

When Family Love Strangles and Love Outside the Family Disappoints: The Irish Family in the Early Novels of Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien



Literature

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Abstract

This paper sets out to examine various representations of the patriarchal Irish family, constricting family ties, and the role of women within the family in Kate O'Brien's novels *The Ante-Room* (1934) and *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy* (*The Country Girls* (1960), *Lonely Girl* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964)). The paper attempts to demonstrate that in these works both authors more or less openly defy the Church-state conception of the ideal family and the ground tenets of Catholicism of their time. The aim of the analysis is to show that the novels represent the family as a highly repressive force which constantly supervises women and holds their desires in check throughout their lives.

No matter how much Kate O'Brien's heroines succeed in dissociating themselves from the story of the Irish family romance, they remain lodged within its confines.

(Fogarty, 1993, p. 116)

[Edna O'Brien] undermines the sanctity of the family by exposing its dysfunctions, highlighting its subsequent disintegration, and showing its repressive and, therefore, debilitating effects on women's psyche.

(Moloney and Thompson, 2003, p. 197)

Family life and family values always featured prominently in Irish public discourse throughout most of the last century. The nexus between Church and State never missed an opportunity to promote an unspoiled image of a country where the asexual and chaste Irish lived in big families, and where notions such as premarital sex, adultery or illegitimate children did not exist. Catholic chastity and a numerous family were fostered as the core of Irish society and were opposed to sexual immorality which was identified (and shunned) as English, foreign and deeply antithetical to Irishness. Catholic moral doctrines, especially those related to the family, divorce and contraception were finally incorporated into Irish legislation when a new Constitution came into force in 1937. One of the most contentious articles of the Constitution, article 41, clearly stated to what extent Church and State were focused on the ideology of family, but also to what extent Irish woman was subjected to the social force of both family and religion. Relegated solely to the private domestic space, "by her life within the home," Irish woman was supposed to give "to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved" (as cited in Boyle Haberstroh, 1996, p. 14).

Around the time of the passing of the infamous Constitution, Kate O'Brien published novels which certainly challenged these images of the ideal Irish family and the Catholic embodiment of ideal womanhood. Two of her early novels which will be analysed in this paper, *The Ante-Room* (1934) and *Mary Lavelle* (1936), feature young women who are deeply and painfully torn between forbidden love and duty. Set in the milieu of the late nineteenth-century middle-class Irish bourgeoisie, the former features Agnes Mulqueen who is in love with Vincent, her sister's husband. She struggles hard, however, never to get tempted to defy the authorities of family and religion and transgress the moral principles of her time. Agnes eventually remains loyal (that is, subjected) to her family and her beloved sister. On the other hand, the eponymous heroine of *Mary Lavelle*

decides to get involved in an illicit love affair in a foreign country despite the fact that she is already engaged. She thus goes along with her passion in the face of the severe punishment for the transgression of morally accepted behaviour. However, she herself forestalls the stigmatization of both her family and the intolerant Irish society by intentionally withdrawing from them. Both women thus seem to remain forever lodged within the suffocating confines of the patriarchal Irish family, as argued in the first epigraph.

Some thirty years later, Edna O'Brien published her proscribed *The Country Girls Trilogy* consisting of *The Country Girls* (1960), *Lonely Girl* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964). Edna O'Brien traces the coming-of-age of two best friends, Caithleen and Baba, in contemporary Ireland: their childhood in the rural West, education in a convent school and the expulsion due to inappropriate behaviour, moving to Dublin and later to London in search of a job, first loves and frustrating sexual experiences, failed marriages, extramarital affairs, and Caithleen's death. In her early fiction, Edna O'Brien demonstrates how the Church-state conception of the family simply fails in the lives of Irish women. In her novels, it is represented as an apparatus which certainly does not function when her protagonists are young girls and even less so when each of them starts a family of her own. The paper will therefore attempt to show that Edna O'Brien persistently and consistently challenges the sanctity of the family unit, as quoted above. Her representation of the family, as we will see later, is marked by highly repressive effects on women's lives. This paper will also attempt to demonstrate that one of Edna O'Brien's "girls", Caithleen, has much more in common with Kate O'Brien's more or less compliant heroines than with her subversive and astringent friend Baba. The complexities which Kate O'Brien's heroines and Caithleen come across when facing many restrictions imposed on them are not as different as they seem at first sight. Despite the fact that these novels are all set in different time periods, the confines of a small, patriarchal and Catholic society determine Caithleen's behaviour and her destiny almost as much as they do in the world of Kate O'Brien's heroines. The paper will therefore look more closely at how the patriarchal Irish family and constricting family ties supervised Irish women's lives and held their desires in check at the end of the nineteenth (*The Ante-Room*), at the beginning of the twentieth, in 1922 (*Mary Lavelle*) and in mid twentieth century (*The Country Girls Trilogy*).

Of all the novels under discussion here, it is probably Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-Room*, but also the first two novels of Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy*, which enact most graphically the repressive force of the Irish family at work. Kate O'Brien set the story of *The Ante-Room* in the late nineteenth-century, and thus managed to obfuscate the too obvious allusions to the Irish society of her time. Many critics have noted that in *The Ante-Room*, it is not Agnes Mulqueen's Catholic training as much as the influence of another social force -- family loyalty -- particularly an immensely affectionate relationship with her sister, Marie-Rose, that thwarts her attempts to achieve fulfilment and emotional happiness. The novel straddles both facets of loyalty so deeply intertwined and ingrained in Agnes that it is almost difficult to say which of the two acts in a more restrictive manner. Commenting on familism in Kate O'Brien's fiction, Anne Fogarty (1993) points out that it conveys not only "the plight of women who are fated to be trapped in domestic relations," but that it also acts as a "commentary on the closed and hierarchical nature of Irish society in the initial decades of the Free State" (p. 103). Since both her father and brother are bungling men totally unable to cope with their wife's/mother's fatal illness (as Mrs Mulqueen is on the deathbed dying of cancer), Agnes finds herself virtually in charge of the dismal household. Being the one on whom everything in the house "had come to depend entirely" (*AR*, p. 9), it is quite obvious that she is indeed trapped by their dependence on her unreserved devotedness to them and to their constant needs.

What is significant, however, is that despite this dull and tedious daily routine, Agnes never experiences family bonds as any kind of entrapment, but begins each day patiently, "crouched to receive the usual baggage of its day's march" (*AR*, p. 5). Continually burdened by "all the troubled souls under the roof" and desperate to

“find the way” (AR, p. 138) to alleviate everybody’s problems but her own, Agnes demonstrates how unselfishly she uses the power of prayer. As will be demonstrated later in the paper, the eponymous heroine of *Mary Lavelle* tries to break away from her family in Ireland by spending a year abroad, in Spain, and Edna O’Brien’s Caithleen consistently resists the demands of her abusive father and the misogyny of the small community. Agnes Mulqueen, on the other hand, never questions her subjection to family ideology. As a matter of fact, she does not recognize her loyalty to the family as any kind of subjection. She perceives it as a duty she needs to fulfil as a family member. Stressing this notion of duty, Agnes demonstrates how she envisages her life: “Here were Christian and social duty combining with sisterly love” (AR, p. 240), “My real duty is to God and Marie-Rose” (AR, p. 250). For all the frenzied interrogation of her conscience, strongly convinced that she has no other option in life, Agnes will probably forever remain a devout Catholic and an equally devout member of the Mulqueen family.

Lorna Reynolds (1987) comments that in the mid-thirties, the time when *The Ante Room* was published, “practically every girl saw herself in the role of Agnes, torn between love and duty.” However, she goes on to say, what really fixed the attention of such a girl was the realization that there never is a solution to a struggle between love and any other demand of the spirit, that a struggle of that kind puts its victim on a perpetual treadmill: and this realization is at once terrible and exalting; for, while it speaks of suffering, it also testifies to the power of human spirit. (p. 125)

Unlike Kate O’Brien’s later heroines unafraid to break social conventions, she is prepared to give up on love and her own happiness “at an immorally high price” (AR, p. 241). Agnes is not ready to upset the fragile balance within the family, or in other words, the strict order rules of her family. The overwhelming relationship between her and her older sister, Marie-Rose, is thus depicted as a bond so strong that cannot be in any way endangered, not even by a larger-than-life passionate love. As Adele Dalsimer (1990) suggests, in the world of O’Brien’s fiction, “outsiders cannot enter, insiders cannot leave” (p. xiii). Emma Donoghue (1993), on the other hand, comments on the special bond the sisters share and insists that a character like Agnes may feel somewhat “troubled by the excessive love for her sister,” but she adds that, “that love is not presented as in any way taboo” (p. 38). In this restricted world of the late nineteenth-century Irish bourgeoisie, it is certainly more tolerable to nurture passionate feelings for a sibling than for a potential lover.

However, the two sisters who are also best friends overtly stuck in their childhood reminiscences, seem to accept the stagnant quality of their lives – the sort of an *ante-room* in which they both live. Totally unaware that she is involved in a fatal triangle, the vain Marie-Rose cannot and does not want to face the breakdown of her marriage and resorts to keeping up appearances. Neither in 1880, the year in which the narrative is set, nor in 1934, when Kate O’Brien actually wrote the novel, could an unhappily married Irish woman (especially from upper-middle classes) escape her predicament. On the one hand, she experiences marriage and family life which she unsuccessfully constructs with her husband as oppressive. On the other hand, however, she relies wholeheartedly and somewhat selfishly on her family and her sister for moral and emotional support. At the same time, Agnes cannot realize a fulfilling life as woman, wife and mother since it would haplessly involve her beloved sister and her husband (who is also in love with Agnes), and her existence has thus been brought to a virtual standstill. It is more than obvious why the “insiders” in this novel cannot leave and start a life away from the suffocating family bonds.

However, claiming that the two sisters “so insulate each other that neither need ever grow up” (Dalsimer, 1990, p. 28) can be quite misleading. It is true that Agnes pampers Marie-Rose with this excessive sisterly love all through to the overtly tragic end of her marriage. Nevertheless, in the course of the three days

conveyed in the novel,¹⁰ well hidden from the eyes of the others, Agnes undergoes an excruciating coming of age process and indeed grows up. Although the *Bildung* of the main character in this novel is perhaps not as emphasized as in other Kate O'Brien's novels, especially in *Mary Lavelle*, it is nevertheless one of its relevant and unavoidable elements. Abel, Hirsch and Langland (1983) claim that "successful *Bildung* requires the existence of a social context that will facilitate the unfolding of inner capacities, leading the young person from ignorance and innocence to wisdom and maturity" (p. 5). They also mention that "women characters, more psychologically embedded in relationships, sometimes share the formative voyage with friends, sisters or mothers, who assume equal status as protagonists" (Abel et al., 1983, p. 12).

We can indeed trace Agnes's maturation from ignorance and innocence, a state we find her in before she is directly faced with the (im)possibility of the forbidden love, to wisdom she has acquired by the end of the novel. However, with the debilitating mother and the self-centred sister oblivious to what is going on around her, she goes through this formative voyage completely alone, without her closest female companion. In this respect, this stifling world and close family ties prove the perfect social context to facilitate the *Bildung* of the main character. A sacrificial daughter and sister, Agnes is compelled to come to terms with her desires and search for all the inner resources to suppress them once and for all. Although on the surface she remains as devout as ever, inwardly she has changed to such an extent that not only has she matured in the course of the three intense days but, ironically, she has also become a more disillusioned and unhappier young woman than she ever was before. Unlike Mary Lavelle whose illicit passion, as we will see later, also threatens her main roles and duties in life, but who nevertheless decides on her own to get carried away by it, Agnes is willing to stick and comply with the limiting social norms of traditionalist Irish society. A disappointing twist at the close of the novel, in the form of Vincent's suicide brought about by Agnes's rejection, only undermines her hard and moral decision not to choose love but to simply pursue a stagnant existence of a loyal adherent to religion and her family. Vincent's suicide, as unexpected as Theresa Mulqueen's death would be expected in a household imbued with the sense of death and decay, resolves Agnes's (Marie-Rose's as well) torture in a rather artificial and disappointing manner. On a symbolical level, the fact remains that in the stalemate ante-room in which the Mulqueens live, love just cannot thrive and is always doomed to die or. As Adele Dalsimer (1990) points out, "family love strangles, love outside the family disappoints" (p. 21)

Whereas Agnes does not experience familial bonds in terms of oppression, Mary Lavelle in *Mary Lavelle* is a character who seems to understand these bonds well and in effect find the way to eschew them. She is very much willing to act out and change conditions of life:

To go to Spain. To be alone for a little space, a tiny hiatus between her life's two accepted phases. To cease being a daughter without immediately becoming a wife. To be a free lance, to belong to no one place or family or person – to achieve that silly longing of childhood, only for one year, before she flung it with all other childish things upon the scrapheap. (*ML*, p. 30)

Mary is surprisingly determined to "fly by the nets" of the family, to use the words of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus. In order to successfully do so, she feels that she must go as far as to even leave her native country to work as a governess. Irish society and the Irish family confine her to the identity she is not yet, and perhaps not ever, ready to accept and she thus flees to a place much more exotic than Ireland - Spain. This transference from being a daughter to becoming a wife is a process that Mary clearly wants to postpone. She knows that this short period of time she will spend in a foreign country will allow her to taste a more spontaneous way of life unburdened by the family or any other control. She is aware that it might offer her a kind of life which will not

¹⁰ The novel takes place at the end of October and the beginning of November, over the three Catholic feast days concerned with dead: the Eve of All Saints, the Feast of All Saints and the Feast of All Souls.

require playing any social role other than that of being herself. Although already engaged to be married to a “decent” young man and in this way conforming to the social conventions of the time, she is not at all exalted about the idea of marriage: “Mary, in fact, mooned not at all about married life” (*ML*, p. 111). Mary Lavelle does not want to rush into it as she intuitively feels that she will be no less controlled by her husband than she was controlled by her father and her family. She is aware that the life of a married woman, wife and mother will most probably hold her desires in check. Her (un)surprising hesitancy about marriage and a wish to be “a free lance” is thus strangely at odds with the ruling ideology of the young independent state which strictly defines the identity of woman and the course her life should take. It is therefore significant that it is not so much the role of a daughter that she wants to get away from (like Caithleen in *The Country Girls Trilogy*, as we will see) but her becoming somebody’s wife the moment she returns to Ireland.

What seems to be subtly running throughout the novel is the notion of her fiancé, a man “she could safely say she loved” (*ML*, p. 108), as one of the dominating authorities she has been subjected to in Ireland. The character of John is constantly associated to some kind of oppression. In this light, it is no wonder that he comes across as a rather condescending and dull man to whom she bashfully rationalizes and even apologizes for her decision to take some “time off” in a letter at the outset of the novel:

“I’ll be quite happy here, and I’ll learn Spanish and get to know something about the world – or a bit of it. Which will be no harm, will it? I know you think me rather a fool – so perhaps foreign life – you could hardly call it foreign travel – will improve my mind for you. Dearest, I hope it will. You are so good and brainy that it seems cruel to plan to marry you – and make things even harder they seem to improve. But I want to marry you – so what can I do except promise to be a good wife?” (*ML*, p. 10)

Mary addresses her fiancée as if she were addressing the higher authority of a father or a teacher. She justifies her seemingly unreasonable decision and constantly belittles herself. She thus clearly demonstrates how she relates to him, but she also unromantically places his love for her and their whole relationship next to the exigencies of the family apparatus. Positioning herself in the role of a woman whose intelligence cannot ever match the superiority of man’s mind but might be perhaps “improved” by travelling abroad, she shows awareness of the fact that as an Irish woman she is completely subjugated to the authority of man. It is exactly this subtle but disturbing awareness that makes her want to avoid the control of her future husband and before settling down, experience something new which will not be policed by anyone or anything. When she eventually falls in love with another man who is already married, it represents the culmination of her “emotional surrender” to Spain. She is about to realize that what she feels for Juanito “is not reasonable or manageable; that unlike her feeling for John, it has nothing to do with social convention or conformity or tradition. It cannot be legislated and is only with difficulty restrained” (Ingman, 2007, p. 106). Torn between her engagement to John and the newly found passion for Juanito, she is, just like Agnes Mulqueen, torn between duty and forbidden love. She feverishly interrogates her inner self and makes plans for premature return to Ireland where “the old rules were absolute” (*ML*, p. 208). Learnt to be unquestioningly obedient to the fixtures of the Church, state and family, Mary is now simply at a loss as to know how to handle this wild new sensation. However, her decision to go a step further and subvert not only the role of a dutiful daughter-soon-to-become-a-wife but also the sanctity of marriage, comes as no surprise.

An “individualist who does not mind temporising” (*ML*, p. xv), Mary finally lives her life in Spain more spontaneously than ever. She knows at the same time that her “loose” behaviour will forever cut her off from fitting into the image of the family so heavily promoted by the Irish state and church. Mary consciously takes on a role of someone who not only trespasses on the forbidden ground of someone else’s marriage and family but also consciously deprives herself of ever achieving a fulfilled and meaningful married life in Ireland. Totally getting away from the normative restrictions of her home country, she is “now at odds with her nation’s view of

womanhood where the sexual purity of the Irish woman guarantees the purity of the nation” (Ingman, 2007, p. 106). Deeply aware of her predicament, of turning into a woman who, ironically, now truly belongs to “no one place or family or person” (*ML*, p. 225), Mary decides to go back to Ireland where she knows she will be surveyed again and perforce punished for her stray conduct. Agnes Mulqueen in *The Ante-Room* does everything in order to suppress her desires so as not to disrupt the seeming harmony of the otherwise strictly defined familial bonds. Needless to say, she thus remains unhappy and unfulfilled. Mary Lavelle seems at first sight to be the character with more options in life, especially when we bear in mind her strong will to get away from Ireland and the concerns of the tight-knit community. However, her relation to the constrictions and ideological boundaries of her native country proves far too overwhelming and not surprisingly decides the rest of her, most probably, very lonely life. Mary consciously runs away from the only way of life a young woman was expected to live at the time. She dismisses both poles of existence: a good and obedient wife on the one hand, and a woman who would be considered no less than a whore if she stayed in an illicit relationship, on the other. Mary goes into the self-imposed exile and is not very likely to ever start a family of her own.

It seems that Edna O’Brien’s Caithleen Brady in *The Country Girls Trilogy* lacks the emotional maturity and decisiveness that both Kate O’Brien’s heroines possess. Mary Lavelle consciously decides to come clean to her fiancé about the affair, and then leave her home town to face an unforeseeable future on her own. For the sake of her family and her faith, Agnes Mulqueen remains forever subjected to these forces and renounces love. If we compare *The Ante-Room* to *The Trilogy*, we can argue that the control that the Irish family exercises in Kate O’Brien’s novel is shown as a rather subtle and restrained mechanism which individuals do not even recognize as repressive. In Edna O’Brien’s trio of novels, however, it is demonstrated as highly aggressive and narrow-minded. It is also the motif of death that may connect these novels. Although it is not the heroine but her forbidden lover who dies at the close of *The Ante-Room*, death as the only escape from the subjugation to the suffocating Irish family culture functions prominently in the works of both authors. Besides, it could be argued that Edna O’Brien’s Caithleen, who drowns in a health farm pool, also experiences both sides of love, as it were. Long before she herself learns about how love can be as disappointing as in the world of Kate O’Brien’s heroines, she is smothered with and spoiled by her mother’s over-protectiveness. As Mrs Brady is an extremely submissive woman trapped in a miserable marriage with a violent alcoholic husband, it is no wonder that, as Eileen Morgan (2000) claims “by early adolescence Caithleen has learned to mimic her mother’s behaviour” (p. 461). What her mother passes on to her is a rather detrimental heritage: excessive dolefulness and obedience. Part and parcel of every Irish woman’s identity, it is no wonder that it remains forever imprinted in her mind as an unwritten rule of moral behaviour. Morgan adds that Caithleen is unable to see “her circumstances in terms other than those by which her mother lives – that is to say, her unquestioning acceptance of the twin roles of victim and romantic heroines.” She goes on to say:

Instead of analyzing their conditions, young Irish women learned to perceive them through the lens of romance, and consequently to trust their well-being and happiness to men. Of course, in a society that restricts women’s rights and access to power as severely as early postcolonial Ireland did, dependence on men is practicably inevitable. (Morgan, 2000, p. 462)

It is only after the final collapse of her own marriage during which Caithleen is constantly oppressed by a sadistic man that she starts to analyze and question the true nature of her relationship to, and the influence of her mother. As if regaining sight after many years of blindness, Caithleen suddenly sees “that woman in a different light. A self-appointed martyr. A blackmailer. Stitching the cord back on. Smothering her one child in loathsome, sponge-soft, pamper love. ... For days she went around hating her mother, remembering her minutest fault” (*CGT*, p. 476-477). Love-turned-hate towards her dead mother acts as the final step in Caithleen’s awakening and understanding of her predicament. Her dead mother’s legacy combined with the uneasy

relationship she has had with her father throughout her life certainly shape the frail girl's coming of age and her female identity. As a matter of fact, it is not easy to discern which of the two parents has had a more harmful influence on Caithleen's existence -- is it her dead mother whose haunting presence, as it were, is strongly felt through Caithleen's emulation of her conduct, or her violent and abusive father who breathes down her neck, especially in the first two books of the trilogy.

However, when Baba, the other "girl" and Caithleen's best friend, comments on Caithleen's life and tragic end in the Epilogue, she argues sardonically that it is her father who is actually "the crux of her dilemma" (*CGT*, p. 531) and seems not to be not too far from the truth. Caithleen's father who functions here as an extension of extremely bigoted and patriarchal but powerful Ireland is contrasted to fathers in Kate O'Brien's fiction, who are all kind and gentle but in effect almost completely incompetent men. Even Baba's father in *The Country Girls Trilogy*, a village doctor, is represented as a too good man who constantly indulges his frustrating wife and spoilt children and is in return totally disrespected by them. In *The Ante-Room*, Agnes's father, Danny Mulqueen, is at a loss as to how to cope with his wife's illness, and shares a stagnant existence with all the other members of the family. He is in a way emasculated and relegated to a supporting role, both within the Mulqueen household and in the novel. Mary Lavelle's father, a good-hearted doctor, "inefficient and bored" (*ML*, p. 21), is almost totally absent from the story (although the novel opens with Mary's letter to him). His role is replaced by her fiancé, John, a kind of strict fatherly supervisor.

Caithleen, on the other hand, does not seem capable of shaking off her father's influence on her choices in life. One of the first images O'Brien offers at the outset of *The Country Girls Trilogy* is that of the young Caithleen dreading her father's coming home in one of his violent moods after a three day drinking binge: "Would he stumble upon the stone steps at the back door waving a bottle of whiskey? Would he shout, struggle, kill her, or apologize?" (*CGT*, p. 6-7). This is the world of subdued yet constant fear, but also of a totally dysfunctional family life that is going to be enacted throughout all three novels. Desperate to escape the heavy restrictions imposed on her from early childhood, Caithleen does everything to defy her father's bigoted and blinkered ways. The odd relationship with Mr Gentleman who is much older than her and whose very nickname stands in sharp opposition to her father's aggressiveness, proves only a temporary father-figure escape from the oppressive atmosphere in which she has grown up. When this weird romance ends as Caithleen's lover suddenly backs off threatened by her father, her overtly romantic and naive hopes are not at all thwarted. Wanting to get away as far as possible from the "decent" life her father and zealous moralists from her village envisage for her, she mindlessly rushes into yet another doomed relationship with a director Eugene Gaillard who has already been married.

Nevertheless, no matter how hard she tries to escape parental control, she always gets caught, as it were. In the eyes of prudish Ireland, she is an Irish virgin led astray by Eugene, a wicked non-Catholic man, and should be straightened out as soon as possible. His daughter's turning into an "immoral" young woman is his worst fear come true, and in a response to this horrid realisation Caithleen's father again resorts to aggressively gaining control over her life and hauls her back to her native village. His sentence, "You'll meet a nice boy yet, one of your own kind" (*CGT*, p. 251), sums up all the aspirations of the conservative tight-knit community in mid-century Ireland. The way he thinks he should "discipline" and punish his daughter for misbehaviour illustrates best the repressive force of the mid-century Irish family. A marriageable Catholic girl like Caithleen should perform fit into the image that is constructed for her, or else she will be punished for not obeying the unwritten laws of the patriarchal community. Although burdened by her mother's doleful behaviour, Caithleen mainly tries to resist conforming to this image fostered by the Church and state, and thus more inadvertently than intentionally challenges the control of Catholic Ireland in the pursuit of love.

In this context, Eugene Gaillard, Caithleen's husband, is of course seen as the embodiment of wickedness, as that disconcerting factor which opposes the strictly defined construction of relationship and marriage within a rural community. In a word, he represents anything other than a suitable match for a "nice" Catholic Irish girl. Michelle Woods argues that in describing Caithleen and Eugene's relationship and later marriage, O'Brien largely draws on her own experience of the failed marriage with a novelist Ernest Gebler. She suggests that Eugene is in fact a fictionalized version of Gebler. Referring to Eugene's French-Jewish origins, she points out that "foreignness is the kernel of O'Brien's portrayal of Kate's relationship with Eugene Gaillard. ... it is this, and not Gaillard's stature as an older and established artist, that attracts Kate, who sees in his foreignness an escape from the future her father wants to impose on her" (Woods, 2006, p. 58). In this light, when she is eventually rejected by Eugene after the collapse of their marriage, her plight seems far more tragic. Heather Ingman (2007) points out that Eugene, just like her father, keeps trying to pull her back into the "simple" identity of an Irish country girl which is the image he constructed for her. Needing her to be this, he rejects her when she turns out to be more complicated. For not conforming to a stable category of womanhood, Kate has been rejected three times – by her country, by her family and now by her husband. (p. 44)

It turns out that both her violent father and her sadistic husband try to discipline her, and when they fail, they punish her by rejecting her as an outcast. Caithleen is punished by both her families, as it were, for being unable to "properly" subject herself to the authorities of the father and later the husband. Eugene is as a tyrannical husband as her father, as his love for her resembles "Mr Brady's in its sadistic assertion of authority over the powerless" (Peterson, 2006, p. 158). He is therefore oddly and ironically juxtaposed with the repressiveness of Catholicism and familism. It is significant that in the last book of *The Country Girls Trilogy*, *Girls in the Married Bliss*, Caithleen's father is never mentioned any more. Since she marries Eugene at the outset of the novel, she virtually substitutes one aggressive man for another. The family apparatus proves equally oppressive for Caithleen after she symbolically leaves one family to start a family of her own. Her sardonic remark upon finally realizing that their marriage is over and that her husband was seriously mistreating her all along sums up perfectly the true nature of their relationship: "His little dictatorship demanded a woman like her – weak, apologetic, agreeable" (*CGT*, p. 455).¹¹ A divorced woman now and an outcast rejected by everybody except for her friend Baba, Caithleen thus comes full circle. The image of a shy teenager, afraid of what her alcoholic father might do next to her mother or herself, turns into the image of a disillusioned young woman, weighed down by the idea that the family and marriage bliss are for her virtually non-existing categories.

It turns out that the urban family of the more and more liberating sixties exerts no less control and pressure on women than a conservative rural family, typical for Ireland of the forties and fifties. Therefore, I do not agree with Mary Burke (2006) who suggests that an insistence on the absolute link between Catholicism and ... Irish women's oppression in her early fiction fails to note that she un-tethers this subjugation from Irish culture by depicting the continuation of Kate and Baba's troubles *after* they move to London in the 1960s, a secular metropolis at the heart of the new culture of liberation. (p. 226)

What Burke fails to note is that Caithleen and Baba's troubles continue *despite* their moving to London in the early sixties, as both girls carry on behaving in much the same way in London as they did back in Dublin. On the one hand, Caithleen marries Eugene after the on-again-off-again relationship they had in Ireland, and on the other hand, Baba marries a rich Irishman who is as conservative and prejudiced as if he never ever left his native country.

¹¹ This sentence almost brings to mind Sylvia Plath's famous lines from her poem "Daddy" which illustrate the oppressor-victim relationship between man and woman: "Every woman adores a fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you." (Plath, 1985, p. 49)

In spite of living outside Ireland, both women are dangerously trapped in their own botched constructions of what love, sex and family life should be like.¹² It is therefore not so surprising that divorce, a long awaited legal means of liberation for many unhappily married and abused Irish women, in the context of *The Country Girls Trilogy* is not perceived as such. Following in the footsteps of her mother who had no other option but to stick obediently to the bad marriage and a violent husband (“Divorce is worse than murder,” my aunt had always said (*CGT* p. 260)), Caithleen is desperate to salvage her marriage no matter how discontented and miserable she is in it. She is unable to perceive divorce as an opportunity that might actually offer her an escape from her deadlock and a new start in life. Unsurprisingly, she never really recuperates from it.¹³ Her tragic death some twenty years later after numerous attempts to start a meaningful relationship and hopefully a new marriage symbolically underscores her frantic and continual desire to comply to the construction of the ideal Irish family.

There are no happy endings for the women in Kate O’Brien’s and Edna O’Brien’s early fiction as neither of them is able to achieve fulfilment and emotional happiness. It seems that there is no escape from the constrictions and control of the Irish family. Edna O’Brien’s Caithleen ends up a hapless divorcee deprived of custody of her small son and later drowns in a pool. She simply replaces one repressive family for another, a violent father for a violent husband, and thus inevitably perpetuates oppression and subjugation throughout her life. Remaining loyal to her sister and the Mulqueen family, Agnes in *The Ante-Room* is stuck in a stagnant life as possibly the most miserable of heroines in Kate O’Brien’s fiction: “There was no hope or courage anywhere now. Only starvation.” (*AR* p. 274). As opposed to Agnes or Caithleen, Mary Lavelle seems to have succeeded in disengaging herself from her family and the concerns of the tight-knit community, if only for a brief period of time. In a way, Mary totally opposes the aspirations of Edna O’Brien’s “country girls” who are anxious to experience the happily-ever-after “marriage bliss” and start their own families as soon as possible. Aware that she will be perforce punished for “tasting” freedom in Spain, however, she eventually goes into a self-imposed exile away from the loved ones, probably feeling as hopeless and dejected as her counterparts in *The Ante-Room* and *The Country Girls Trilogy*. The protagonists of these novels eventually get punished for deliberately or inadvertently straying from the morally accepted behaviour of their time and the precepts of the Irish family.

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¹² Baba Brennan, the other “country girl”, may be observed in complete contrast to Caithleen and Kate O’Brien’s women, and that is why the analysis of her character is beyond the scope of this paper. This defiant gold-digger is unafraid to go on blatantly disrupting the family-centred vision of Ireland: after having a one-night stand and getting pregnant, she continues to have affairs, constantly cheats on her bigoted and violent husband, and always finds the way to go about things. It seems that neither the oppressive family life nor the disintegration of the traditional Irish family has too debilitating effects on her life and her psyche.

¹³ Divorce, part of her mother’s strictly forbidden vocabulary, now becomes Caithleen’s reality, but only because she lives in England. Unlike Ireland where it was legalized only at the turn of the twenty-first century, in England, it was legalized as early as 1857.

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