deep within her consciousness: "I went down on my knees upon the brand-new linoleum and smelled the strange smell. It was rich and oily. It first entered and attached itself to something in my memory when I was nine years old" (O'Brien, 2013, p.89). In 'Rose', after the breakdown of her marriage, the daughter moves to England to start a new life: "She wanted to go somewhere where she knew no one" (O'Brien, 2013, p.155). But the past and its graphic images continue to haunt her through dreams and daydreams:

She was staggered by the assaults of memory – a bowl with her mother's menstrual cloth soaking in it [...] the five freakish winter roses that were in bloom when the

pipes burst; the mice that came out of the shoes. Then out of the shoe closet itself, [...] the little box of rouge that almost asked to be licked, [...] the flitches of bacon hanging to smoke; [...] and always, like an overseeing spirit, the figure of the mother (O'Brien, 2013, p.155)

This potent mix of objects and emotions are firmly anchored in the daughter's mind, resisting all her efforts to banish them.

In 'The Rug' the exterior of the house, unkempt and sinister, belies what lies within its four walls. The avenue leading up to the house is lined with a tangle of broken rhododendrons, and the many potholes in the road surface make driving perilous:

But though all outside was neglect, overgrown with ragwort and thistle, strangers were surprised when they entered the house; my father might fritter his life away watching the slates slip from the outhouse roof – but within, that same, square, lowland house of stone was my mother's pride and joy. It was always spotless. (O'Brien, 2013, p.89)

Throughout the narrative are references to the husband's idleness and hypochondria: "he'd had a headache [...] He was in bed with rheumatic pains" (O'Brien, 2013, p.90, p.92). His character is drawn through the eyes of the narrator when she was a child. The view of her long-suffering mother, who "had early accepted that she had been born to do the work", is likely to have contributed to the daughter's opinion of her father: "My father was generous, foolish, and so idle that it could only have been some malcontent" (O'Brien, 2013, p.90, p.89). As in 'Rose' the images of family life in 'The Rug' confirm a woman's unremitting labour, in contrast to the irresponsible behaviour of the husband. Douglas sees the home as a 'gift economy' where its members are part of a system of exchanges that work on a reciprocal basis, even though that reciprocity is often delayed or compromised: "A home is a tangle of conventions and totally incommensurable rights and duties" (1991, p.53). Even allowing for the fact that both narratives are recounted by women, the division of labour between husband and wife seems patently unjust. But the extent to which O'Brien's fictional husbands have been marginalised by bitter, resentful wives is open to question. Their shortcomings effectively alienate them from family life so that men seem hardly at home in

their own houses. In Douglas's view the home is "a fragile system, easy to subvert" (1991, p.52). She argues that the wellbeing of the home is compromised by the extent to which family members absent themselves from family life: "To leave erratically, without saying where or for how long, to come back and go upstairs without greeting [...]. Perhaps the most subversive attack on the home is to be present physically without joining in its multiple coordinations" (Douglas, 1991, p.52); O'Brien's husbands pose just such a threat to the 'collective good' of the home. In 'A Scandalous Woman' Mr Hogan "was a very gruff man who never spoke to the family except to order his meals and to tell the girls to mind their books" (O'Brien, 2013, p.69). The family lived in fear of this "old man with an atrocious temper" (O'Brien, 2013, p.69). His counterpart in 'Rose' openly threatens his wife on two separate occasions with a hatchet and a shotgun and is prone to going "off on a batter" (O'Brien, 2013, p.142), a prolonged drinking spree, for days at a time.

In *The Sense of an Interior: Four rooms and the writers that shaped them* (2004), Diane Fuss points out it was not until the nineteenth century and the advent of "specialized rooms, corridors, hallways, closets, and back-stairwells does an interior subject truly begin to emerge. The compartmentalization of the bourgeois interior provides one of the necessary historical conditions for the romantic discovery of the self and for the philosophical exploration of interior life" (p.4). Not surprisingly, analogies have been drawn on the interiority of human consciousness and house interiors. Fuss sees interior space as "an expansive space, encompassing both the psychological and the architectural meanings of interior life" (2004, p.4). Fuss contends that while literature's concern is with the life within the house, architectural criticism tends to 'evacuate' the house:

Few architectural studies explore how specific individuals creatively dwell in their houses. [...] If architectural historians treat the domestic interior more literally than figuratively, ignoring the metaphorical in favor of the functional, literary critics, for their part, tend to treat the domestic interior as pure figuration. Literature scholars typically view houses as metaphors for something else, and rarely as important constructs in their own right. (2004, p.1)

As the title of the book implies, the author's principal concern is the relationship between writers and their dwellings, but I suggest this association extends equally to houses in fiction and, it follows, the narrators and protagonists who inhabit these fictional houses. Fuss argues that "Every house is, in reality, an outer embodiment of the inner life of its occupant. Far from evacuating the house of subjectivity, as architectural scholars tend to do, literary critics present the house as *nothing other than* subjectivity, a self under construction" (2004, p.1). It is the human senses that effectively form a bridge or conduit between the "architectural and the psychological interior [...]. The senses stand at the border of what is inside and outside consciousness" (Fuss, 2004, p.6). Choosing to add the sixth sense to the accepted grouping of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell, she argues that all six senses contribute to the construction of interiority. This notion of 'inner life' found form, albeit ephemeral, in Whiteread's *House*.

Mezei and Briganti suggest that houses and works of fiction are often conflated in what they describe as an "interactive relationship between the home and the literary text [...] novels and houses furnish a dwelling place – a spatial construct – that invites the exploration of private and intimate relations and thought" (2002, p.837, p.839). The centrality of the house in literature is underlined by the number of fictional works that features houses in their titles, for example, Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). In the novels and essays of Elizabeth Bowen and J.G. Farrell, the Irish house, or to use McLeod's term, the "Big House", is associated with Protestant Anglo-Irish landowners: "'The Big House' was, from the eighteenth century, commonly the home of wealthy Anglo-Irish Ascendancy families, existing in stark contrast to the meagre houses of the Catholic peasantry" (McLeod, 2007, p.41). Built by her ancestors in 1775, Bowen's Court was home to the writer Elizabeth Bowen. In her essay of the same name, she describes the house:

Home was our first world – it was at one time the world: we knew no other. [...]The house stands in lonely country. From its windows nothing but trees, grassland and, at the back, mountains are to be seen – no road, no other habitation. It is square,

high and set in a shallow hollow, screened by plantations from the winds blowing over heather and bog behind it. [...] White-grey, the classic façade stares out from its leafy background – still somewhat a foreigner to the landscape. (Bowen, 2008, p.138, p.140, p.141)

This sense of being ‘foreign’ in the landscape derives from its association with Empire and colonialism but also from its relationship to the land itself since, when fortunes change, nature takes every opportunity to reclaim its own. Houses play a central role in O’Brien’s stories in the way that they bear witness to human activity within their walls. The grey stone houses, often in a state of neglect, present a passive front to the world, but they conceal interiors where emotions are suppressed or erupt in equal measure.

The stories in ‘The Love Object’ document the importance that the house and its furnishings play in women’s struggle to hold on to a sense of self-worth. In O’Brien’s story ‘The Connor Girls’, the narrator’s mother is snubbed by the two Connor sisters, who, with her husband’s permission, walk their dogs across the family’s land: “She longed to bring them in so that they could admire our house with all its knickknacks, and admire the thick wool rugs which she made in the winter nights and which she folded up when no visitors were expected” (O’Brien, 2013, p.26). When they refuse her invitation to tea, the mother vents her rage and disappointment in an assault on the house: “When in a temper, she resorted to doing something about the house. Either she took the curtains down, or got on her knees to scrub the floor and the legs and rungs of the wooden chairs” (O’Brien, 2013, p.27). Bachelard argues that caring for household objects by polishing and dusting elevates them to a higher level: “they attain to a higher degree of reality than indifferent objects, [...] For they produce a new reality of being [...]. From one object in a room to another, housewifely care weaves the ties that unite a very ancient past to the new epoch” (1994, p.68). But for Bachelard, the idea that “housewifely care” might come about through desperation is never entertained. In ‘The Connor Girls’ it is the furniture that becomes the beneficiary of an outpouring of wounded pride and disaffection, hardly in step with Bachelard’s high-minded thinking.

When a black sheepskin rug is unexpectedly delivered to the house, there is joy but also “surprise, and a touch of suspicion. Though she was always hoping, she never really expected things to turn out well” (O’Brien, 2013, p.92). When the rightful owner turns up to claim the rug, the mother weeps “not so much for the loss of the rug – though the loss was enormous – as for her own foolishness in thinking that someone had wanted to do her a kindness at last” (O’Brien, 2013, p.96). While the outcome is just, the experience has dealt her a cruel blow. The rug had delivered, in Bachelard’s words, “a new reality of being”, but it proves to be short-lived.

For Mary, the protagonist in ‘Irish Revel’, home is a small whitewashed mountain cottage. Released one November evening from daily unrelenting labour on the family farm, “doing a man’s work” (O’Brien, 2013, p.1), Mary cycles into the village to a party at the Commercial Hotel, where she has been led to believe someone is expecting to see her. Wary of the unreliable brakes on her bicycle, Mary dismounts before descending the Big Hill. She “looked back, out of habit, at her own house. It was the only house back there on the mountain” (O’Brien, 2013, p.2). Distanced from the house, she becomes an outsider, seeing the farm in a state of detachment, the text reading as if it were an extract of an estate agent’s listing: “small, whitewashed, with a few trees around it and a patch at the back which they called a kitchen garden” (O’Brien, 2013, p.2). This is her moment of liberation; away from the constraints of home and full of excitement that she is about to be reunited with John Roland, an artist she met two years previous. Here, on this neutral ground, she can indulge herself in memories of that romantic encounter. Her hopes are dashed when she arrives at the shabby hotel and the party turns out to be a coarse, sordid affair, where she is not a guest but is there to help the landlady. Returning home the next morning, she reaches the top of the hill, where her house comes into view: “like a little white box at the end of the world, waiting to receive her” (O’Brien, 2013, p.24). The apparent simplicity of this image conceals a depth of complex meanings. The liminal hilltop position places her between two worlds in both physical and psychological terms. For a girl of seventeen, now a little more

worldly-wise, it represents a return to the innocence of her childhood. While the house speaks of safety and family companionship, it also represents confinement and a life of hard labour similar to that which her mother has endured. Its isolated position on the mountainside serves to confirm how small and inconsequential human lives are.

Carsten and Hugh-Jones identify a particular synergy between house and body:

The house and body are intimately linked. The house is an extension of the person; like an extra skin, carapace or second set of clothes, it serves as much to reveal and display as it does to hide and protect. House, body and mind are in continuous interaction, the physical structure, furnishing, social conventions and mental images of the house at once enabling, moulding, informing and constraining the activities and ideas which unfold within its bounds. A ready-made environment fashioned by a previous generation and lived in long before it becomes an object of thought, the house is a prime agent of socialisation. (1995, p.2)

I suggest that this “continuous interaction” is not simply the province of the residents, but is also fashioned by the outsiders who interact, or who would dearly love to interact, with a particular house. “To know them would be to enter an exalted world” (O’Brien, 2013, p.25); so writes the young and impressionable narrator of ‘The Connor Girls’. “To open the stiff green iron gate, to go up their shaded avenue and to knock on their white hall door was a journey I longed to make” (O’Brien, 2013, p.25). As Protestants, Major Connor and his daughters are outsiders in a rural Catholic village. The description of the house and grounds is focused through the eyes of a young girl, who is heavily influenced by the attitude of her mother towards this family who choose to remain “aloof” (O’Brien, 2013, p.25) from the village. A warning sign at the gate “said ‘Beware of dogs’ and the white pebble-dashed walls that surrounded their acres of garden were topped with broken glass so that children could not climb over and steal from the orchard” (O’Brien, 2013, p.29). As if to stress that difference is both mortal and immortal, the family vault is “in the Protestant graveyard [...] with steps leading down to it, just like a house” (O’Brien, 2013, p.25). The house is known only to a privileged few outsiders, “the gardener, the postman, and a cleaning woman, who told none of their secrets [but] merely boasted that the oil paintings on the walls were

priceless and the furniture was all antique" (O'Brien, 2013, p.25). When she finally visits the Connor house after the death of the Major, the house is a disappointment to her: "It was much more simply furnished than I had imagined and the loose linen covers on the armchairs were a bit frayed"; the priceless oil paintings turn out to be "portraits of glum puffy dark-looking ancestors" (O'Brien, 2013, p.34). A marriage against her parents' wishes drives a wedge between her and her family, and not until some years later does she return home on a visit with her husband and child. Her adult status is reflected in a shift in the narrative voice. The Connor girls, now on friendlier terms with her parents, hold no interest for her. At first sight this seems curious since her husband's preference for "China tea" (O'Brien, 2013, p.37) and interest in fishing might indicate that he would find their company convivial. However, his intention "to do some trout fishing in one of the many mountain rivers, and to pass his few days, as he said, without being assailed by barbarians" (O'Brien, 2013, p.38) confirms his contempt for this rural backwater and all who have the misfortune to live there.

The family house in 'Rose' plays a particularly significant role in the narrative. It takes on its own persona, a house "with a strange lifelikeness, as if it were not a house at all but a person observing and breathing" (O'Brien, 2013, p.135). Two of the rooms, the blue room and the vacant room, have resonance with Freud's thinking. Both rooms have been subject to, as Carsten and Hugh-Jones suggest, "continuous interaction" (1995, p.2) where events have shaped and determined their fate. Walls are permeable, absorbing both physical and psychological elements. The blue room, with "walls of dark wet morose blue", is filled with the moans of childbirth that "went beyond the distempered walls out into the cold hall outside" (O'Brien, 2013, p.136). As if acknowledging the significance of the birth, the text thereafter ennobles the space; it is subsequently referred to as the Blue Room. The chill blue interior evokes cold blue statues of the long-suffering Virgin Mary. On the daughter's return home for her mother's funeral, the Blue Room, damp with "little burrs of fungus", is now the custodian of "bits of her mother's life" (O'Brien, 2013, p.136, p.166). After the incident where "the father had taken a shotgun to her [the mother] and had shot her [...], had missed, had

instead made a hole in the Blue Room wall" (O'Brien, 2013, p.143), the girl returns home to find her mother gone. Staying at a neighbour's house, she can see her house abandoned, "with the back door wide open so that any stranger or tinker could come in or out" (O'Brien, 2013, p.143), a distressing image of this once solemn, dignified house, now, like her mother, violated and made vulnerable. On the mother's return they find the water pipes have burst, as if with her absence, the house has fallen to weeping. In 'A Scandalous Woman' Eily's mother, Mrs Hogan, mourns not only for the loss of her daughter's virginity and the attendant shame that this has delivered at her door, but the realisation that

they would never provide bricks and mortar for the new house now. [...] It was to be identical to their own house [...], but with the addition of a lavatory, and a tiny hall inside the front door, so that, as she said, if company came, they could be vetted there instead of plunging straight into the kitchen. [...] She was a backward woman and probably because of living in the fields she had no friends, and had never stepped inside anyone else's door. (O'Brien, 2013, p.78)

For this shy, country woman, a hall, albeit 'tiny', would allow her some control over visitors, who currently cannot help but trespass the boundary of her territory, the kitchen. The narrator's lack of maturity and her tendency to reflect the attitudes of the adults around her is evident in use of the derogatory term 'backward'. Mrs Hogan falls short of the neighbourhood norms by choosing to live a secluded life away from society. She has a liking for gossip, however; with her "wild stare", she would press the narrator's mother when they met for "any newses" (O'Brien, 2013, p.78). Like many houses of the time, Mrs Hogan's house is rudimentary, with no inside bathroom. With "a room off the kitchen" (O'Brien, 2013, p.76) given over to the storage of oats, the inference is that all the living goes on in the kitchen. With a stroke of acute irony, this room is cleared of grain and transformed into a space in which to receive and entertain the bank clerk, the person who has brought shame and dishonour to the household. Not only has Eily's predicament repositioned them within the village community, the makeover of the side room has the effect of alienating the Hogans from their own house: "Eily's mother refused to sit down, and stayed in the kitchen", while her father, arriving home drunk, "took off his hat to it and said 'Am I in my own house at all

mister?” (O’Brien, 2013, p.80, p.79). Eily also absents herself from the proceedings, “standing by the window looking out at the oncoming dark” (O’Brien, 2013, p.80), as if gazing into the abyss wherein her future would be defined. The image evokes another young woman on the brink of momentous change. Eveline, in James Joyce’s story of the same name, “sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. [...] her head was leaned against the window curtains and in her nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne” (Joyce, 2008, p.25). Renovating the side room involved the “running up of a little curtain” which Eily “had to hem” (O’Brien, 2013, p.79). In the fates of both Eily and Eveline, the house plays a conspiratorial role as ‘curtains’ become synonymous with entrapment and suffocation.

Vidler understands Freud’s “unhomeliness” as “the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarised, derealised, as if in a dream” (1992, p.7). With the loss of her hardworking daughter and the house deprived of Eily’s creativity and flair, her mother retreats further into introspection. Any prospect of building a new house has evaporated, and this woman who has never “stepped inside anyone else’s door” (O’Brien, 2013, p.78) seems to have become estranged from her own house with all its tribulation. Bricks and mortar have failed her; she is more at home in the natural world: “She liked the birds and in secret in her own yard made little perches for them, and if you please hung bits of coloured rags, and the shaving mirror for them, to amuse themselves by” (O’Brien, 2013, p.84).

Mezei and Briganti point out that “domestic space implies the everyday, the rituals of domesticity in their cyclical, repetitive ordinariness” (2002, p.842). Fiction that has its origins in the space of a house, they suggest, can “bestow literary value” (Mezei and Briganti, 2002, p.843) on domesticity as well as adding value to women’s lives. However, while the domestic world might be revalorised it remains the case that for countless women, the home and domesticity represent incarceration, with significant implications in terms of self-

determination. Paula Geyh emphasises the interdependence of subjectivity and space, referencing in particular Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* (1980), the story of two orphan sisters' progression to adulthood. Geyh's concern is the construction of female subjectivity and how the house is implicated in this process:

Space is not inert, a mere site or setting for the action of our lives and narratives, nor do subjectivities simply 'inhabit' spaces that exist independently of them, as some theorists seem to suggest. [...] subjectivity and space are mutually constructing: while subjects constitute themselves through the creation of spaces, these same spaces also elicit and structure subjectivities. (1993, pp.103-104)

Geyh discusses the development of female subjectivity in Robinson's novel and its emergence "through the processes of *housekeeping* and *unhousing*" (1993, p.105), effectively from the patriarchal house to uncharted territory outside any symbolic structures and constraints. Two orphaned sisters, who come into the care of their aunt Sylvie, are offered a mode of living which privileges the 'outdoors' over the 'indoors'. A consequence of this is that one sister, Lucille, elects to live with a domestic science teacher in town. When the authorities threaten to remove her sister Ruth, the aunt and Ruth set fire to the house and move off together to live itinerant lives. Geyh identifies two models of feminine subjectivity in Robinson's work, the *settled*, a continued existence within established cultural norms, and the *transient*, manifest through the rejection and ultimate burning of the family house. In O'Brien's work, the mothers trapped by unsatisfactory marriages and society's expectations are representative of the *settled*, while their daughters might be seen as *transient* in their struggle to free themselves from a past life in which the patriarchal family house is powerfully implicated.

The protagonists in 'The Love Object' and 'Paradise' may have carved out successful careers, but after a succession of failed relationships both are emotionally vulnerable. The two houses that feature in the texts, one chaotic and uncared for, the other a luxury holiday villa, function as actants in exposing the insecurities of the two women. In 'The Love Object',

on the morning after spending the night with her, Martha's new lover asks to use a clothes brush, at which point she admits to never having owned one: "I own books and records and various bottles of scent and beautiful clothes, but I never buy cleaning stuffs or aids for prolonging property" (O'Brien, 2013, p.170). Her decision to install central heating is not prompted by a desire to make the house cosy for her sons when they visit, but to indulge herself and her lover: "we liked walking around naked eating sandwiches and playing records" (O'Brien, 2013, p.170).

Holiday homes, like railway carriages or airports, are liminal places of transit, where the normal rules of engagement do not necessarily apply. In 'Paradise' a house party at her lover's villa in the sun proves to be an ordeal for the protagonist rather than a dream holiday, characterised as it is by anxiety and humiliation. While this is a luxury house, it is by no means a home; it would fail to meet the criteria identified and discussed earlier in this chapter. The setting has an air of unreality, destined to be immortalised in holiday photo albums rarely opened, and regularly displaced by new exciting trips; a perfect setting for this imperfect alliance. Out of her depth, she clings to a relationship that is as abusive as it is insubstantial. The fact she has agreed to take swimming lessons despite her fear of water is compounded by her profound insecurity as the newcomer in the party. Normal life has been put on hold for these holiday guests, and the idle chatter in which they indulge is inconsequential. Those most at ease amid the luxury are the servants, "women in black, with soft-soled shoes, all smiling, no complicity in any of those smiles" (O'Brien, 2013, p.337).

The housekeeper

had old-fashioned habits and resisted much of the modern kitchen equipment. [...] in the evenings when every task was done, the housekeeper sat in the back veranda with her husband, doing the mending. [...] Her husband made shapes from soft pieces of new white wood, and then in the dark put his penknife aside and caroused with his wife. (O'Brien, 2013, p.345)

In 'Rose' the daughter, now divorced and living in London, feels compelled to visit home. She "dreaded the summer holidays, but still she went" (O'Brien, 2013, p.157). The glories of

the countryside in summer enchant her: “The fields themselves as beguiling as ever, fields full of herbage and meadowsweet [...]. If only she could pick them up and carry them away” (O’Brien, 2013, p.157). However, “They sat indoors” (O’Brien, 2013, p.157). The house, so much part of their shared history, seems to demand their presence. It is a silent witness to the superficial chatter about dogs and the weather as the family fail to engage in the matter of feelings.

Having spent some years in America but now living in London, the narrator of ‘Shovel Kings’ is struggling to make sense of her life with regular visits to an analyst. Therapeutic support relies on a safe environment and trust between analyst and client. The narrator seems overly dependent on the therapist, who also appears to have an itinerant lifestyle. His move to “a less salubrious part of London” has a destabilising effect on her: “partly because I had left, as I saw it, fragments of myself behind in that other room” (O’Brien, 2013, p.402). She is rocked once more by the news of yet another move, this time to Bristol, raising questions about probity and professional competence. The traditional notion of home no longer serves. The world that Verschaffel identifies as “the old pre-modern world” has given way to a world no longer “made of centred and fixed meanings. [...] Modernity introduces exchange, movement and transport, change and openness, it induces the globalisation that weakens and deconstructs the home” (2002, p.154). There is resonance here with Sylvie and Ruth in *Housekeeping*, who under threat from the welfare authorities abandon a housed existence: “We are drifters. And once you have set your foot in that path it is hard to imagine another one” (Robinson, 2005, p.213). People, Verschaffel suggests, can become “‘nomadic subjects’ who at every moment can (re) define their position and belong nowhere – except exactly in that ‘in-transit-condition’” (2002, p.154).

This description seems particularly apt to describe the narrator and Rafferty, a retired labourer who, like thousands of his fellow Irishmen, left Ireland for work in England. The fact

that the two strike up an unlikely friendship after meeting in a pub on St Patrick's Day suggests that the state of being in transit transcends issues of gender. The narrator meets him again by chance: "I was on the Kilburn High Road outside a second-hand furniture shop, where he was seated on a leather armchair, smiling at passers-by like a potentate. He was totally at ease out in the open, [...] surrounded by chairs, tables, chests of drawers, fire-irons, fenders, crockery and sundry bric-à-brac" (O'Brien, 2013, p.404). This random assortment of domestic items, so unlike the miscellaneous ornaments in 'The Rug', subverts the notion of home. But John Berger challenges the notion that a house is essential to a home: "Home is no longer a dwelling but the untold story of a life being lived" (2005, p.64). He argues that home can be constituted through "Physical objects and places – a piece of furniture, a bed, the corner of a room, a particular bar, a street corner" (Berger, 2005, p.64). The fact that Rafferty is so obviously 'at home' suggests his itinerant life has left him with no place to call 'home'. The image of Rafferty sitting among the second-hand furniture recalls a scene in Raymond Carver's story 'Why Don't You Dance?' (1981) in which the protagonist is contemplating his furniture in the driveway, evidence of his broken marriage. Like Berger, Morley points out that 'feeling at home' is not always realised within bricks and mortar:

Home is not always symbolised by any physical container – whether suitcase, building or coffin. At times language and culture themselves provide the migrant with the ultimate mobile home. According to John Berger, in our contemporary mobile world, we need a much more plurilocal concept of home which, for many of the world's mobile population, may be inscribed not in a building or a territory but in "words, jokes, opinions, gestures, actions, even the way one wears a hat". (2000, p.46).

Undoubtedly it is language and culture that draws the two protagonists together. Here on the Kilburn High Road, with its surreal semblance of home, the narrator, in turn, becomes the therapist as Rafferty recounts the details of his life. When they meet next, she learns he has been offered a live-in job as a carer, a chance to return to his homeland. Back in Ireland Rafferty finds he does not fit in. Even in the pub, "It was noisy and brash, young people coming and going, no quiet corner to brood in, and no one had any interest in his stories"

(O'Brien, 2013, p.425). In London again and back in his little room, Rafferty resumes his old life. Wounded by the experience, he distances himself from the narrator as if in an effort to shore up a fragile identity: "He had cut me out, the way he had cut his mother out, and those few who were dear to him, not from a hardness of heart, but from a heart that was immeasurably broken" (O'Brien, 2013, p.426). Like the protagonists in 'Rose' and 'The Love Object', the characters have no secure sense of belonging. Unable to move on they are haunted by the past, which continues to compromise the present.

As this chapter has shown, the notion of home is complex and contradictory. It seems 'home' might be best understood as whatever can bestow a feeling of being at one with the world, whatever that world might be. What generates a sense of home depends on the connections and threads that in some way weave together to constitute something that might be called home. O'Brien's stories demonstrate just how difficult a process that can be.

CONCLUSION

This thesis is a timely contribution to the long-overdue critical assessment of Edna O'Brien's work. The close readings that underpin this study demonstrate unequivocally that O'Brien's chosen territory of home, motherhood and domesticity, and within that setting, a daring to be a sexual woman, has been consistently marginalised by critics. I believe that this study will help address the anomaly that while O'Brien's recent novels, *The Little Red Chairs* and *Girl*, have attracted interest and acclaim, the earlier work of this same fearless writer, championing the same uncompromising message of women's subjection, remains critically neglected.

The motivation for this study was a desire to explore what makes the short story form such a powerful genre. Reading O'Brien's short fiction has confirmed and deepened my appreciation of the form. This study attests to O'Brien's skill as a storyteller, but just as importantly, it also pays tribute to the courage and determination of a woman who by writing against the establishment ensured that women's lives did not remain written out of history. The importance of recovering voices from the past has been a crucial driver in the emergence of a broad spectrum of poststructuralist theories, including, among others, postcolonialism and feminism. When a text focuses on individuals and marginalised groups in society, it becomes embedded in the world, a result of which is that it can "destabilise the very notion of the world" (Bennett and Royal, 2004, p.28). O'Brien's fiction reminds readers that history is not linear but complex and shifting, always subject to review. Hilary Mantel views the past not as a closed chapter but as a dynamic entity with an enduring capacity to reveal new insights: "The past is not dead ground, and to traverse it is not a sterile exercise. History is always changing behind us, and the past changes a little every time we retell it" (2009). I suggest that fiction, and in particular the short story, is uniquely placed to reveal and redefine the omissions and anomalies of history. While there are those who have commented that O'Brien's approach to women's experience borders on the obsessive, it is important to acknowledge that, while the contexts may be different, there remain areas of

public and private life today where women continue to suffer sexual harassment and abuse. Most recently, under the banner of #MeToo, women collectively are taking a stand against unacceptable behaviour; voices that were either ignored or silenced through shame or fear of reprisal bear testimony to instances of abuse that hitherto went unchallenged. As O'Brien's fiction continues to challenge what is now deemed socially unacceptable so #MeToo articulates new thinking about past behaviours, holding individuals and institutions to account.

Some critics have accused O'Brien of a self-serving preoccupation with the dreariness of her protagonists' lives, but I have endeavoured to show the uncommon strengths of a narrative style that transcends what might appear to be unpromising terrain. Cleary asserts that "In Irish naturalist fiction, protagonists usually survive their deathly social condition only if they can escape or emigrate; to remain within or committed to the local community is to atrophy with it" (2004, p.207). But O'Brien's fiction reveals that to escape or emigrate guarantees no resolution; the damage has been done, and leaving Ireland does not automatically bring salvation.

A number of insights have emerged through my research. Understanding the social conditions in mid-twentieth-century Ireland, when a woman's role as wife, mother and homemaker was enshrined in both the Irish Constitution and Catholic ideology, brings added depth and potency to O'Brien's stories. A consequence of this compromised position was that rural households often condemned women to a life of drudgery, responsible for running the farm as well as caring for the children and looking after the house. As a society we cling to the notion of the home as protection, but under scrutiny every attribute can be shown to be fragile and vulnerable to attack. Mary Douglas describes the longstanding perception of home as a "relic of nineteenth-century romantic enthusiasm" where "both home and community are supposed to be able to draw on the same mysterious supply of loyal support" to sustain them (1991, p.51). This study has shown that the understanding of home as a place of safety can be jeopardised by the actions of its members. O'Brien's fiction confirms

this inherent capacity for disruption. Her stories depict the agents that threaten the home: violent husbands, improvidence, the tragic repercussions of a wild affair and, most poignantly, unfulfilled dreams of what 'home' might have been like in America. The tragic consequences of obsessive love are evidence of the home's complicity in stifling healthy development and hindering subjectification of daughters. This study has revealed a number of areas which I believe merit further examination. While the focus of my study has been O'Brien's women, many questions arise over the portrayal of her male characters, who include among their ranks a missionary, tyrannical and absentee fathers, a vagrant, a fraudster and a philanderer. Looking in detail at how men are characterised in O'Brien's short fiction may also offer insights into the tragicomic elements that are present in a number of her stories. I suggest that both these aspects of her writing would reward further study.

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