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Faith and mystery in Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-Room*



*In her novel *The Ante-Room*, Kate O'Brien displays a palpable appreciation of the mystery that lies at the heart of Catholicism, writes Eamon Maher*

Kate O'Brien (1897-1974) is a writer who throughout her career remained fascinated by issues related to her Catholic faith. She arrived in UCD at a time of simmering tension in the wake of the 1916 Rising: "I came up to Dublin still smoking from Easter Week. The first European War was on, and all general conditions were sad and miserable."¹

One of the distinguishing features of O'Brien's work is her ability to situate Irish Catholicism in a European context. Because of her knowledge of French and Spanish literature and culture, she was well placed to see that Ireland's insular, repressive Catholicism was at quite a remove from developments on the continent. While she could be critical of certain aspects of Irish Catholicism, she was nevertheless very attached to her faith. The difference between her and most other Catholics of her generation was the intellectual grasp she had of the most complex areas of theology and dogma. Her education by the nuns in Laurel Hill convent in Limerick, so memorably recounted in *The Land of Spices* (1941), also left an indelible mark. O'Brien's portrayal of nuns is unfashionably positive: she appreciated the manner in which they instilled confidence in their girls and how they urged them not to be afraid to take up a profession after leaving school.

Twists and turns of life

The Ante-Room (1934) is O'Brien's second novel and follows the

highly successful *Without My Cloak*. The fortunes of the well-to-do Catholic Considine family form the basis of the first novel. At the beginning of *The Ante-Room* it is revealed that Teresa Considine, married to Danny Mulqueen, is dying of cancer. She would be more resigned to her plight if it wasn't for the fact that her death will deprive her son, Reggie, ravaged by syphilis, of her love and guidance:

'Reggie was 36, wasted, unhappy, dangerous – dependent for his own decency and for his whole interest in life on his devotion to her – and she was leaving him – and God had not answered her yet or told her where he was to turn then, so that he would do no harm in his weakness, and yet be a little happy, a little less than desolate.'²

The novel traces the many conflicts that arise as the characters struggle with the twists and turns that life throws at them. Teresa's maternal concern for the 'black sheep' of the family is a natural one. What she fails to realise, however, is that her two daughters, Marie-Rose and Agnes, are also in need of nurturing. Marie-Rose is in an unhappy marriage to the handsome but weak Vincent de Courcy O'Regan.

The real dilemma occurs when Agnes and Vincent find themselves trapped within the four walls of Roseholm, the Mulqueens' residence, during the Triduum of Masses that Canon Considine, the sick woman's brother, organises in the hope of securing an unlikely cure. Agnes is very attached to her sister and knows that there can be no future in her own strong feelings for Vincent. But his presence in the house at a time of such emotional turmoil is, to say the least, discomfiting. In order to participate fully in the Triduum, Agnes decides to go to confession. After benediction, she waits in the church to rid herself of her sins.

Examination of conscience

The classic scene in the novel, in my opinion, is the examination of conscience Agnes undergoes before her confession to a Jesuit. She is very au fait with the main tenets of her faith. She questions how it can be a sin to fall in love: is it not just a quirk of fate over which she has no control? She soon faces up to the fact that her main sin is against her sister, Marie-Rose, who loves and trusts her completely. She reaches the following conclusion in relation to her conduct: 'The common sin against the ninth commandment, enhanced by all the pitiful complications of sister love.' (p.80) She forces herself to face up to the reality of her situation and at no time indulges in self-deception: 'Faith, a cold thing, a fact – that was what she must use to destroy fantasy.' (p.84)

On entering the confessional, she outlines her sin, stating that while she has strong feelings for Vincent she not given in to her inclinations or spoken to him of her feelings. The Jesuit is impressed with her lucidity and gives her what he considers to be solid advice: earthly love is transient, 'whereas in the search for God, in the idea of God, there is matter for eternity.' (p.89) Declan Kiberd sees in this comment an illustration of the dogma 'that accorded with the life-denying Jansenism much favoured in 1880s Ireland.'³

The novel is set during the late 19th century, at a time when there was a significant amount of distrust in relation to sexuality and its incompatibility with the state of grace (we saw how prominent this philosophy was in Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux* in last month's article). The priest's words will subsequently be seen by Agnes as devoid of solace in her struggle to resist Vincent.

Immediately after confession, however, she does feel as though she might have the strength to resist the attractions of her brother-in-law who is due to arrive with Marie-Rose later that evening. Agnes is also relieved that she will now be in a position to receive Communion at the Triduum of Masses for her mother:

'She had done what her belief exacted, and here, without fuss or probing, was the immediate reward – the cold comfort which assured her with gentle contempt that everything dies except the idea of God – even sin itself, being more mortal than the sinner.' (p.90)

Awareness of sin

There was an acute awareness of sin among Irish Catholics at the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. As Louise Fuller observes: 'Sins had to be confessed in detail, as well as the number of times they had been committed. There was a very real fear of dying in a state of mortal sin and thus losing eternal salvation.'⁴

Agnes was wary of giving in to her passion for Vincent because of the threat it posed to both her spiritual well-being and her relationship with her sister. But the sight of Vincent, his physical proximity and the thought of what it would be like to be held in his loving embrace, especially in the depressing atmosphere that pervades Roseholm, all of this prompts Agnes to remark ruefully: 'Yes, Holy Jesuit, that's all very fine. But we aren't made in the most convenient form in which to pursue ideas, and we have no notion at all of how to front eternity.' (p.200)

Vincent's suggestion that they run away and start a new life together, although attractive, is not sufficiently powerful to persuade Agnes to ignore her familial responsibilities and her religious beliefs. She is a stronger character than Vincent who is seeking in Agnes a replacement for his dead and much regretted mother. In spite of her virtuousness, she receives little reward for her loyalty within the family circle. Reggie becomes attracted to his mother's nurse, Miss Cunningham, and it soon becomes apparent that he intends to marry her. That will jeopardise Agnes's position in Roseholm after her mother's death. Mrs Mulqueen, for her part, feels as though her prayers have been answered: 'at the eleventh hour, with no powers left her but those of faith and sentiment, [she] was purely happy, entirely and childishly grateful to God [...] because her ruined son would have a custodian when she was gone.' (p.288)

Agnes is offered the choice of a comfortable life with her mother's doctor, Curran, but she rebuffs his declarations of love, in spite of the fact that a relationship with him would pose no moral deviation on her part. The end of the novel is full of incident: Teresa Mulqueen dies; Vincent takes his own life when Agnes refuses to flee Roseholm with him,

Reggie proposes to Nurse Cunningham, and Dr Curran despairs of ever winning Agnes's heart. Catholicism is constantly to the fore. Canon Considine offers the sacrifice of the Mass to an enraptured congregation in Roseholm:

'Silence relaxed into quietude. God was present; the room and the morning were full of peace. The Latin murmuring of the priest, the holy sighs of old Bessie (the cook), [...] softly relaxing tension, brought back its human reality to each consciousness, though keeping it mercifully illumined by the miracle in which it was participant.' (p.175)

Such a description could not be provided by a writer who was not familiar

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with the symbolic power of the Mass. There is a palpable appreciation on the part of O'Brien of the mystery that lies at the heart of Catholicism. Thus, as they recite the 'Holy, Holy, Holy' in preparation for receiving Holy Communion, 'they reached the quietest moment of their faith, a moment so still that bells must ring and sometimes guns must sound to make it humanly bearable.' (p.173) Like John McGahern, whom she befriended when he was a young writer, Kate O'Brien remained attached to the rituals of her Catholic religion, long after she had ceased practising. *The Ante-Room* is as close as we have come in Ireland to producing a 'Catholic Novel.' It is well worth reading for that fact alone, but it has the added advantage of being beautifully written and of providing an array of fascinating characters. ✚

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1. Kate O'Brien, "As to University Life", in *University Review*, Vol. 1, No. 6, 1955, p.6
2. *The Ante-Room* (London: Virago, 1989), p.17. All subsequent references will be to this edition with the page number in brackets
3. Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta Books, 2000), p.565
4. Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill&Macmillan, 2004), p.21