# "I Was Doing Without Salt at That Time. As an Affectation": Food, Gender, and Sexual Politics in Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*

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## Abstract

Against the backdrop of mid-twentieth century Ireland, Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* trilogy provides a rich literary case study through which to explore the intersection of food, gender, and sexual politics. From the theoretical perspective of feminist food studies, this article examines O'Brien's use of food-based language to establish exposition and build character as well as how food propels plot; appetite, food choice, cooking, and dining rituals serve to tease out complex constructions of girlhood and womanhood just as these acts and impulses shape episodes of sexualisation and experiences of trauma. This article both contributes to scholarship on alimentary symbolism in Irish literature and brings sustained critical attention to the feminist potential of food in creative writing.

## Keywords

Feminist food studies; Edna O'Brien; gender; appetite; Irish food; Irish literature

Dismissed at the time of its publication by the same oppressive forces it critiqued, Edna O'Brien's masterful *The Country Girls* (1960) provides a singular literary case study in which to explore coming of age in mid-twentieth-century Ireland. Through the language of food, among other narrative techniques, O'Brien traces main characters Cait[1] and Baba's developing understandings of gender, sexuality, and adulthood. O'Brien uses a rich food-based lexicon and food as a cipher to situate unstable and often conflicting understandings of girlhood to describe and propel formative moments in Cait and Baba's lives. In response to the conference subtheme of "art and writing" that explores food traces, food as/in trauma, and food traditions, this article brings sustained critical attention to food's feminist potential in creative writing. After briefly situating the text in the wider field of food in English-language

[1] The character of this name is also referred to as Kate in later books, but I opt to use the Irish spelling throughout for clarity.

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Irish literature,[2] I present the theoretical frame and historical context relevant to considering *The Country Girls* and its sequels.[3] The article then provides evidence of O'Brien's use of food as a general narrative device and literary technique in *The Country Girls* before delving into a close reading of a selected scene that showcases the murky boundary between youth and adulthood, and how this boundary can be weaponised against girls during traumatising experiences; as Susan Cahill argues, this boundary is enforced by "contextual pressures" that can be euphemistically coded as "tradition."[4] In closing, I touch lightly on the language of food in the novel's sequels and suggest the contributions made by revisiting Ireland's literary canon from a feminist food studies perspective.

## Food in Irish Literature and Feminist Food Studies

In spite of claims that "unlike other peoples, Irish writers of memoirs, poems, stories, political tracts, or songs rarely included the details of food in describing daily life,"[5] Irish literature is bursting with references to food as a symbol as well as exemplars of texts in which food is a plot device and form of narration. Providing insights on ethnic, religious, class, and cultural identity through featured foodstuffs and the nuanced rituals associated with eating, Ireland's English-language literature has received scholarly attention through work, for example, on alimentary symbolism in James Joyce,[6] the influence of Maura Laverty's cookery book-writing on her fiction,[7] chapters on authors ranging from Maria Edgeworth to John McGahern in *'Tickling the Palate': Gastronomy in Irish Literature and Culture*,[8] and culinary heritage in Heaney's poetry.[9]

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[2] While outside the scope of this article, it is important to note that from *Aislinge Mac Con Glinne* to *An tOileánach* and the poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Biddy Jenkinson, Irish-language literature boasts rich and varied literary production about food and an array of texts that use food to communicate central themes and ideas.

[3] The version cited for this article includes the entire trilogy and the epilogue. When citing, I use page numbers as they appear in the collated collection.

[4] Susan Cahill, "A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing?: Girlhood, Trauma, and Resistance in Post-Tiger Irish Literature," *LIT Literature Interpretation Theory* 28, no. 2 (2017): 153–171, https://doi.org/10.1080/10436928.2017.1315550, 154.

[5] Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 85.

[6] Lindsey Tucker, *Stephen and Bloom at Life's Feast: Alimentary Symbolism and the Creative Process in James Joyce's Ulysses* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984).

[7] Caitríona Clear, "'The Red Ink of Emotion': Maura Laverty, Women's Work and Irish Society in the 1940s," *Saothar* 28, no. May 2021 (2003): 90–97.

[8] Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Eamon Maher, eds., *'Tickling the Palate': Gastronomy in Irish Literature and Culture* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014).

[9] Anke Klitzing, "'Gilded Gravel in the Bowl': Ireland's Cuisine and Culinary Heritage in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney," *Folk Life* 59, no. 2 (2021): 101–122.

A subtopic that merits further examination is the ways in which the use of food is gendered by women writers and/or for characters that are women in an Irish literary context. Feminist food studies, and a more targeted focus on girlhood therein, is the key interdisciplinary *milieu* in which to anchor such a study. In "The Intersection of Gender and Food Studies," Alice McLean writes that feminist food studies is a research nexus concerned with "the female body and the myriad ways in which its appetites are nourished or suppressed by cultural forces."[10] Appetites, here, is crucially broad, and refers not only to food, but also to "knowledge, [...] power, [...] [and] creative self-expression," as "hunger [can be] a course of empowerment."[11] In directing their attention to the contested space of the kitchen – in many ways, the nucleus of patriarchal oppression in the home through the undervaluing of unpaid labour and the "second shift," but also a potentially creative space from which domestic influence and power could be harnessed,

> some women's studies scholars have discovered that food practices and their representations, interwoven as they are into the dailiness of life, can reveal the particularities of time, place, and culture, providing an excellent vehicle to contextualize women's lives.[12]

Specifically with respect to the art and labour of writing, Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran suggest that "women writers of the twentieth as well as the nineteenth century, express deeply conflicted feelings about appetite and desire, authority and assertion."[13] In sum, feminist food studies literature highlights how food selection, preparation, and consumption allow us to consider questions related to agency and control at all stages of women's lives. This generative theoretical frame thus emerges as a prism through which to consider how food can be at the centre of traumatic experiences of girlhood as well as how wrestling with food-based traditions is a hallmark of many girls' path to womanhood.

Intersections of gender, sexuality, and food have already been explored with respect to O'Brien's work. Amanda Graham's "'The Lovely Substance of the Mother': Food, Gender and Nation in the Work of Edna O'Brien" (1996) and Mary Burke's

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[10] Alice McLean, "The Intersection of Gender and Food Studies," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies,* ed. Ken Albala (London: Routledge, 2013), 250–264, 250.

[11] McLean, 252.

[12] Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber, "Feminist Food Studies: A Brief History," in *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*, ed. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 1–26, 2.

[13] Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran, "Introduction - Scenes of the Apple: Appetite, Desire, Writing," in *Scenes of the Apple: Food and the Female Body in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women's Writing*, eds. Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 1–42, 3.

"Famished: Alienation and Appetite in Edna O'Brien's Early Novels" (2006) are the touchstone texts for considering these topics. While both pieces contribute to our understanding of relationships between gender, sexuality, and food, Burke's and Graham's studies are more focused on hunger and disordered eating as responses to the oppressive forces exerted by patriarchy, consumerism, Catholicism, and nationalism onto women's bodies in Ireland. In dialogue with Burke and Graham – as well as other scholars of O'Brien's work, including Maureen O'Connor,[14] Sinéad Mooney, and Kathryn Laing[15] – this article examines how O'Brien deploys the language of food to articulate how various characters conceptualise and articulate girlhood and womanhood. In other words, whereas themes surrounding restraint and denial shape Burke and Graham's valuable studies, this article shifts its focus towards appetite and agency,[16] further examining how these are either encouraged or curbed in the enforcement of hegemony in late 1950s and early 1960s Ireland.

## Historical Context

Mary Daly maintains that "one of the recurrent themes in the 1960s was that Ireland had abandoned its preoccupation with the past to focus on the present, redirected its energies towards economic and social development instead of the previous fixation on national sovereignty;" an alleged "determination to present Ireland as a modern nation, which had moved beyond past insularity and local preoccupations, is central to contemporary images of the 1960s."[17] For women more specifically, the late 1950s and 1960s were a time during which "post-war domestic bliss" was beginning to confront "second-wave feminism," which would ramp up in earnest in the 1970s;[18] debates surrounding divorce and contraception accelerated and intensified as changes to child-rearing and domestic space were happening with the expansion of rural electrification and the introduction of free universal secondary education in 1966. These debates were oppressively framed, however, by what Eimear McBride calls the "cultural, social, and intellectual stagnation" of 1960s Ireland, very much opposed to the image of modern Ireland projected by and associated with Seán Lemass's government. In an *Irish Times* article, McBride writes that "every aspect of women's lives [was] invaded by, and subject to, the whims of a State machine ideologically opposed to female emancipation – under the direction

[14] Maureen O'Connor, *Edna O'Brien and the Art of Fiction* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2021).

[15] Kathryn Laing, Sinéad Mooney, and Maureen O'Connor, eds., *Edna O'Brien: New Critical Perspectives* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006).

[16] Burke study does address questions related to appetite through her sensitive analysis of girlhood and consumerism in the text, but it is not the focus of the piece.

[17] Mary Daly, *Sixties Ireland: Reshaping the Economy, State and Society, 1957-1973* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 362–364.

[18] Daly, *Sixties Ireland,* 151.

of a meticulously prurient Catholic Church."[19] What emerges when we weave these stories together is strain: the house becomes more modern for "women's work" while it is a marker of modernity for women to leave the house. Relationships are strengthened with continental nations as anxieties about "traditional" Irish ways are articulated. It is to these tensions that *The Country Girls* so fruitfully responds and which it explores (amongst other ways) through food.

## Tracing the Language of Food in *The Country Girls*

*The Country Girls* tracks the girlhood, adolescence, and young adulthood of best friends Cait Brady and Baba Brennan as they move from rural County Clare to Dublin city and eventually London in later books. The lore surrounding the partially autobiographical text is that O'Brien was given a £50 advance on the book and wrote it in three weeks. The author recalls that the book "wrote itself."[20] The book was also infamously banned for its depiction of female sexuality; writing for *The Guardian* in 2008, O'Brien said that "in the big world the reactions were a little chauvinist. Frank O'Connor, in *the New York Times*, concluded that I had appalling taste in men, and LP Hartley, on English television, dismissed it, deeming Baba and Kate a pair of nymphomaniacs."[21] In a similar vein to the volatile but intimately close friendship that underpins the more recent and acclaimed Neapolitan Quartet written by Elena Ferrante, O'Brien confronts readers with how such bonds are both self-actualising and have a destructive capacity; much like Lenú and Lila in *My Brilliant Friend* and its sequels, Cait and Baba share an extraordinary closeness while being in endless, and often toxic, competition with one another.

Throughout the narrative, O'Brien deploys food towards a variety of literary devices that advance the plot and flesh out character. Within the very first pages, and by way of exposition and introduction to our narrator, Cait wakes in her family home to olfactory traces of food through "smells of frying bacon from the kitchen, but it didn't cheer [her]," immediately anchoring readers in Cait's view of food as, typically, a source of pleasure and comfort.[22] Cait later uses food again in explaining her girlhood crush on farm-hand Hickey, to articulate her ideal future in a child's simple terms: "...that we were going to live in the chicken run and that we would get

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[19] Eimear McBride, "Eimear McBride on Edna O'Brien's 'Rigorous, Beautiful' The Country Girls," *The Irish Times*, September 16, 2017, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/eimear-mcbride-on-edna-o-brien-s-rigorous-beautiful-the-country-girls-1.3218341

[20] Shusha Guppy, Interview, "Edna O'Brien, The Art of Fiction No. 82," *The Paris Review,* Accessed January 22, 2024, https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2978/the-art-of-fiction-no-82-edna-obrien

[21] Edna O'Brien, "Causing a Commotion," *The Guardian,* April 19, 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/19/featuresreviews.guardianreview2

[22] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 3.

free eggs, free milk, and vegetables from Mama. Cabbage was the only vegetable they planted."[23] Our protagonist imagines and accesses her future through food provision and consumption, seeking to project her bucolic childhood onto her hopes for a rosy future. When Cait is preparing to eat her breakfast, she tells readers "I was doing without salt at that time. As an affectation. I thought it was very grown-up not to use sugar or salt," using food as a way to perform her sense of her own maturity.[24] Within the first eight pages of the text, we trace O'Brien's use of food to set the stage and to flesh out the protagonist's situation: simultaneously in the vestiges of youth and on the cusp of young adulthood. Cait flexes food selection and preference as a marker of adulthood when it suits her, and projects her happy future in a simple and naïve language of food provision and eating elsewhere. This messy overlap is a crucial conceptual space for readers of the *bildungsroman.* Cahill, the key scholar of girlhood in Irish literature, builds off Catherine Driscoll's work in emphasising the importance of "notions of transition, process and transformation" in understanding coming of age, without necessarily leading to "an achieved endpoint."[25]

Cait also describes the world around her, and the people within in, through food. She conveys an image of her mother as a caregiver in that she spoils Cait with cakes, biscuits, and dainties; all of these food items stand in as emotional traces of a mother's love. In the same scene Mama is seen carrying off hen feed, so we understand that she cares for not just Cait, but others too, as a provider of sustenance. Food emerges as a currency for affection and care. Readers of the series' third novel, *Girls in their Married Bliss,* will recognise a neat contrast between Mama's gentle feeding of the hens and Cait's disinterested feeding of ducks in London with her son Cash, suggesting Cait's complicated feelings towards motherhood. Elsewhere, Cait tells readers that she sees "drops of water like overripe currants," adeptly conveying lushness and fullness through an image of the berry.[26] On other occasions in the text, too, evocative language such as "black coils of hair like bunches of elderberry," "moist blackberry eyes," and "cerise blouses" reveals how food provides a repository of descriptive language for O'Brien in her writing.[27] O'Brien introduces Mr Gentleman, a deeply problematic character to whom we return below, as mysterious and sophisticated through Cait's association between himself and luxurious foodstuffs: "the smell and sizzle of a roast," his description as

[23] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 5.

[24] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 8.

[25] Susan Cahill, "Making Space for the Irish Girl: Rosa Mullholland and Irish Girls in Fiction at the Turn of the Century," in *Colonial Girlhood in Literature, Culture and History, 1840-1950*, ed. Kristine Moruzi and Michelle J. Smith (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 167–179, 170.

[26] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 11.

[27] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 48–49.

a "marvellous cook," the evoking of the image of "orange[s]."[28] Cait also imagines him with "elegant glasses of sherry," "soufflés," and "venison."[29] Tapping into the multi-sensory experience of cooking and eating, and pointing to food's capacity to comprise cultural capital in the case of the "refined" Mr Gentleman, we enter Cait's world through the accessible, descriptive language of food.

O'Brien also uses food preparation spaces as a means of foreshadowing impending trauma and plot advancement. When entering the home in the pages leading up to Mama's disappearance and the subsequent discovery of her death, Cait notices that "inside, the kitchen was untidy and the range was out."[30] Readers are alerted to a state of uneasiness by the fact that kitchen is not clean and the range is not alight. When Cait becomes aware of her mother's death, she says that she has a sip of wine and contemplates how that day was the "the last day of [her] childhood."[31] This forms a noteworthy mirror to Cait's reflections on denying use of salt and sugar as an affectation of adulthood during her youth; here, she indulges in a sip of wine at the very moment she feels herself shift from girlhood to adulthood, and there is a heart-breaking sense that she wished she could cling to her youth. When visiting home from her convent school, Cait relays that she was upset that things she

> thought […] forgotten kept floating to the surface of [her] mind[…] The smell of apple jelly in the autumn[…] Flitches of bacon hung up to smoke. The cookery book on the window ledge stained with egg yolk. These small things crowded in on me, so I felt very sad going down the drive.[32]

Pastoral, nostalgic scenes related to youth in the country overwhelm her, and a sense of food security is cheerily depicted in contrast to the convent's "gray" and "dry"[33] food, in spite of the fact that in the third book, Baba recalls theirs as a "hand-to-mouth" youth.[34] Roughly one hundred pages later, Baba extends the relationship between imbibing and adulthood by telling Cait "we want to live. Drink gin."[35] Not ten pages after that, Baba pushes a reluctant Cait to go on a double date by reminding her to think of the meal of "lamb and mint sauce" they will have.[36] In these passages, food takes on connotations of experimentation and adventure.

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[28] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 16.
[29] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 17.
[30] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 32.
[31] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 58.
[32] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 146.
[33] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 96.
[34] O'Brien, *Girls in Their Married Bliss,* 658.
[35] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 183.
[36] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 190.

## Food, Trauma, and Sexual Politics in *The Country Girls*

Not all scenes that orbit around food, however, are marked by agentic consumption. In perhaps one of the most disturbing scenes in the first novel of the series, the "lunch date" to which an adult Mr Gentleman invites an adolescent Cait, food provides essential language for articulating the imposed sexualising of a teenage girl by the former as the latter struggles to locate her own sexual burgeoning in what she, understandably, cannot entirely comprehend is a predatory situation.

Seated at the table, Cait uncomfortably decides that she will order "the cheapest thing on the menu" and opts for "Irish stew," revealing a selection process possibly informed by any number of factors, including inexperience, a child-like adherence to received manners, or a preference for the familiar and the traditional.[37] Mr Gentleman undermines this choice by saying, "no, you will not," with a "playful" faked crossness before proceeding to order "little chickens" for the pair.[38] Mr Gentleman orders wine for the table and pours his own glass before offering Cait some, which can be read as his ensuring that the bottle is not corked but, contextually, reads more like him selfishly meeting his needs before considering another's. Reminding us of Cait's youth, she references her shame about drinking given her "confirmation pledge" before telling Mr Gentleman about her day: "I bought my school uniform and I walked around."[39] Further underscoring this dynamic, Cait pronounces the wine as "bitter," indicating that she would have preferred lemonade, and had ice cream after.[40] Mr Gentleman, for his part, has blue cheese, or as Cait describes it, "white cheese with green threads of mold in it. It smells like Hickey's socks, not the new socks I bought him, but the old ones under his mattress."[41] The acquired flavour of blue cheese, here, serves to widen the gap between Cait's quintessentially childish dessert, ice cream, and Mr Gentleman's decidedly more adult after-lunch cheese course, even more so because of the way that Cait describes it. Recalling the inexperience with which Cait approached ordering, and perhaps her desire to affect maturity, she recites that the meal was "lovely," and pushed her "plate over to the edge of the table, where it would be more handy for the waiter to get it."[42] This kind gesture is contrasted in the following sentence, in which Mr Gentleman is described as "lazy" and "bored," blasé and cavalier.[43] Throughout the lunch scene, O'Brien uses food and drink to highlight age

[37] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 70.
[38] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 70.
[39] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 71.
[40] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 71.
[41] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 71.
[42] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 71.
[43] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 71.

difference and differences in experience, as well as how consumption can be the gateway to abuse.

Mr Gentleman's alcohol consumption increases as the meal progresses and his sexualising of Cait becomes more overt; he asks her if she had ever kissed anyone and his intense gaze on her neck prompts her to become conscious of her body at the table, repeating "my neck" three times.[44] Cait seems to try to exert some control over the situation, saying that his eyes met her "for as long as [she] wanted."[45] Jarringly, Mr Gentleman commands "the next time we have lunch, don't wear lipstick [...] I prefer you without it."[46] O'Brien once again turns to the language of food to emphasise the tug-of-war nature between Mr Gentleman's sexualising of Cait's girlhood and her own experimenting with her sexuality. In the line following Mr Gentleman's demand that, for their next meal, Cait not wear lipstick, presumably because of its connotations of adulthood and female sexuality, Cait tells readers "the coffee was bitter. I used four lumps of sugar. We came out and went to the pictures. He bought me a box of chocolates with a ribbon on it."[47] Cait's dislike of bitter coffee – reminiscent of the inaccessibility of blue cheese to Cait's palate and symbolic of her youth – and her need to sweeten it so heavily, as well as her receipt of a bowed box of chocolates, read as texts of her youth and girlhood, which are disturbingly encouraged by Mr Gentleman to satisfy his destructive and predatory desires. Cait's inability to see Mr Gentleman's abusiveness is underscored by her thinking that she should base her post-"date" letter to him off of *Wuthering Heights,* a text with a notoriously violent and cruel romantic entanglement.[48]

Later on, once the "relationship" has progressed and when trying to identify what destination Mr Gentleman selected for their romantic getaway, Cait anxiously thinks "with horror of the bacon-and-egg hotels across the central towns of Ireland with ketchup dribbles on the relish bottles and gravy stains on the checkered cloth."[49] There is certainly a class element to this worrying, as Cait postures herself as "better" than such establishments, but there is also a mental linkage between her perceived worth to Mr Gentleman and the type of food on offer during their holiday. When the destination of Vienna is made clear, Cait sees herself "in a bed with a big breakfast tray across [her] lap," a shorthand for the performance of "married bliss" with Mr Gentleman.[50] This scene never materialises, as Mr Gentleman abruptly cuts ties. While Cait is deeply saddened, readers cannot help but feel relieved. Cait's

[44] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 72.
[45] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 71.
[46] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 72.
[47] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 72.
[48] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 80.
[49] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 207.
[50] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 207.

entire "relationship" with Mr Gentleman, detailed through references to food, exemplifies how Cait's involvement with a much older man makes her "subject to sexual predatorship rather than rebellious transition."[51] Taken together, the extended lunch scene and the subsequent references to the alimentary all trace how food serves as a social language that communicates a range of often traumatic feelings and experiences.

## *The Lonely Girl* and *Girls in Their Married Bliss*

The analysis developed in this paper can be extended to the second and third novels in the trilogy. If we accept that, over lunch, Mr Gentleman attempts to control the boundaries between girlhood and womanhood as well as those between innocence and experience in a way that suits the satisfying of his own predacious pleasures – just as Cait tests those boundaries as part of her own coming of age – then we might also observe how food is used to communicate transitions from childhood to adulthood in other parts of the text and in ways that are specifically gendered rather than sexualised. Food features in the later texts as Cait and Baba develop understandings of their own adulthood and womanhood. Briefly, in *The Lonely Girl,* Cait relays Eugene, who would go on to be the father of her child, asking her,

> 'Tell me, what sort of food do you like?' he asked as he put butter on my cabbage and passed me a tube of mustard. At home we aways mixed mustard in egg cups. 'I like everything.' 'Everything?' He looked appalled. I was sorry then that I didn't pretend to have some taste.[52]

A few years on from the lunch "date" mentioned above, Cait exhibits a similar thinking process to that which led her to order the familiar and the inexpensive from the restaurant menu. Here, rather than seizing the opportunity to exert control and influence her choices – a denial of Cait's agency which, as we have seen, brings Mr Gentleman pleasure – Eugene seems disappointed in her inability to articulate preference with confidence. A less charitable reading of an otherwise self-centred character might suggest that, as his love interest, Eugene was hoping to see his own good taste reflected in Cait's.

An anxiety about cooking proficiency and its ability to communicate maturity also frames Cait's thinking in the second novel. She lies about her ability to cook and recalls her one failed venture into preparing mackerel. Cait's unease with her limited cooking skills leads her to lie, pointing to how the burden that food-based tradition can be, especially for women. Moreover, *Girls in Their Married Bliss* sees Cait flexing her limited cooking knowledge to assert power over Maura, the *au pair* living with

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[51] Cahill, "A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing?," 157.

[52] O'Brien, *The Lonely Girl,* 281.

herself, Eugene, and Cash, in perhaps an early hint that Cait suspects something developing between Maura and Eugene. "Cauliflower needs only a little water," Cait tells Maura, by way of declaring her dominance in the domestic space and somewhat strangely for someone who has such limited cooking experience.[53] Here, Cait can be seen to leverage tradition, in this case her knowledge of cooking practices, in a harmful way so as to belittle her perceived opponent. Seemingly innocuous advice about meal preparation thinly veils Cait's view of a power struggle between the two women. In a similar vein, Baba recalls conflict with her husband during which "he said to leave his mother out of it, that she was a good woman and baked the best bread in Ireland. [She then] said there was more to life than baking good bread."[54] These passages highlight how food tradition could be activated with the intention to injure others and call the performance of their gendered "duties" into question: Cait sidesteps difficult feelings relating to her complicated relationship with domesticity by disparaging Maura's cooking attempts and Baba expresses frustrations about her home life by criticising her mother-in-law's homemaking.

## Conclusion

In the epilogue to the series, wherein Baba reflects on the life and death of her closest friend Cait, she suggests that men had "put her in aspic."[55] O'Brien choice of language, again leaning on a vocabulary of food, points to one of the central conflicts of the text: as McBride notes,

> O'Brien's girls succeed, and do not succeed, in overcoming their internal and external obstacles. The point is that they never stop grappling with the terms of their lives, and the author[…] never relegates their status within those lives to that of best supporting actress.[56]

In so doing, O'Brien reminds us of the critical potential of tracing food in creative writing. Rather than satisfying unrealistic expectations by sating country girls' "big huge appetites," no matter how much readers may desire just that, *The Country Girls* unleashes the feminist possibilities of using food in creative writing by calling out the forces that would try make those appetites small.[57] By deploying food in her texts to trace the non-linear and complex journey from girlhood to womanhood, and by using eating and cooking as acts that either affirm and contest Cait and Baba's

[53] O'Brien, *Girls in Their Married Bliss,* 495.

[54] O'Brien, *Girls in Their Married Bliss,* 519.

[55] O'Brien, "Epilogue," 675.

[56] McBride, n.p.

[57] O'Brien, *The Country Girls,* 159.

understandings of gender and sexuality, O'Brien sensitively explores the traumas and contests the traditions that underpinned coming of age in 1960s Ireland.