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# Catholic Sensibility in the Early Fiction of Edna O'Brien

EAMON MAHER

**E**DNA O'BRIEN (1930–) seems to have been with us forever. The stir caused by the publication and subsequent banning of *The Country Girls* trilogy in the 1960s, which will form the focus of this article, made O'Brien a figure of dissent, a reputation that was enhanced by her fiery interviews and flaming red hair. She was very vocal about how backward Irish society was in the 1960s, especially in its attitude to women, an attitude that was often promulgated by a highly influential Catholic Church in Ireland at this time. The 1960s would herald a challenge to such patriarchal views, something that can be seen in the examination of women's rights in the home and the workplace as overseen by the establishment of the Commission for the Status of Women in the 1960s, and the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s. So change was afoot and writers like Edna O'Brien were to the forefront in bringing to public attention the travails endured by many Irish women as a result of prejudice and inequality.

In many ways, O'Brien's tumultuous personal life is reflected in the experiences that confront her characters. Her decision to marry the writer Ernest Gébler against her parents' wishes in 1954, and her subsequent divorce from the same man in 1964, ensured that she was rarely out of the media spotlight. Gébler was jealous of his wife's success and tried to undermine her achievements, claiming at one point that it was he who had written *The Country Girls*, and the life of the couple

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and their two children, Carlo (a successful writer also) and Sasha, in London was far from idyllic. A fraught family situation, communication difficulties, petty jealousies, lack of financial independence, bringing up a family while trying to pursue a literary career, an absence of family support, O'Brien experienced all these obstacles at first hand, which is why she produces such an authentic, some would say, pessimistic, canvass of male-female relationships.

Born in Tuamgraney, County Clare, and educated by the Sisters of Mercy in the 1940s, Edna was the youngest child of a highly Catholic family. The scandal caused by her marriage and the condemnation of her books from the pulpit in the 1960s would not have gone down well at home.

When re-reading these novels with the benefit of hindsight, as I have done recently, one wonders what all the hype was about. O'Brien does depict young women coming of age, experimenting with sex and alcohol, but the main thing they are looking for is romantic love. Unfortunately, neither Cait (later referred to as Kate) Brady nor Baba Brennan ever experience fulfilment in their quest for love. Instead they end up marrying abusive and controlling husbands who fail to give them any happiness.

#### DISCOVERING YOUR AUTHENTIC SELF

In many ways I think that Edna O'Brien was a lot less subversive than her namesake Kate, whose characters look on sexuality as a transformative experience, something that helps them to discover their authentic selves.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of *Girls in their Married Bliss*, the final novel of *The Country Girls* trilogy, Kate and Baba are disillusioned with sex and no longer see any hope of finding their soul mate. The following lines describe how Kate feels after spending the night with a man she met at a party in London:

Out in the street the stars, if there had been any, had vanished and the light was deepening from dun-grey to a tenuous satin blue; blue light touching the slates of the high houses, approaching windows,

1. We will address this point in greater detail later in the article.

behind which people slept and had made love or had dreamed of having made love or had turned over to avoid the face and breath of some hated bed-companion. People were strange and unfathomable. As well as being desperate. He [man with whom she had slept] would be relieved to find her gone.<sup>2</sup>

So despondent is she with marriage and motherhood (her husband Eugene has absconded with their son Cash to Fiji) that Kate decides to have herself sterilized. She knows what it feels like to be hopelessly in love, the central focus of a man's life, and then 'a hated bed-companion', a figure of contempt, a target for criticism and denigration. The impression that the reader is left with at the end of the trilogy is one of entrapment and impotence for women who fail to conform to the dictates of society. Rebel and be punished, stray from the norm and you will be alienated, these appear to be the harsh lessons that Kate and Baba are taught.

#### COMFORT OF RELIGION?

And what about religion as a source of comfort to the two women? Well, it plays a very minor role in their lives. It is a tool used by their parents to keep them in line. When Cait's father discovers that she is carrying on with a married man, he visits her lodgings in Dublin and forcibly brings her home. When she escapes and goes to stay with her soon-to-be lover Eugene Gaillard, her father arrives at the house with a posse of men, all of whom have consumed copious amounts of alcohol, and commences interrogating Eugene. After hearing Gaillard state that he is not a Catholic, Cait's father rather stupidly asks if he goes to Mass and does he eat meat on Fridays. In an effort to calm things down, Eugene suggests that they have some tea. When he leaves the room, Cait, hiding under a bed in the sitting room, listens to some of the exchanges between the men:

'Look at the bloody nose of him – you know what he is? They'll be running the bloody country soon', Andy said.

2. Edna O'Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 151. First published by Jonathan Cape in 1964. The Penguin edition is the one we will be using for citations.

'God 'tis a bloody shame, ruining a girl like that,' Andy said, and I thought how baffled they'd be if they had known that I was not seduced yet, even though I had slept in his bed for two whole nights.<sup>3</sup>

From the comments he makes and the questions he asks, it is clear that Cait's father's primary concern is the prospect of this liaison being a source of scandal to the family. Andy's comments in the quote above focus on Eugene's assumed Jewish background and consequent immorality. The irony is that nothing untoward has happened between the couple up to this point. This is largely due to the fact that Cait is troubled by the prospect of full-blown sex and prefers kissing and holding hands.

When the visitors discover that Eugene and Cait are not prepared to fall in line with their plans, they resort to violence and are only prevented from inflicting serious harm to Eugene by the sudden entrance of the housekeeper Maura, who fires a shotgun and disperses the hooligans. Eugene thinks of his future wife's father and friends as a bunch of uncivilised barbarians and, if truth be known, he has similar disdain for Cait. In response to a question from her as to whether he believes in God, Eugene offers the following enigmatic response:

'Not when I'm sitting at my own fire. I may do when I'm doing eighty miles an hour. It varies.' I thought it a very strange answer, altogether. (*Girl with Green Eyes*, p.125)

#### DEPENDENCE

Eugene is a type of *faux* intellectual who sees himself as a great liberal and yet who deprives Cait of any real independence. He constantly underlines her lack of sophistication, urges her to read and teaches her how to behave in company. Ultimately, however, his desire is to control the young woman, to make her wholly dependent on him. Sex is just another means of achieving this objective. The first time they make love, Cait is left wondering if it is really all that she has built it up to be in her mind:

3. Edna O'Brien, *Girl with Green Eyes* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 131. First published as *The Lonely Girl* by Jonathan Cape in 1962. All quotations will be from the Penguin edition.

I let out a moan but he kissed it silent and I lay quiet, caressing his buttocks with the soles of my feet. It was very strange, being part of something so odd, so comic: and then I thought of how Baba and I used to hint about this particular situation and wonder about it and be appalled by our own curiosity. I thought of Baba and Martha and my aunt and all the people who regarded me as a child and I knew that I had now passed – inescapably – into womanhood. (*Girl with Green Eyes*, p. 149)

#### REACHING WOMANHOOD

The sexual act is a stage Kate must pass through in order to reach womanhood. There is no delirium in her reaction to what has happened, no real feeling of liberation or elation. O'Brien's descriptions of sex are discreet, but the omniscient narrator comments at some length on Kate's reaction to this key moment in her life in order to emphasise a lingering feeling of disappointment:

I felt no pleasure, just some strange satisfaction that I had done what I was born to do. My mind dwelt on foolish, incidental things. I thought to myself, so this is it; the secret I dreaded, and longed for.... All the perfume, and sighs, and purple brassières, and curling pins in bed, and gin-and-it, and necklaces, had all been for this. I saw it as something comic, and beautiful. The growing excitement of his body enthralled me – like the rhythm of the sea. So did the love words that he whispered to me. Little moans and kisses; kisses and little cries that he put into my body, until at last he expired on me and washed me with his love. (*Girl with Green Eyes*, pp. 149-50)

#### MARY LAVELLE AND KATE BRADY

At this juncture, I feel it would be useful to compare Kate's experience to that of Mary Lavelle, the eponymous heroine of Kate O'Brien's novel. Mary marvels at how mundane she finds her fiancé John's kisses:

She found in fact no more than a passing discomfort and guilty sensation of relief as each kiss ended. Occasionally too, in horror she caught herself being almost overcome by a sense of the ludicrousness of kissing. But in the main all she experienced was

a mild physical discomfort and, at the roots of her virgin spirit, an inadmissible distaste.<sup>4</sup>

While Kate does not believe Eugene's lovemaking to be distasteful, neither does she find it particularly pleasurable. This may have something to do with Catholic guilt. Writing a few decades earlier (*Mary Lavelle* was published in 1936), Kate O'Brien's character has a robust understanding of the danger to which she is exposing herself by choosing to sleep with the Spanish nobleman Juanito, a married man destined to play a decisive role in Spanish society. She knows that they can have no future together, but nevertheless wishes to experience at least once the rapture of making love to him. Afterwards, she has a very different reaction to Kate Brady's:

She lay under his hands and marvelled at her peace. She thought of school and home, of John, of God's law and of sin, and did not let herself discard such thoughts. They existed, as real and true as ever, with all their traditional claims on her – but this one claim was his, and she would answer it, taking the consequences. (*Mary Lavelle*, p. 308)

#### TO BE A SAINT

Kate Brady displays a fascination for the Catholic rituals of her childhood, which may explain her desire to attend Mass on the Sunday after her father returns to Eugene's house, accompanied this time by the bishop, in a final attempt to wrest his daughter from the clutches of the atheist. As a young girl, Kate had wanted to be a saint, and now that she has become a 'fallen woman' in the eyes of the Catholic faith in which she was brought up, she yearns for the certainty of childhood. The sermon that Sunday is about grace, which brings to mind how she has spurned God's grace once too often and will have to face the most terrible consequences. Eugene's caustic comment when she emerges from the church and forgets he is waiting for her, confirms that he is uncomfortable with her religiosity:

'I don't know how you can do it,' he said, remarking on my hypoc-

4. Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* (London: Virago edition, 1984), p. 32.

risy. 'How can you live two lives? In there' – he nodded towards the concrete church – 'you're deep in it with Crucifixions and hell and bloody thorns. And here am I sitting on a wall, reading about atom bombs, and you say "Who am I?"' (*Girl with Green Eyes*, p. 162).

Eugene wants to be the central focus of Kate's life and resents her attachment to Catholicism. She is determined to get married in a Catholic church, something he finds distasteful. He accuses her of hypocrisy, but really it is more complicated than that. Not being a Catholic himself, he fails to appreciate how a person's character and attitudes are moulded by what is drilled into them at home and in school, especially in post-independence Ireland where the Catholic Church was almost an irresistible influence.

Although they become reunited in the final tome of the trilogy in London, the tensions in Kate and Eugene's relationship are already clearly visible. Baba proposes to Kate that she accompany her to London, an invitation that is accepted only after Kate accepts that Eugene has abandoned her. The news of the break-up is greeted with glee by Kate's father: 'My father was delighted. In a letter he praised me for being so loyal to my family, and to my religion. He sent me fifty pounds reward – collected no doubt from cousin Andy and other rich relations.' (*Girl with Green Eyes*, pp. 202-203)

The relief felt by Mr Brady is understandable when one considers the type of shame he would have been made feel at having a daughter living in sin. In an early exchange with Kate, Eugene observed: 'Catholics were the most opinionated people on earth – their self-mania, he said, frightened him.' (*Girl with Green Eyes*, p. 30) But his own intolerance is palpable in his treatment of Kate, who will live as a virtual prisoner in London before being banished from the family home when Eugene discovers that she has been conducting an affair, something that his cold indifference makes almost inevitable.

#### GROWING UP

This article is working backwards through the *Country Girls* trilogy in an attempt to trace the young women's development in reverse. Baba and Cait (as she is called in the first novel) are very much the product of their experience of growing up in a remote part of Ireland



where there was little to titillate or excite the inhabitants. Cait's life was transformed by the suicide of her mother when she was very young and the alcoholism of her domineering father. She worked hard to secure a scholarship to a girls' boarding school and she might have achieved academic success were it not for the bad influence of Baba. On their arrival in the school, Sister Margaret outlines what is expected from the new arrivals:

'The new girls won't know this, but our convent has always been proud of its modesty. Our girls, above everything else, are good and wholesome and modest. One expression of modesty is the way a girl dresses or undresses. She should do so with decorum and modesty.'  
(*Country Girls*, p. 88)

Baba, the daughter of a wealthy vet, does not have the same financial constraints as Cait and is anxious to experience the type of sexual escapades the girls discuss at length when they are alone. Eventually they are expelled for writing obscenities on a lavatory seat about the school chaplain Father Tom and Sister Mary, who dressed the altar and served Mass. If that were not bad enough, Baba insisted that they both sign their names to what is an affront to two people of the cloth. There can be only outcome, expulsion, which is probably what Baba was seeking in the first instance. After enduring the expected commotion at home – Mr Brennan has to restrain Cait's father from hitting her – the girls find themselves in Dublin, where they hope to enjoy the fruits of their freedom. As she is heading off, Mr Brady has the following advice for his daughter:

'You're to behave yourself in Dublin. Live decent. Mind your faith and write to your father. I don't like the way you have turned out at all. Not one bit.'  
(*Country Girls*, p.151)

#### MR GENTLEMAN

Cait has already attracted the attentions of a wealthy local businessman, Mr Gentleman, with whom she has fallen in love. Middle-aged and married, he knows how to exploit her youth and vulnerability. As he drives her to Limerick one day, Cait catches him looking at her:

We smiled at each other and his hand came off the steering-wheel and rested on the lap of my ice-blue dress. My hand was waiting for it. We locked our fingers and for the rest of the journey we drove like that, except going round sharp bends.... 'You're the sweetest that ever happened to me', he said. (*Country Girls*, pp. 73-74)

While by today's standards, this type of exchange might appear pretty harmless, in the 1960s an illicit relationship with a married man was a dangerous undertaking. Mr Gentleman knows that Cait is ripe for the plucking and he also realises that he need not do anything in a hurry: Cait will be there for him whenever he decides to pursue her more seriously. In the meantime, the two girls would spend their time drinking and socialising in Dublin, generally doing everything in their power to enjoy the fruits of their freedom.

But Cait's attraction for Mr Gentleman has not abated and she spends a night with him in his car, watching the sea rise over Dublin Bay, hopelessly in love. When he drops her back to her lodgings, she eats her breakfast and goes straight to bed. We read: 'That was the first Sunday I missed Mass.' (*Country Girls*, p. 203) There is something about being involved in a relationship with a married man, and being in Dublin, that makes turning her back on religion more natural for Cait.

There will be no happy ending to this adventure, or to any of the others in O'Brien's trilogy. When Mr Gentleman's wife discovers what has been happening, he fails to collect her as agreed and the week away together is cancelled. Eventually a telegram arrives to explain what has happened: '*Everything gone wrong. Threats from your father. My wife has another nervous breakdown. Regret enforced silence. Must not see you.*' (*Country Girls*, p. 226. Italics in original)

#### SHAPED BY RELIGION

Pain, solitude, disappointment, powerlessness – Edna O'Brien's characters experience all of these things. While Catholicism is no way as prevalent a leitmotif in her writings as in those of Kate O'Brien's, she nonetheless displays an openness to religion which is evident in comments made in interviews during the 1970s. For example, she told David Heycock of *The Listener*: 'I was extremely religious. I got out of bed maybe ten or twenty times in the middle of the night to pray,

to say little quick prayers and kneel on the cold floor' (7 May 1970). Similarly, in 1976, she informed Judith Weinraub of the *New York Times*: 'The ordinary trials of a nun weren't enough for me. I wanted to be a saint.... The Catholic religion really is the most primitive in the world. One never gets over it' (7 April 1976).<sup>5</sup>

Such comments might surprise some people, but to me they are consistent with the mindset of a writer who, although she became estranged from the Catholic religion at a young age, nevertheless appreciated how its language, rhythms and rituals formed an important part of her Irish heritage and literary inspiration. Re-reading *The Country Girls* has confirmed my belief that O'Brien possesses what I would describe as a 'Catholic sensibility'. As she says herself, for better or worse, one can never completely 'get over' a Catholic upbringing.

5. These quotes were cited by Rebecca Pelan, 'Edna O'Brien's "Stage-Irish" Persona: An "Act" of Resistance', in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (July 1993), pp. 67-78, p. 72.