A GRAND TRAGEDY:
THE PROGRESSION AND REGRESSION OF GENDER ROLES
IN
EDNA O’BRIEN’S THE COUNTRY GIRLS TRILOGY AND HOUSE OF SPLENDID ISOLATION

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INTRODUCTION

Notorious for bucking tradition, Constance Markievicz – soldier, rebel, and woman – dismissed concerns about how she would handle combat during the 1918 Easter Rising in Ireland by glibly stating: "I'll have a pistol here and a pistol here and my best hat" (O’Brien, “Why Irish Heroines”). This nonchalant juxtaposition of gender roles, an embracing of both femininity and violence, defines Markievicz’s role in the struggle for Home Rule as well as her unusual place within Irish society. As an integral part of the revolutionary nationalist movement to claim independence, she served as speaker, strategist, conspirator, and soldier, but was known as much for her unusual dress and beauty as she was for her impressive political resume. Her place in Irish history is much contested. While she is undoubtedly revered for her patriotism and aberrant elegance, primary and contemporary analysis of her effect on Irish society invariably reveals complex and disputed issues of gender. As one of Markievicz’s biographers argues, “she is remembered for the wrong reasons, in the wrong way . . . hers is not the image of Irish womanhood we want to present to the outside world” (O’Connor 43).

1 Why is it that such division exists pertaining to the memory of a woman who sacrificed her reputation, much of her wealth, and her aristocratic station in life to work toward Irish independence? Why is it that then and now, swathes of Irish society do not want Markievicz to be

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1 The biographer, Elizabeth Coxhead, is quoted in Maureen O’Connor’s essay “Irish Dandy,” in which O’Connor forges a connection between the “strikingly similar criticisms” of O’Brien and Markievicz (43). The criticisms range from simply courting controversy by writing about subjects deemed inappropriate by society to the public focus on each woman’s physical appearance rather than her accomplishments. O’Connor draws on other support for her theory, including analysis from noted literary theorist Terry Eagleton, but evidence beyond the essay is easily found. The title of the novel Terrible Beauty: A Life of Constance Markievicz by Diana Norman is a concise summary of the disparate images both Markievicz and O’Brien have historically had to contend with to their detriment. Hence Coxhead’s and O’Connor’s concern that Markievicz “is remembered for the wrong reasons, in the wrong way” and that this lasting memory, which corresponds to the contemporary treatment of O’Brien, could be damaging to Irish women (43).
representative of Irish femininity? This tension solidifies Markievicz’s role as an icon in the continuing struggle to understand the effects of the roles and expectations of Irish women in history, and of the artistic interpretation of that history in literature.

It is unsurprising that author Edna O’Brien references Markievicz frequently in her work, even naming her as one of her primary sources of inspiration, particularly in the piece “Why Irish Heroines Don’t Have To Be Good Anymore.” In this essay written in 1986, O’Brien draws on the wealth of Irish literature to support her own views about what exactly it means to be a woman in this canon. The contradiction that was Markievicz, so succinctly demonstrated by her own words prior to the Easter Rising, illustrates the type of heroine O’Brien is known for, as does Markievicz’s tragic end. O’Brien rejects the notion that “Irish heroines [have] to be gentle, tremulous, gullible, devout, masochistic and beautiful” (“Why Irish Heroines”). Instead, O’Brien wishes to both return and propel Irish literature to a place where characters can embody opposing representations in a way that does not undermine their femininity. She notes that women in older Irish lyrical work were actually “quite modern” because “they took the initiative in love and courted their men with words and flattery the way knights courted women” (“Why Irish Heroines”). Responding to the tragic nature of many of these stories, O’Brien admits, “it is true that all these heroines came to a calamitous end but their tragedy is grand tragedy” (“Why Irish Heroines”). In O’Brien’s estimation, a woman who works unceasingly toward the development of a self-identity, and who commands language and serves as an inspiration for others in this quest does not die in vain, no

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2 Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward examine this occurrence in the chapter titled “Constance Markievicz and the politics of memory” in their book Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags. They note that though Markievicz, “spent the final decade of her life alternating as soldier, statesman, dissident, and inmate” with unceasing dedication to the cause, she “continues to suffer from a terrible reputation” (63).
matter how she dies. Certainly this could be argued of Markievicz, and it is this model among others that O’Brien references in her fiction. Referencing the historical position of these sources yet couching her characters in a modern setting with revised language is a theme that extends across the canon of O’Brien’s work, beginning with her first publication, *The Country Girls Trilogy*.

When O’Brien began to pen the first book of the trilogy in 1960, Ireland was still firmly rooted in conventional gender roles, a fact which explains the explosive reaction domestically. Though not considered as radical by today’s social standards, O’Brien’s prodding of stereotypes and questioning of Irish values related to this issue so enraged some members of the nation that book bannings and burnings were widespread. Yet nothing fans the flames of success like controversy, and O’Brien went on to write the remaining two books of the trilogy over a period of four years and a crucial epilogue much later. Her books received international attention, and both the praise and criticism were vehement, a testament to the divisive nature of O’Brien’s work. This same trend has continued over the course of O’Brien’s career, in which she has produced (and is ostensibly still producing) an impressive body of work including sixteen novels, eight collections of short stories, five plays, two biographies, two autobiographical works and two collections of poetry. Such a prolific career largely revolving around such controversial topics has led to an unusual course in the critical reception of O’Brien’s work. Though much of the criticism remains divided, an expanding collection of critical literary analysis of O’Brien’s work has begun to shape a growing body of scholarly work solidifying her place in both the Irish and international literary canon.
The Country Girls trilogy as a whole, as well as her novel House of Splendid Isolation, written later in 1994, are largely considered to be O’Brien’s most seminal works, garnering quite a bit of academic attention. Regardless of positive or negative reactions to her work, most critics agree that at some point in her prolific writing career, O’Brien’s work underwent a shift, dividing her work into a less progressive earlier period and a more radical modern period. While this makes sense at a meta level simply due to the impressive fifty-year spread over which she has consistently produced work, and the concurrent shifting of society, the question deserves further examination. With the wealth of academic criticism devoted to unpacking the layered nuances of female and national iconography in both works, especially within the last ten years, it is undeniable that these elements are thematically crucial to the plot. A significant body of criticism identifies The Country Girls Trilogy and House of Splendid Isolation at opposite ends of this shift; the former is classified as progressive to be sure, but the latter is often seen as more modern and layered in the way it handles gender roles. However, this viewpoint overlooks two crucial elements: the passage of time as well as an analysis of the female characters in comparison to the Irish female archetypes that O’Brien identifies in her essay and her work, Mother Ireland.

The first novel of The Country Girls Trilogy – simply titled The Country Girls – was written in approximately three weeks in 1960, the following two books The Lonely Girl and Girls in Their Married Bliss were completed within four years. The epilogue, which ties up key plot elements and is identified by O’Brien as essential to her vision of the story, was written significantly later in 1986. House of Splendid Isolation was written and published in 1994. Given the remarkable amount of time The Country Girls Trilogy
spans, and the much more recent publication of *House*, it stands to reason that O’Brien’s writing style would evolve, as would social mores. Yet even given this assumption, *The Country Girls Trilogy* in and of itself embodies a radical shift in tone from the first naive and angsty book to the explosively flagrant epilogue. Though O’Brien nods to traditional Irish female icons with the character Kate, she also includes her foil Baba, who continuously fights the system and harkens back to the lyrical women who steered their own fates. In both *The Country Girls Trilogy* and *House of Splendid Isolation* (referred to in the following chapters as the Trilogy and *House*), O’Brien broadcasts the problem of being a woman and mother in Ireland, an element running through her work that is consistent in its inclusion if not in its variations. However, *House* broadens her perspective by bringing in political arguments as well, and this coupled with the lack of a progressive Baba-esque character to balance out the conventionality of Josie lets the controversy, at least in terms of gender, in this novel fall flat. Increasingly throughout *The Country Girls Trilogy* and most significantly in the epilogue, O’Brien truly takes up arms against conventional gender mores with a progressive style of writing that takes leaps in time, language and illicit topics. Ultimately, *The Country Girls Trilogy* is a more effective venue for addressing O’Brien’s preferred topics of gender and sexuality, in that the format and time over which she wrote the novels allows for an evolution – an impressive shift – of her topics and theme. Both endings result in tragedy, but according to O’Brien’s own analysis of Irish literature and the history of Irish female icons, only in *The Country Girls Trilogy* can that tragedy be considered grand.
CHAPTER 1

“ERE YOU CAN FADE, ERE YOU CAN DIE”:
THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDERED ICONOGRAPHY IN IRELAND

To evaluate the progressive nature of O’Brien’s writing in terms of gender, it is first necessary to understand the complex history of Irish female icons and archetypes. That the feminization of Ireland and its icons are central to O’Brien’s work is clear, not only from secondary analysis of her work, but also by the author’s own admission. One of her memoirs, aptly titled *Mother Ireland*, consists of seven essays that weave together vignettes from O’Brien’s own history with the history of Ireland, rendering the two inseparable. The first two lines of the work succinctly illustrate the three components that are always present in O’Brien’s work: gender, history and literature. She writes, “Countries are either mothers or fathers, and engender the emotional bristle secretly reserved for either sire. Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare” (O’Brien, *Mother Ireland* 1). In these opening lines, O’Brien establishes the long history of personifying the nation itself as female and names many of the icons that spring from this tradition. Other themes entrenched in her writing are referenced as well, from the literary allusion to Joyce with the inclusion of a sow, to the rural imagery so prevalent in many of her works, to the religious overtones of being at once a pure bride and a fertile mother. Throughout the work *Mother Ireland*, and her standalone essays on similar topics, O’Brien does not seek to further complicate female iconography in Ireland; her contention is that it is already complicated enough. Therefore to understand her
deconstruction and criticism of the effect of these various forces on women in Ireland, the
history is especially pertinent.

Historically, female icons in Ireland have served a twofold purpose: to reinforce
conventional gender roles and to muster support and sacrifice for nationalist causes.
Though many nations embrace the tradition of personifying their nation as female,
Ireland is unique in that the tradition was born out of necessity. The mythical feminine
Ireland was created as an expression of patriotism during the long British domination of
the country – hence why O’Brien identifies Ireland as having “always” been female. The
year 1167 marked the beginning of an eight hundred year struggle between Britain and
Ireland for control of the country, with the invasion of the Normans in Baginbun County.
Drawn to Ireland by territorial and economic aspirations, the British had a vested interest
in suppressing the individual cultural development of the colonized nation. With the
Statute of Kilkenny in 1366, the English banned not only Anglo-Irish marriages, but also
any use of Irish language, customs or laws (Orpen 554). This included speaking of
Ireland as an independent nation. Therefore, beautiful women became code words to
express nationalism and political ideas without being outwardly subversive (Tracy 38). In
everything from ballads to poems to everyday speech, this romanticized version of
Ireland gradually developed into a deeply entrenched cultural tradition that transcended
the oral culture into the literature of today.

Portrayals of the nation were many: Hibernia, Eire, Erin, Mother Ireland, the Poor
Old Woman, Cathleen ni Houlihan, and Dark Rosaleen, in addition to less formalized
icons named by O’Brien, are all examples of classic female symbolic figures (Innes 2).
Significantly, these characterizations can be split neatly into two categories: maiden and
mother (Innes 15). Hibernia, Eire, and Erin are all typically depicted as tall, dark, and handsome maidens (Innes 17). Always pure and chaste, they are often isolated; a statuesque, regal, yet passive symbol of pride in the nation. Ireland is also often seen as “a young maiden besieged,” as Dark Rosaleen and Cathleen ni Houlihan, illustrate (Innes 2). In these cases, the maiden in peril served as an allegory for contemporary situations. The beauty and virtue of the girl was a moral impetus for the men she called upon to save her, just as those who desired independence in Ireland extolled the beauty and virtue of the nation itself. This is exactly the type of woman that O’Brien rejects in her essay, identifying the archetype as a “perfect vessel . . . ready for contamination” (“Why Irish Heroines”). In other words, O’Brien believes these women are passively used up by society around them, whether they are filled literally with children and doomed to a life of unfulfilling motherhood or filled metaphorically with love for the nation, inspiring them to become martyrs. Their lack of agency condemns them to passivity and tragedy.

Of the many icons that O’Brien references consistently throughout her work, the three most common are Dark Rosaleen, Cathleen ni Houlihan and the Poor Old Woman, or Shan na Vocht. Significantly, all three women are abandoned in some sense, dependent on rescue, and a personification of Ireland in some way. Particularly in House of Splendid Isolation, O’Brien references Dark Rosaleen. James Clarence Mangan’s ballad “My Dark Rosaleen,” written during the reign of Elizabeth in England, exemplifies the qualities of the young maiden as Ireland and offers some understanding of how nuanced O’Brien’s inclusion of these references are. The burning passion Rosaleen inspires in men, as well as her purity and virginal qualities are explicitly labeled: her “holy delicate hands” and status as a “virgin flower” (MacCarthy). Further, many
variations of this ballad featured Rosaleen as the “passive victim of some unworthy captor” which clearly describes Josie’s situation with the terrorist McGreevy (McCullen 37). Rosaleen’s salvation is her “steadfast devotion” to her home and her faith that a loyal Irishman will come to save her, which in most versions of the story, he, of course, does (McCullen 37). Her fate, and as the allegory suggests, the nation’s fate rests upon the conservation of conventional gender roles with women passively domestic and men valiantly active. The ultimate sacrifice as the final line warns, “ere you can fade, ere you can die” can be requested of any true Irish patriot, regardless of gender at any time. Certainly this underlying history of a sacrificial female icon is relevant in dissecting the tragic endings of O’Brien’s Kate and Josie.

In both the Trilogy and House, O’Brien also consistently directly and indirectly references both Cathleen ni Houlihan and the Shan na Vocht. If the imagery and description of her physical appearance weren’t enough, Caithleen’s name in the Trilogy is a clear reference to the character made most famous by Yeats and Lady Gregory in their play Cathleen ni Houlihan. Though she is most often called Kate, the use of her full name at the beginning of the novel and throughout the works at key points underscores the historical and literary allusion. Almost all of the older female characters in both books are obliquely referred to as Shan na Vochts as well. Interestingly, Cathleen ni Houlihan and the Shan na Vocht have been conflated over time and are used interchangeably in literature, despite the fact that one represents a maiden and one a mother. O’Brien’s use of references that evoke this biologically impossible standard reinforces her awareness of the dichotomous expectations such icons create. All three of her main female characters as well as her secondary characters can be viewed in context of how much they conform
to or reject these stereotypes, an examination which O’Brien sets up with her frequent direct and indirect referencing of the icons themselves.

As Kristine Byron notes in her work focused exclusively on the epilogue of the Trilogy, any criticism of O’Brien’s literature must acknowledge religion because ultimately her writing is a “radical critique of a capitalist patriarchy that is specifically Irish and Catholic” (448). The pervasiveness of Catholicism further complicates the societal expectations of women, due to Ireland's particular cultural emphasis on the Virgin Mary, a fact of which O’Brien is clearly aware. One of the opening images of the Trilogy is of the Virgin, staring at Caithleen “icily from a gilt frame,” an inanimate object that Caithleen nevertheless regards with a great amount of fearful reverence (O’Brien 4). O’Brien is certainly not alone in her exploration of religion’s role in creating and maintaining cultural female icons. Dovetailing with both Cathleen ni Houlihan and the Poor Old Woman figure, much research exists on the church’s support of the dualistic expectations of women. C.L. Innes devotes a large portion of her work Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society to the influence of the Catholic church on the feminine portrayal of the nation. She observes that “the cult of the Virgin endorsed not merely chastity and motherhood as womanly ideals, but also humility, obedience, and passive suffering,” moving the focus of this cultural tradition to the effect on women (Innes 40). In accordance with the dual roles of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic Church, Irish women were therefore expected to maintain an impossible balance between chastity and motherhood. The Poor Old Woman and Mother Ireland represent the other side of this dichotomy. Though these women were mothers, they were usually widowed and many times their children were dead as result of some English enforced tragedy (Ryan
76). Alone in the world, and suffering from the cruelties of poverty and the indignity of servitude to the English, these images provided another inspirational vision of a victimized woman which O’Brien references frequently throughout her work.

More specifically, as Helen Thompson notes in her groundbreaking book on the role of Irish women in O’Brien’s work, O’Brien “critiques the iconography of femininity in the shape of the Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland” (2). The dichotomous expectations of women the church touted led to a phenomenon within Irish society that Innes identifies as “Mother Church” (Innes 40). In many ways, the church did assume a nurturing role in Irish society, holding itself chiefly responsible for the moral behavior of its followers just as a parent does within a family unit. Yet the name also implies other factors. Implicit in the portrayal of the Virgin Mary who is both chaste and a mother, Mother Church elevated the role of women to embody both of these aspects. The symbolism of Mother Church, then, acted as a unifying factor between these two seemingly contradictory female roles, providing a very difficult standard against which Irish women were to measure themselves. To be an exemplary wife and mother under these conditions was a balancing act. As McCullen notes, “the Good Irishwoman was the Good Mother, spiritual, fixed at home, transmitting Irishness to her children (37). Her duties went beyond the domestic; she was further required to sacrifice herself, particularly for purity like the Virgin, an act which could end in martyrdom in quest to live up to the epitome of femininity (Stoddard 115). Scholars of O’Brien have also noted this trend in her work as well, and as Amanda Greenwood contends, “Mother Ireland' is simultaneously constructed as victim of patriarchy, and oppressor of her daughters” which creates a “double colonization of Irish women” (“Representations of Femininity” 19). Kathleen
Jacquette’s work focuses on the dual relationship of the church and patriarchy in restricting Irish women, and how O’Brien’s work fights against that by revealing realistic portrayals of Irish women. In short, the variety and intensity of feminine icons against which Irish women historically had to measure themselves presented an arduous challenge, a notion that O’Brien certainly supports in her books.

Also of note, considering that O’Brien’s books are set in the 1940s through 1950s, is the intentional resurgence of these icons in the twentieth century. As Peterson observes, the “particular gendered nationalism” that defines the Irish Republic came about due to a meeting of these historical icons with a current political need (151). Thompson’s book, *The Role of Irish Women in the Writings of Edna O’Brien* hinges around this very premise by examining the “interlocking tropes of nationalism and sexuality in Edna O’Brien’s writing, particularly how Irish women’s sexuality has been used to reinforce Irish national identity from its independence until the 1993 Good Friday Agreement” (1). The critical point here is that while female icons were used for hundreds of years to inspire fervent patriotism, once the goal of independence was achieved, the consequences of using women as a motivational tool became apparent. The reality of these consequences is the focus of O’Brien’s work, hence why Rebecca Pelan argues, “O’Brien’s interest has always been in women who are active and extraordinary rather than passive and average, though she presents the effects or results of passivity on the part of women” (76). Certainly her work is highly critical of the effects of passivity on women, although to what extent her characters are active and extraordinary is a matter not so easily resolved. Regardless of the motivation of her characters, however, the timing of O’Brien’s work is uniquely poised: the postcolonial setting rife with continued
gender inequity supported by cultural norms and the church offered plenty of grounds for criticism, yet the conservative society ensured also that her work would be disputed.

Modern Irish women writers have responded to the effects of these stereotypes in a variety of ways: some seek to deconstruct the feminine idols of the past through critiques and some seek to complicate the figures by writing fiction that includes women’s viewpoints from a new perspective. O’Brien’s place among the latter group – those authors who seek to reimagine the way in which Irish femininity is presented through literature – is somewhat complex. O’Brien seeks to “debunk the mystique of Ireland” by portraying women’s experiences from the viewpoint of female characters (Coughlan 184). More specifically, O’Brien holds a “well deserved reputation as an author who passionately and eloquently addresses women’s needs and desires for liberation and autonomy, particularly in sexual matters” (Farquarson and Schrank 110). This reputation is not universally accepted however, especially in the early part of O’Brien’s career. Although it is clear that issues of gender and national identity, including themes of iconography and religion figure heavily into O’Brien’s work, how these themes are dissected in criticism vary greatly, especially in the last ten years.
CHAPTER 2

“THE SILLY AND THE SERIOUS”

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF O’BRIEN’S WORK

In considering the critical reception of O’Brien’s work, it is necessary to examine the popular argument that the biggest obstacle to positive reviews is O’Brien herself. Everything from O’Brien’s physical appearance, to her departure from Ireland, to her public persona has figured into the perception of her work. Multiple sides of this argument are explored by Amanda Greenwood in her doctoral dissertation, which according to other O’Brien scholars offered “the fullest assessment” of O’Brien’s body of work at the time of its publication in 2003 (Laing, Mooney, and O’Connor 3).

Greenwood does assent, “It is difficult to establish the extent to which O’Brien undermines her own position as a 'serious' writer, and how much it is undermined for her. She has advertised shampoo – Wella's 'Crisan' in the 1970s – and she has appeared on television chat shows” (“Representations” 4). However, she concludes that the focus on O’Brien’s public image, often “to an obsessive degree,” is the reason for a delayed appearance of objective critical responses to her work (“Representations” 2). Yet Greenwood is certainly not the only scholar attempting to unpack this mystery. The introductions to the two collected works of essays on O’Brien, New Critical Perspectives and Wild Colonial Girl, each touch upon this topic in their early discussions of the author. Peggy O’Brien argues that Edna O’Brien’s very image, her red hair, green eyes, and overall beguiling “Irishness” precludes her work from being taken seriously (475). Certainly, her physical appearance, whether fairly or unfairly, has been a major focus of
those reviewing her work. Thompson outlines numerous interviews and reviews that focus on O’Brien’s appearance, describing such whimsical details as her “fragile wrists,” and “wonderful trademark hair, an extraordinary luxuriant plumage like that of a very intelligent alert rare bird” (6). Certainly O’Brien is not the only female author to encounter such shallow criticism. David Richter identifies a genre of “‘phallic criticism’ that emphasizes the writers’ figurative “bust, waist, and hip measurements” rather than their literary qualities” in his work The Critical Tradition (1504). Yet ironically for O’Brien in this instance, the focus on her aesthetic qualities at the expense of her intellectual ones is a plight experienced and denigrated by her own characters, which affects her literary career as well as the perceptions of the women in her work.

Another common early criticism of O’Brien’s work is that her writing tended to be overly personal, autobiographical, and repetitive. In analyzing her early work, especially the Trilogy, critics were fascinated with “the extent to which O’Brien’s own life has been transformed into the early novels” (Haule 216). Certainly authorial intent is a largely contested topic in literary criticism with a variety of theories in direct opposition to each other, yet in O’Brien’s case, this fascination takes on a whole new level. Many reviews lambasted O’Brien’s “token Irishness” and viewed her female characters solely in light of her own public image (Greenwood, “Representations” 1). Analyzing a typical early review, Greenwood summarizes: “Lambert refers to 'Ms. O'Brien's love-and-leprechaunish pen', pointing out that O'Brien is known largely for her 'fey, charming and obviously autobiographical' earlier works” (“Representations” 9). Though the words “fresh” and “charming” litter her early reviews, so do “specious” and “familiar” (Greenwood, “Representations” 9). Another early critic equivocates in 1960, “The
*Country Girls* may be shallow, but it presents a smooth and pleasing surface” (Greenwood, “Representations” 34). These varied reviews, while not wholly unpleasant, do not indicate any sort of depth or breadth in O’Brien’s writing worthy of academic inquiry. At best, many early critics marginalized her work as the sort of charming journaling exercise of an author gifted with words, but ultimately (and ironically) prey to national stereotypes of a different sort than gender. Whether viewed as a national trope, girlish romance, or stylized memoirs of a sort, few initial reviews focused on the literary value of O’Brien’s work on its own.

Perhaps the most well known scholarly article in establishing a reductive link between O’Brien’s writing and a focus on its potential autobiographical nature is “The Silly and the Serious” by Peggy O’Brien. “The Silly and the Serious” attempts to reduce O’Brien’s work to habitual pandering to Irish stereotypes and “specious” use of female stereotypes played out through characters Kate and Baba. Yet as Greenwood rightly notes, “this title indicates its author's determination to set up polarities and contradictions” (Greenwood, “Representations” 12). Published in 1987 (on the later end of the critics mentioned in the previous paragraph), Peggy O’Brien’s work is significant in that it represents a continuation and amalgamation of the criticism that prohibited O’Brien’s work from serious academic inquiry for so long. In addition to chastising other critics for being “beguiled by O’Brien’s Irishness” she undertakes a psychological analysis of O’Brien’s work, focused on autobiography, which will ostensibly help her account for the “inadequacies of her prose” (P. O’Brien 475, 474). Arguing that her characters are specious, that O’Brien is obsessed with her mother and father, and that the endings of her works are disappointing, Peggy O’Brien pulls no punches in her
assessment of O’Brien as an author. Since its publication, however, many champions of O’Brien’s work have since dismissed this article with thorough and critical analysis, most notably Haule, Thompson, Morgan, and Greenwood. Yet despite its current unpopularity, Peggy O’Brien’s initial success with the article is one crucial example that helps explain the dearth of objective criticism on O’Brien’s work that has nothing to do with her hair color or ability to move in public circles.

Ultimately, critics of O’Brien will have to reckon with the literature itself separate from her public image. Yet, as is often the case with a still living author, a fascination with the creator is to be expected. Whether or not O’Brien’s public image is helpful to her or not, Greenwood's assessment rings true; “However whilst Edna O'Brien's contradictory public persona does little to facilitate 'serious' and objective assessment of her work, her uncertainties seem understandable, given the extremes of response discernable in critical receptions of her work” (“Representations” 7). Overall, much of the critical work on O’Brien exists at an interesting theoretical crossroads, between the feminist examinations of her work, to the New Criticism advocates that argue her intent should not matter, to the still evolving nature of work being produced by a living author. For the purposes of this paper, the examination of her work also exists squarely within this crossroads. An examination of the female characters relies by necessity on the work done by scholars in this field, such as Pelan, Greenwood, and Thompson; while all of these authors reject the focus on O’Brien’s public persona as a detriment to serious examination of her work, they also all incorporate quotes from O’Brien that concern authorial intent to varying degrees. The textual analysis of O’Brien’s work proves her writing can stand on its own, while the admission by O’Brien that nation, gender,
religion, and injustice are intentionally themes of her work justifies an examination of those very themes.

Since the prodigious amount of writing that O’Brien has achieved spans a period of over fifty years currently, much work has been done to not only examine these themes but to examine them over the course of her career. In general, most critical work on O’Brien identifies a shift in her work from more conventional to more progressive in terms of gender roles. While this shift is gradual and marked in different places by some, *The Country Girls Trilogy* by virtue of its place as her first work is always at one end of the spectrum. *House of Splendid Isolation*, the first book in her much more recent trilogy that includes *Down By the River* and *Wild Decembers* is often placed at the other. Of course that both works consist of or are part of a trilogy format provides easy initial grounds for their comparison. Yet it is also the timing of the works that merits examining them side-by-side. As Harris argues, *House* was written in O’Brien’s sixties after a long period of silence and “marks a transition for the prolific writer” (125). The topics of the works are viewed as discrete as well: “Unlike her previous work, which has been perceived as being preoccupied with the individual Irish female subject pursuing personal liberation at home and abroad, *House of Splendid Isolation* opens O’Brien’s trilogy on contemporary Ireland which more explicitly examines the national culture that shapes the individual subject” (Harris 125). This focus on politics and national culture in addition to gender provoked many critics to express a perceived progression in O’Brien’s work. Farquarson and Schrank argue that O’Brien’s early characters “lack psychosocial grounding and see themselves as floating free of social and historical contexts” which “exacerbates their feelings of powerlessness and purposelessness” (111). Further, *House
is a “departure” and unlike any other previous works of O’Brien’s, the “most politicized” (Farquarson and Schrank 136). They contend that it is not only O’Brien’s subject matter but the actions and intentions of her characters that create comparatively more radical work in her later books, beginning with *House*. Thompson’s analysis focuses on the scope of O’Brien’s work, particularly the *Trilogy* and her three most recent novels, and she argues that there is a “growing agency” in her characters as they move from “daughterhood and domination to sisterhood and increased agency” (2). Further, Thompson concludes that Josie finds “agency” through her relationship with McGreevy while Kate and Baba are lacking any similar situation, and therefore ultimately passive (16). Are these works so clearly separated at opposite ends of a conventional to progressive shift? O’Brien’s own insight into Irish literary history offers a new perspective that informs the answer this question, and a close examination of the texts offers an answer that complicates where the shift in O’Brien’s writing is placed.
CHAPTER 3
FROM PROGRESSIVE TO TRADITIONAL:
TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE COUNTRY GIRLS TRILOGY AND HOUSE OF
SPLENDID ISOLATION

In the aforementioned essay, “Why Irish Heroines Don’t Have To Be Good Anymore,” O’Brien examines a larger shift in the context of Irish literature as whole, while also explaining the conception of her female characters. Harkening back to the 1700s, she extols female poet Eileen O’Leary for her “passion” and “lack of timidity” (“Why Irish Heroines”). She similarly references the lyrical poem “The Old Woman of Beare” for its topics of unbridled passion and love. Of these earlier poets, O’Brien argues, work was produced with a surprising modernity brought about by the agency and “initiative” of the female characters (“Why Irish Heroines”). Yet it is important to note that while their actions may have been starkly different, the ends met by the female characters were equally dire; a fact that O’Brien insists does not negate the radical nature of their previous acts. She concludes, “It is true that all these heroines came to a calamitous end but their tragedy is grand tragedy and not a rasping lay composed by a merely bitter woman” (“Why Irish Heroines”). This is the most crucial underlying message of this essay that places all of her female characters in a historical literary context.

The creation of O’Brien’s female characters, as she baldly states, is in reaction to the conventionality of Irish female literary heroes. Those same descriptors, “gentle, tremulous, gullible, devout, masochistic and beautiful” do crop up with remarkable
frequency in 19th and 20th century Irish literature ("Why Irish Heroines"). O’Brien notes *The Collegians* by Gerald Griffin as an example, but the work of C.L. Innes and Rebecca Pelan among others provides significant academic support for this phenomenon. While O’Brien does mention the existence of Constance Markievicz, she is an exception to the rule, and her literary appearances are more intriguing since they were based, of course, on the woman herself, as she existed in real life. Armed with this inspiring historical example, and the examples of female characters from much older poems, O’Brien set out to create carefully crafted female characters.

Using Kate and Baba from the *Trilogy* as her example, O’Brien ties her work inextricably to nationalized gender stereotypes and elaborates on her concept of the grand tragedy. Of her heroines, O’Brien writes, “I decided to have two, one who would conform to both my own and my country's view of what an Irish woman should be and one who would undermine every piece of protocol and religion and hypocrisy that there was” ("Why Irish Heroines"). However, she also notes that these characters must exist together, and that their lives are “made bearable by the company of each other” ("Why Irish Heroines"). This is significant, because while O’Brien does set up Baba as the clear foil to Kate, they function as a pair, and between the two of them do achieve a version of the “grand tragedy” that O’Brien references previously in her work. That O’Brien wanted for them to achieve this end is made clear as well – the article was written in 1986 as the new version of the *Trilogy* with the epilogue was released. O’Brien writes of leaving the characters “suspended” for twenty years, and of her rationale for penning the epilogue: that “Baba's asperity had to prevail” ("Why Irish Heroines"). Further, she writes of taking up a “cudgel against life” through Baba’s actions, a phrase that can only evoke notions of
power and agency (“Why Irish Heroines”). This “war of words” is what makes O’Brien’s work progressive in terms of gender (“Why Irish Heroines”). The actions of her characters, the initiative they take in acts of small rebellion, their use of language designed to reveal their process of self discovery and discovery of the way society functions around them, separate them from conventional Irish literary characters. Kate, Baba, and Josie all come to some degree of bitterness in their conclusions, but which among them achieve O’Brien’s sense of grand tragedy? Despite the evidence that the character that might best fit this description hail from her most recent work, it is actually O’Brien’s oldest work, that has most evolved over time, that merits this description.

Since she is known to be progressive, many critics note the trend in her work that “condemns the women of Ireland to the support of a social and moral order that is hopelessly destructive” (Hauled 217). The Country Girls Trilogy and House of Splendid Isolation represent two very different manifestations of this trend. The three main female characters, Kate, Baba, and Josie can all be considered departures from standard gender roles, but to very different degrees. Kate and Josie struggle with their femininity and role as mothers, ultimately coming to tragic ends. Though Josie attempts to buck society’s standards she is unsuccessful and cannot fulfill the role of a mother or a rebel or even some hybrid of the two. Kate remains the typical passive and limpid Irish female, with brief but significant rebellions, which serve to place more sharply into contrast the character Baba. Baba represents O’Brien’s labored creation of a lyrical/modern woman who is in control of her fate – as much as society allows – and doesn’t conform to stereotypes. It is Baba, and particularly her voice in the epilogue that transforms The Country Girls trilogy from a bitter and sad story about two girls and their adventures to a
progressive novel that complicates gender roles. In contrast, Josie demonstrates that happiness does not result from either embracing gender roles or fighting against them, and her lack of stance doesn’t lend the purpose to her demise that O’Brien establishes is necessary for that sacrifice.

Kate, arguably the least complicated of the three characters initially embodies all the negative aspects of typical Irish female icons and none of the positive. She is passive, melancholy, victimized, and weak. Like a good country maiden, she initially waxes poetic about nature describing at length the beauty of the “delicate wandering mist,” “haloes of water,” and water that “glistened like silver” (Trilogy 3). Similar passages punctuate the novel from Kate’s perspective, a trait that is initially reminiscent of Cathleen ni Houlihan and Dark Rosaleen with their deep ties to the land itself. Yet her poetic descriptions also speak to her intelligence, which O’Brien emphasizes in the first novel. She wins a scholarship to a convent school and also wins a reputation as something of a “genius” among her schoolmates with a natural gift of language (Trilogy 73). She loves to read, is quick to correct spelling, and blushes “even to her earlobes” when she breaks the rules unwittingly (Trilogy 68). Later among the men of Dublin, she irritates Baba by continuing to ask men on dates if they have read James Joyce (Trilogy 150). Kate is the picture of innocence and naïveté, even in her schoolgirl crush on an older man aptly dubbed Mr. Gentleman, but her character is balanced by her early intellectual promise.

While O’Brien does much to establish Kate’s intelligence and love of language, she also places Kate firmly in the role of the victim that doubles as intense social commentary. Kate is ruled over by the memory of her mother, an eccentric and tragic
figure who was unable to escape the tyranny of her drunken father. Her mother used to ask Kate if she would become a nun because, “It was better than marrying. Anything was she thought” (Trilogy 67). She is periodically terrorized by her father who is unfailingly cruel to her, drunk or sober. She is further ruled over by Baba, giving her sentimental jewelry and following her orders, even when those orders destroy her future (Trilogy 91). Baba’s own father speaks of Kate as “Baba’s tool” (Trilogy 109). Though she speaks of it lightly in the narrative, Kate’s decision to go along with Baba’s plan and deface a picture, expelling them from the convent effectively ends her opportunity for education. Her intelligence was an opportunity for her to become something more than a stereotype, and yet O’Brien characterizes her as thoroughly powerless to change her situation. After the punishment has been meted out, Kate lays in bed thinking of a way to “put an end to [her] life” (Trilogy 106). She protests that she will continue school in Dublin but as she and Baba focus on men, older men, and men with money this chance is irreparably undermined.

The types of men Kate seeks relationships with are indicative of her lack of self-esteem and further cement her into a typical passive and victimized female role. Older men, rigidly set in their ways, unavailable, at times emotionally cruel – these are the characters she consistently falls for. Their dominance of Kate is reinforced by their life situations. As Greenwood notes, “Each is older than Caithleen, each is sexually experienced and professional, and each is rendered in some way 'mysterious' by the inaccessibility of his past life” (“Representations” 38). Unlike Baba she has no revolving door of admirers that she ushers in and out. Despite sprinklings of compliments that attest to her “Rubenesque” beauty, Kate describes herself as “tall and gawky, with a bewildered
look and a mass of bewildered auburn hair” (Trilogy 121). Though Kate claims to desire, “Young men. Romance. Love and things,” she has eyes only for two men that do not at all fit this description (Trilogy 145).

An innocent childhood crush quickly evolves into something more sinister when the character Mr. Gentleman begins to reciprocate Kate’s affections. The much older Mr. Gentleman is known around town for his quiet and seemingly aristocratic ways, but Kate is more impressed by his “sad smile” (Trilogy 55). Their relationship begins innocently enough but progresses with romantic intent inappropriate for a man already married, much less an older man with a girl many decades his junior. He appears to be intoxicated by her youth, ordering that Kate not wear lipstick and emphasizing her “sweetness” repeatedly (Trilogy 56). He meets her secretly, gives her gifts that she is not allowed to wear, and criticizes her when she speaks of the future (Trilogy 97). During the years that Kate is at school, her contact with Mr. Gentleman is limited to holidays where he calls her his “freckle faced daughter” while kissing the length of her arm (Trilogy 101). Their relationship continues when Kate is in Dublin, where she oddly and affectionately describes his appearance as the “carved pale face” of “an old, old man” (Trilogy 157). Finally he sneaks into her boarding house (where men are not allowed) and promises to make love to her (Trilogy 162). Yet he merely asks her to undress and looks at her, calling her alternately a “bad girl” and a “sweet country girl” continuing to hold her in a purgatory of conflicting expectations (Trilogy 165). He promises to take her to Vienna, throwing Kate into a frenzy of shopping, packing, and romantic notions from which she emerges alone at their agreed meeting place, stood up and deserted. A romantic hero Mr. Gentleman is not.
At the beginning of the next novel, aptly entitled the Lonely Girl, Kate meets Eugene, another older man she is attracted to because of his “sad face” that looked like a “saint’s face carved out of gray stone” (Trilogy 184). Her attraction to older men she views as idols references her early reverential fear of the Virgin Mary and emphasizes her need to laud and obey. Once again the relationship begins innocently enough, with an unplanned meeting in a tea shop. Kate makes her girlish intentions clear and Eugene stresses his “natural, puritan caution” and that he is “a man more than old enough to know better” (Trilogy 199). From the outset his manner is condescending toward her, and even his compliments are thinly veiled insults; he describes her “lemur” eyes when she admits she does not know what a lemur is (Trilogy 201). He does not tell her he is married and is “unapologetic” when she finds out, retorting, “you never asked” (Trilogy 213). He displays the same attitude when she later finds out he also has a child. Despite her anger, she begins to visit him in his isolated country house and eventually moves in with him, quitting her job and any semblance of independence. Even with this new intimacy, she is still terrified he might “lure” her up to the bedroom (Trilogy 223). Of course, eventually he does, and they consummate their relationship, though it takes multiple tries for Kate to overcome her anxiety. Kate has lost both her innocence and her independence, and with the sexual act relinquished one facet of the maiden/mother hybrid expected of her by Irish society.

At the outset of the third book, it is significant that the narrative is either in Baba’s voice or in third person describing Kate’s life, symbolizing that she has lost control over her own fate. Kate cannot fill the role of the Irish maiden as she is no longer virginal, nor does she possess any deep commitment to the land any longer. She is left
with the images of the Mother and Cathleen ni Houlihan; if she were to gain happiness and fulfillment through childbirth perhaps this would be her redeeming quality. Yet, like Josie, she is terrified of childbirth throughout the novel, and also absolutely ignorant as to how it might happen (Trilogy 233). In the last novel, it seems she might finally escape Eugene when Baba convinces her to go to England; yet her freedom is short lived when she meets up with him again and her fears become true. She becomes pregnant, and quickly marries Eugene who is now divorced. The situation is not of her own volition, as the reader later discovers (Trilogy 404). Their marriage doesn’t last long, as she cheats, not physically but emotionally with another man to try to fill the void of her self esteem. This is the final straw for Eugene, who relinquishes her entirely to the role of the victim. He takes up with another woman and keeps the child from her. Kate does express love for the child, but often uses him as an emotional drain, pouring all her worries and anxiety down on him and trying to manipulate him to help her with her own life. He reminds her too much of the “terror of being young” (Trilogy 484). Not only is she still terrified, she is helpless. As she observes, “I had never made decisions in my life. My clothes had always been bought for me, my food decided on, even my outings were decided by Baba” (Trilogy 232). In a last ditch attempt at control and rejection of the role of mother, she has herself sterilized (Trilogy 507). While a significant act of rebellion, especially at the time in which the novel is set, it is not enough to shake Kate from her self defeating path. Eventually, it becomes obvious that Kate cannot care for herself or the child, and once again she turns to Baba, who observes that she is like someone “of whom too much had been cut away” (Trilogy 508). This is the last line of the third novel, and the last time the reader has any intimacy with Kate, as Baba reveals in the epilogue that she kills herself.
Overall Kate reads as a shallow female shadow of another Irish icon, though male: Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Just as it seems that Stephen is plagued by indecision and swept along by popular opinion alternately, Kate is paralyzed by her inability to act in her own best interest. Yet while Stephen is led on a journey of self-discovery, Kate loses herself piece by piece throughout the novel, her academic potential, innocence, beauty and confidence shedding to reveal a lack of core. The growth of consciousness and complexity of language that identifies Stephen’s story as a bildungsroman is not evident in the *Trilogy*, which makes categorization of the novels more difficult. Stephen ends the novel having come to an understanding of what art, literature, and beauty mean to him and resolves to pursue what he believes is his calling by leaving Ireland. That Kate ends the novel by killing herself is not surprising but perhaps the ultimate affront to Irish sensibilities. In a highly Catholic nation this is an unpardonable sin, and one is further associated with selfishness and low self-esteem. Kate is the antithesis of what O’Brien wants to illustrate of femininity – a passive, weak, deeply unhappy woman who is unable to find any happiness. Her tragic end does not inspire greatness or grandness, but rather focuses the reader’s attention both on the negative qualities of the society that produced her, and on Baba who serves as her foil.

If Kate falls short of all Irish feminine cultural expectations, Baba thoroughly rejects them. A rather unlikable character in the first novel, Baba is relentlessly cruel and manipulative toward everyone in her life, particularly Kate. She flaunts her stable and relatively comfortable family life and must have whatever Kate wants, whether it is a ring or admission to a school, only to toss it carelessly aside. As Kate observes, “once Baba got something, she no longer valued it” (*Trilogy* 91). This is markedly different from both
Kate and her mother cling to tokens and hoard small objects as if keeping them might make the sentiment behind them more real. Throughout all of Baba’s escapades she retains an air of supreme optimism and confidence that carries over into her actions, even though luck is not always on her side. Significantly, the first two novels are written from Kate’s point of view with Baba almost constantly featured, but never in the first person. Only in the third novel does Baba begin to have a voice, and then she entirely takes over in the epilogue as it becomes clear that her strength is her redeeming feature.

The first scene of the novel depicts the two girls travelling down country lanes to school, and is significant in that it is thoroughly indicative of their relationship. Kate walks while Baba rides a bike. Kate picks lilac to please the teacher and Baba takes it and the credit as well. Even at this early adolescent age, Baba rides on the tide of her own personality; the one and only time in the novel she plays the follower rather than the leader by going to the convent with Kate she is miserable. She is so unsuited to life there that she states, “I’d rather be a Protestant,” a radical statement for the time but certainly one fitting of her nature (Trilogy 73). She also is straining against the bonds of society to learn more about sexuality even at her age and in her present environment. When speaking with older girls, Baba asks, “are you fast?” “bluntly” and explains to Kate “it’s a woman who has a baby quicker than another woman” (Trilogy 77). Even though her information is not accurate, the fact that she has reasoned herself this far and is asking questions of older girls sets a precedent for her as a sexually interested and aware character, one she lives up to throughout the novels.

After the girls are expelled from the convent (again due to Baba’s illicit knowledge of sex) they go to Dublin at Baba’s behest to chase men and live the life. Or
as Baba says on their first night in Dublin, “I’m going to blow up this town” (*Trilogy* 133). Even in looks, Baba is the opposite of Kate. Where Kate is tall, buxom, auburn haired and slightly unkempt, Baba is “small and thin, with her hair cut short like a boy’s and little tempting curls falling onto her forehead. She was neat looking, and any man could lift her up in his arms and carry her off” (*Trilogy* 121). The irony of course, is that she is not likely to let that happen. She initiates contact with men, dragging Kate to dances, arranging dates, speaking to strangers. She decrees that she and Kate will wear only black underwear since it would be “useful if we ever had a street accident or men were trying to strip us in the backs of cars,” although she balances this vain reasoning with the pragmatic observation that they will also have to wash it less often (*Trilogy* 142).

As the first novel progresses Baba becomes more bold, haunting bars where wealthy men drink searching for dates which she views as an exchange – she gets dinner and a night out on the town, they get the pleasure of her company. As of yet, she doesn’t give more than that. When Kate balks, Baba gives a speech that foreshadows her bold and blunt epilogue: “We’re eighteen and we’re bored to death . . . We want to live. Drink gin. Squeeze into the front of big cars and drive up outside big hotels. We want to go places” (*Trilogy* 145). She goes on to rationalize why she goes after older men, brokenly stating, “smell o’ hair oil . . . out in the woods after tea and a damp hand fumbling in your skirt. No, sir. We’ve had all the bloody air we’ll ever need. We want life” (*Trilogy* 145). Kate wants romance, Baba wants life.

Even moments of perceived weakness serve to advance Baba as a strong character. Baba contracts tuberculosis and has to enter a sanitarium. Given that this occurs toward the end of the novel, it potentially seems like an opportunity to write her
out of the following two books. Yet the disease makes her look “older and wiser” and she puts on lipstick and smiles at herself “bravely” in the mirror before she leaves (Trilogy 159). Therefore it is little surprise when she enters the first page of the second book in the series waltzing (Trilogy 179). Throughout all the drama of Eugene and Kate’s relationship, which takes up most of the second novel, Baba is quiet. She has a brief scare that she is pregnant and in response to Kate’s naive comment that she can’t be pregnant because she’s “not even living with anyone,” Baba responds, “Can’t! It’s the simplest bloody thing, I mean it’s simpler than owning two coats or getting asked to a party” (Trilogy 347). However, Baba is not pregnant and this brief interlude reveals that she is still much more knowledgeable than Kate and she still hates “pity and that slop of holding her hand” (Trilogy 347). Once again Baba initiates change as she decides to move to England, convincing Kate to following along, to “have a whale of a time” and to “see life” (Trilogy 363). This decision poises her to play an even more important role in the next novel.

The third novel begins in Baba’s voice for the first time, and the writing style shifts into the brusque, matter of fact tone that sets her far apart from conventional Irish females. She is searching for a more permanent and comfortable situation, a marriage where she is in control, unlike Kate. She meets a builder who is very wealthy, and more importantly somewhat slow. She remarks, “anybody that vulnerable is nice, at least that’s how I feel. Another dinner. Two dinners in one week and a bunch of flowers sent to me. The first thought I had when I saw the flowers was, could I sell them at cut rates” (Trilogy 383). There is no romance in their relationship; rather it is a pragmatic arrangement on Baba’s part. It is far from perfect – she describes, “I liked his money and
his slob ways: I didn’t mind holding hands at the pictures, but I had no urge to go to bed
with him” (Trilogy 385). Despite this one inconvenience, she marries him and lives in the
lap of luxury, where she is still able to manipulate other people’s lives as well as cater to
her own desires. She arranges meetings for Kate and her clandestine emotional affair and
she has physical affairs of her own. Furthermore, she becomes increasingly critical of
Kate. Her insults used to limit themselves to iterations of calling her a “bleedin’ eedjit”
whereas now she lashes out, “she was so goddamn servile I could have killed her”
(Trilogy 421). Even in the state of marriage, Baba is not at all the image of the perfect
wife or mother.

Rather than allowing a desire for romance to blind her sense of pragmatism, Baba
approaches marriage with the same cold cynicism that defines many of her actions.
Greenwood uses the term “commercial” to describe Baba’s decision to marry Frank, and
it’s an apt word to describe the business-like exchange as managed by Baba
(“Representations” 74). While Kate’s emotional attachment to men is immediate, Baba’s
attraction focuses on physicality or practicality first. In all of their encounters with men,
Baba is either looking to receive some sort of material gain or satisfy lust. While Baba’s
relationship with Frank certainly doesn’t fall into the latter category, it does into the
former, and by marrying him Baba assures herself a life of leisure. Certainly this is no
fairytale ending for Baba; in a similar situation to what Josie experiences in House, her
wedding night is less than ideal and reveals threatening aspects of her husband’s
character. However, Baba admits “the only times [she] found marriage at all pleasing
[were] when [she] was handing out his money,” an observation which takes on many
forms (Trilogy 422). Her ability to manipulate her home situation to invite Kate to stay,
to host lavish parties, and to host her own indiscretions does allow her a certain kind of freedom, a fact which should not be discounted.

Nature is a phenomenon Baba attempts to control as well, though not as successfully as Josie. After her affair she realizes she is pregnant and reacts, “I began to wonder what I could do. When did it remotely resemble a child, because what I had to do ought to be done before that” (*Trilogy* 459). She knows the child is a result of an affair and even more significantly has no desire to be a mother. She buys a medical book and looks for information on abortion, which she cannot find. Instead she decides to try to treat the problem herself with a castor oil bath, which quickly becomes painful and dangerous. Yet she will not let Kate get her out of the bath, remarking that “imagine going through all the pain and sweat and sickness that I’d gone through and then give up in the middle” (*Trilogy* 463). When it’s unsuccessful, she and Kate determine that they will tell Frank, which Baba does unapologetically. Frank is of course angry, and she responds, “did you think I was going to live frustrated?” (*Trilogy* 468). She threatens to leave him, and he offers to keep her as his wife “in theory” (*Trilogy* 469). The situation works out to her advantage. Baba is able to control the situation to have as little effect on her life as possible. She even states that she wishes she was a “savage” and could birth the baby during her daily activities and then get back to work with no fuss (*Trilogy* 473). Baba has in turn rejected the role of both chaste maiden and nurturing mother.

The shift that *The Country Girls Trilogy* embodies is most evident in a comparison between the beginning of the first book and the epilogue. The former is written in first person by Kate in the country, full of innocence, and the latter in first person by Baba in the city full of cynicism. The first line: “it goes on, by Jesus, it goes
“on” is indicative of the fragmented, angry, caustic, and aggressive tone of the epilogue (Trilogy 511). In it, Baba details Kate’s suicide in pieces, and tears her character and society itself to shreds. “Bilge” she labels things in single word sentences (Trilogy 511). “Tautology” she gripes in another, “it’s that surface fucking niceness that grates on me” (Trilogy 511). She lets her radical views on sexuality fly, advocating sex with men of different races and a “harmless fuck” to make her feel good (Trilogy 514). The story shifts quickly between her waiting for Kate’s coffin, her vacationing alone, and her coming back to Frank who has had a stroke, an action that causes her to pity him like she did when they first met (Trilogy 520). She insults the Pope, claiming that he keeps women “in bondage, sexual bondage above all” (Trilogy 522). She details Kate’s last days, cementing her role as a martyr, describing, “The worst bit was when she started accusing herself, said she was ashamed of being miserable when there was drought and famine and holocausts” (Trilogy 528). The momentum of the passage picks up, with the force of Kate’s suicide pressing down and Baba concluding,

I’m walking toward the hearse now and thinking of Durack’s motto – an old soldier, Baba, and old soldier, and I’m praying that her son won’t interrogate me because there are some things in this world you cannot ask, and oh, Agnus Dei, there are some things in this world you cannot answer. (Trilogy 531)

This last sentence of the novel encapsulates Baba. She takes traditional images – soldiers and religion – and turns them on their head. She is the soldier, not the victim, and she is the lion-like lamb who ironically does not let religion dictate her actions. Though the ending is not positive, Baba is still alive and a symbol for O’Brien’s vision of modern womanhood, rough and disturbing as it may be.
In *House of Splendid Isolation*, O’Brian’s most recent and allegedly most progressive book, the reader might expect Josie to thoroughly reject all comparisons to conventional female icons, yet in reality this is not the case. O’Brien focuses heavily on the importance of birth and motherhood in the novel, seemingly setting Josie up in places to assume the role of The Mother. However, the anachronistic manner in which the story is told also debunks the reader’s expectations. As an elderly Josie questions toward the beginning of the novel: “Would she have married James, or having married him, would she have made the best of it and borne him a child, a daughter who would be calling on her now, fussing, tending, fetching a shawl or a bedjacket, saying, ‘Mama . . . Mama’?” (*House* 26). Thus from the beginning, it appears that Josie will ultimately fail to become an icon of motherhood, try as she might. She falls victim to the phenomenon that O’Brien writes of in her personal memoir, *Mother Ireland*: “the person you are is anathema to the person you would like to be” (*House* 34). As Josie’s character develops, she attempts to publicly act the part of The Mother, but privately she begins to fight against the image, first in thoughts and then in actions.

The newly married Josie is aware of her disinclination toward her husband and the consummation of the marriage, but tries to reason with herself repeatedly. She assures herself, “My reserve, or is it my disgust, will pass, and when we go to bed tonight these doubts will have vanished” (*House* 30). Yet her goodwill, her focus on listing his good qualities, and even her endurance of the crude sexual humor of her husband and brother does not succeed in transforming her into the perfect wife. However, her husband and brother in law do succeed in setting up their goals of universal womanhood. Just like the mayflies, to “give life,” whether or not it involves ultimate sacrifice, is a woman’s lot
(House 38). This view is reinforced by the neighbor’s insistence that children would lift the curse on the house and the gypsy’s vague prophecy about a man coming in and a child going out (House 43, 44). The beginning of their marriage is steeped in uncertainty and violence, both of which are dominated by the looming expectation of childbirth.

Josie’s initial reluctance to pursue an intimate relationship with her husband is quickly exacerbated by his cruel treatment of her. Perhaps he has always been predisposed to violence, perhaps her cool behavior toward him drove him to assert his dominance over her, or perhaps the talk of the neighbors concerning the lack of a child necessitated his need to prove his manliness (House 46). Whatever the case may be, Josie is forced to endure bouts of his drunkenness alternated with episodes of forced sex, written in troubling bestial language. He “mounts her without saying a word” holds her mouth shut “clamping the way he might clamp an animal” and “endeavors to prise her apart” (House 47). Besides the obvious act of power that the rape act entails, James continues this cruelty for the purpose of creating “issue,” which he describes as a son (House 47). Josie’s ability to transform into a mother – The Mother – is inherent to the success of her marriage, her acceptance in society, her role as a woman spiritually, both Catholic and folkloric as implied by the gypsy woman. With such incessant and surrounding pressure, Josie begins to buckle and fight against these expectations in her private life.

Josie’s rebellion goes far beyond her efforts to fight back during the unwanted sexual act with her husband. After laying the foundation for her concerns by claiming to some that she was medically unable to have a baby, she must deal with the reality that she is, in fact, pregnant. This is the opportunity for her to seal herself into the role of The
Mother, to break the curse of infertility in James’ family, to quell the gossip of the neighbors, and to live up to a deeply entrenched national expectation. Yet she cannot. She transforms the baby into a thing, even while it is in her womb still she calls it “not a normal child” and feels it crying inside at all hours (House 49). She goes as far as to call it a banshee, and prays fervently that she will lose the child. The irony of praying to a Catholic god that sanctifies marriage and motherhood, idealizing the Virgin Mary is lost upon her. Desperate, she goes to a doctor to remedy her problem.

Interestingly, Josie’s encounter with the doctor reinforces not only her deep fear of having a baby, but also her awareness of her femininity and ability to seduce men. She carefully manages the appointment, not allowing the doctor to examine her but speaking to him “archly” understanding that he is “assessing her charms” (House 50). She makes a plea for his sympathy, complaining of her loneliness and coming to tears. The conversation takes a sexual turn as the doctor questions her libido, claiming that there is “nothing” he doesn’t know about a woman’s libido and placing a kiss with “his finger on her brow” (House 51). At this point, it is evident that the relationship has moved beyond professional, and Josie seeks to use this possible intimacy to her advantage. She attempts to play the game, hoping they will both “talk code” to one another (House 51). The doctor sees the relationship clearly headed down one path, as he announces his role as “a friend . . . a lover . . . and a doctor” (House 51). However, when he cottons to her request to get rid of the baby she carries he reacts brusquely, in a manner that O’Brien describes with language vaguely mirroring James’ violent treatment of her. He “thrust[s] her off” driving with a “jerkiness” the “wet ribbon of the road” is “swallowed” up by the “bouncing” car (House 51). The encounter solidifies Josie’s terror of becoming a mother
and motherhood in general. As she walks back to her home, she recalls her own negative relationship with her mother, concluding, “this child and her mother were one, in league against her” (House 52). In her mind, these two beings are forcing her into a role she cannot fill, mirroring society’s larger unrealistic expectations.

Though foreshadowing and context clues make it evident that Josie has received an abortion from early on in the novel, the details are not revealed until the end of the book making the impact of the event unclear. Josie leaves a letter, labeled “to be opened after my death” explaining and to an extent justifying her actions (House 210). She does not apologize; rather she speaks of her choice in terms of sacrifice that was made for herself and her own happiness. She baldly states, “I was not ready for a child,” a being that felt “alien” to her even while it was a part of her own body (House 210). The description of the abortion itself is as bestial, visceral, and violent as James’ treatment of her in the marriage bed. With a wire, the woman performing the abortion begins to “root and unsettle,” “skewering” Josie until her insides are “raw” (House 211). Yet Josie does not cry out, for the woman has warned her that if she does, she will stop. Everything, the pain, the shame, the guilt, the fact that she “bled like a pig” is worth the act of removing the baby in that moment; for Josie it is her ultimate act of rebellion (House 211). By rejecting the weight of her husband, the Church, and centuries of feminine icons that dictate she should act a certain way, she refuses to become a mother.

While in her youth, Josie fought against the archetypes of the young maiden and The Mother, in her old age O’Brien depicts her as embodying two other fabled Irish icons: the old woman and Dark Rosaleen. The Old Woman trope is clearly evident – at the beginning of the novel, which coincides with the twilight of Josie’s life, she is old, ill,
and broken down, too weak to walk more than a few hundred yards. Her beauty is gone; she is a shell of the woman she once was. She lives in a big house, empty of people but full of memories and guilt. However, it is interesting to note what some critics identify “O’Brien’s shifting direction” in her work, in that Josie is by far the oldest female character she has included in her novels (Farquarson and Schrank 111). That *House of Splendid Isolation* stands apart from her other novels in terms of the age of characters implies that it may stand apart in themes as well, though perhaps more subtly.

It is into this scene that McGreevy walks, the terrorist reviled for his violent acts who yet tenderly gave birth to a cow. As he himself embodies a dichotomy – ruthless killer yet grieving, sad widower – so he inspires Josie to do the same. With his arrival, she becomes Dark Rosaleen. The stories mirror each other closely. He enters her home and holds her, an unlikely captive, to do his bidding, which may jeopardize the future of Ireland. Josie fights him in the beginning. She wishes to protect her home, her isolation, and protect both from what she believes to be a threat to the country in the form of this masculine inscrutable force. Yet this is where the story begins to stray, displaying O’Brien’s continued revision of Irish female icons. McGreevy becomes simultaneously sympathetic and alluring to Josie, reminding her of her youth and sparking intense feelings in her. The same passion that motivated her to rebel against becoming a mother rises again, though this time with different purpose. Josie seeks to rewrite the Rosaleen story with a different form of sacrifice.

In the legend of Dark Rosaleen, the maiden waits passively for a true patriot to rescue her, sustained by her steadfast faith in home and country. Initially, it appears the same fate may play out for Josie, thus relegating her to a depiction of a standard gender
role. The beginning of her relationship with McGreevy – the fear, suspicion, and questioning of motives – as well as her own weak and passive nature implies she will stick to the story. In a slight twist McGreevy even saves her life once, possibly endangering his own. While this further complicates McGreevy’s character, it only reinforces that Josie is frail and incapable of action. Yet, just as she fought against traditional gender mores earlier in her life by refusing to become The Mother, Josie fights the system again. She decides that despite her own fears and the fears of her neighbors, she will buck popular opinion by becoming emotionally attached to a terrorist. Significantly, she decides to aid him in a highly symbolic act that resembles the Dark Rosaleen story with several key departures.

Dark Rosaleen must wait for a man to come rescue her; Josie takes initiative to save McGreevy. She readies herself for this encounter in a ritualistic manner. She shears her hair, a process that could denote sacrifice or a denial of her femininity (House 210). She is sure of her actions; she “already knows what she must do” (House 220). In order to save McGreevy’s life she will have to sacrifice her own, an act that she speaks of with religious tones, seeing to his “deliverance” (House 220). Despite the sheer danger of the situation and the gunfire, she acts decisively and with “no fear” (House 221). However, just as she was once trapped between the inside and the outside of her home while her husband abused her on the window ledge, so once again does she become literally and figuratively stuck. In a “weird and pantomimed suspension” the floor gives away and she is caught dangling between two floors (House 221). The bullets, “like a swarm of crazed insects” swarm around her, violating her battered body once again (House 221). It is only
in this suspended position that the Sergeant realizes that she is a woman, despite her
cropped hair and reckless bravery.

In death, some part of Josie seems to revert to innocence. Her act of sacrifice has
been partially successful in that McGreevy is not dead, but captured alive. Her body is
brought on a litter, “a bead of blood like a wood strawberry on her temple, fresh, bright,
edible” (House 223). This sweet and clean description of her blood speaks to a pure
vision of Josie that has not been described since the beginning of the novel. She
accomplished what she set out to do, yet is she truly vindicated? Two signs indicate that
the answer, tragically, is no. One comes in the form of the sergeant who questions why
she had to die, answering internally, “For What? For Ireland. For martyrdom. For feck-
all” (House 224). This progression of thoughts indicates that despite Josie’s efforts to
redeem herself through a sacrifice for her country and her soul, the result is nothing, a
continuation of the same cycle that brought her down. As the speaker who finishes this
last section of the novel, vaguely referred to only as “he” concludes, “In thirty years what
will he be. Who will he be. Will the land be sated. Will his heart be heavy. Or will
everything continue just as it is” (House 228). The insinuation is that it will only
continue.

The title House of Splendid Isolation itself hints at the unusual and at times ironic
dichotomy the plot and characters embody. Josie is both a prisoner of herself and unable
to escape from interaction with society that ultimately becomes her downfall. She is
trapped between conventional and unconventional gender roles as surely as she is trapped
physically at different points in the novel. She is caught between what she wants to
achieve and what the bystanders and her child conclude that she cannot do – change the
force and momentum of history to fight against the weight of tragic tradition. In this novel, O’Brien paints a picture of conflict in Ireland, both national and personal that is deeply complicated, tragic, and inconclusive. While the volume of her work in its entirety might speak to her progressive portrayal of gender roles, this work in isolation hints that she herself does not have definitive answers. Josie is the subject of the story but also cannot escape being the object of much violence and strife, just like Ireland herself.

Thematically, common threads throughout all of the novels illuminate again the sharp contrast between the female characters. Much work has been done on the significance of mothers and motherhood in O’Brien’s work, and both Trilogy and House offer much material to work with. To some extent all of the mothers O’Brien presents in these works are failed, trapped, or dominated, or a combination of all three. Both Kate and Baba’s mothers are trapped by their situations: Kate’s who is driven to her death by her abusive husband or the desperate nature of her situation, and Baba’s who first rebels against society and then becomes a model of those same stereotypes. Both Kate and Baba become mothers, but both struggle deeply with the consequences. Kate struggles to maintain first custody, then closeness with her child, ultimately sterilizing herself in a radical act of rebellion, late though it may be. Baba becomes a mother biologically, but not emotionally, an act that helps her maintain the “asperity” that O’Brien lauds her for. Josie, as examined earlier, cannot fulfill the expectation of maiden or mother, and though her abortion could be viewed as an act of rebellion similar to Kate’s, her own desires undermine her. She cannot quiet the voice of her unborn child, and her desire to desirable is unquenched.
Thompson includes a detailed analysis of the Dead Mother complex as it might apply to O’Brien’s work in her book *The Role of Irish Women in the Writings of Edna O’Brien*, especially as it works to reinforce the passivity of her female characters. The Dead Mother complex, as first described by psychoanalyst Andre Green, emphasizes a series of behaviors that ties together an obsession with motherhood to a doomed pattern to repeat actions. Thompson identifies a “striking similarity” between these behaviors and Kate’s narrative in the *Trilogy* (33). Though Thompson argues that the trend is most pronounced with Kate, her contention that “this complex offers us a further connection between Irish mothers in general and the Blessed mother” is significant as her work demonstrates that these forces are crucial to the development, or lack of development, in all O’Brien’s female characters (33). A strong component of this theory is that the female characters are doomed to repeat the actions of their mothers – certainly, of this main point, the clearest parallel can be made to Kate’s story. Drawn to similarly unsuitable men, Kate struggles throughout her life as a woman and a mother, and dies by drowning in a shroud of mysterious circumstances just like her own mother. While Thompson does acknowledge Kate’s hysterectomy as a “deliberate refusal” of the continuing role of motherhood, and hence a small rebellion, she argues that ultimately the forces of the Dead Mother complex offer a method of understanding Kate’s passivity (23). While this argument is convincing, her analysis of Baba in the same vein doesn’t fully realize the rebellions of Baba’s character.

It is true due to Baba’s marriage and birth of her child, that as Thompson writes, she “cannot escape the realities of the nuclear family and the need for legitimate offspring” (48). Yet this analysis is used to lump Baba in with Kate as a passive figure.
doesn’t acknowledge several key points. Though Baba has a nuclear family of sorts, it certainly is not traditional. True, Baba stays with her unloved husband to raise her child, but that the child is illegitimate, brought about by an affair sought by Baba purely for physical desire, complicates the phrase “need for legitimate offspring.” Baba stays, of her own volition to care for her husband after his stroke. While it is not a glamorous situation, or one that affords Baba much independence physically, that she maintains a large degree of emotional and intellectual independence is apparent, especially through the epilogue. As Byron concludes in her work that focuses exclusively on this epilogue, not only is Baba “the heroine who understands ‘every piece of protocol, religion, and hypocrisy there ever was,’” she offers a critique of Irish society that can only be described as “radical” (448). While Thompson does conclude her argument noting that it is “Caithleen’s failure to emancipate herself” and to become an independent subject that dooms her character, the enormous contrast between Kate and Baba’s character must be noted (49). As a departure from the Dead Mother complex and as a foil to Kate’s character, Baba illuminates the radical nature of O’Brien’s earlier work.

In *House*, the use of Thompson’s Dead Mother complex in the analysis of the work becomes more complicated. O’Brien offers the reader little information about Josie’s mother, so there is not the richness of material to work with that there is with Kate and Baba and their mothers. However, the central idea of repeated behaviors is very telling in an examination of Josie’s behaviors. As with Kate, O’Brien harps on comparisons of Josie to female icons, especially Dark Rosaleen and the Shan na Vocht. In doing so, and in Josie’s subsequent actions, it seems that Josie is doomed to repeat the behaviors of the icons themselves, especially in her demise. Greenwood notes that Josie
dies “a martyr in her own quest for identity” (“Representations” 294). Yet what does this quest actually entail? Throughout her life Josie has tried on all of the conventional roles for Irish women, maiden, mother, wife, lonely old woman – and she rejects them all, but not for lack of wanting. This is what separates her from Baba; up until the end of the novel, Josie desperately continues to try to fit into gender stereotypes, an action which is ultimately reinforced when she dies protecting a man, since she cannot give him the “wains” she desires to (“Representations 294). Baba’s victory is her criticism of Irish society and its effect on women, though she recognizes to an extent that she remains physically trapped by that same society. Josie has no such recognition, and dies continuing to try to realize her unfulfilled desires as a failed sexually desirable woman, failed mother, and failed female protector of an allegorical Ireland. Her lack of awareness coincides with her lack of agency.

Another thematic element that helps display the contrast between the Trilogy and House is Greenwood's examination of the term “negative romance” and its application to O’Brien’s work (Edna O’Brien 23). Greenwood clearly defines negative romance as an inclination “to define fiction which conforms superficially to 'romance' whilst subverting the genre to expose the position of women under patriarchy” (“Representations” 36). In the chapter focused on this concept both in her dissertation and later in her book, Greenwood argues that early critics who read the Trilogy as a typical, and even trite romance, weren’t looking deeply enough into the plot and characters. Instead, Greenwood argues, the very components – the failure of Kate and Baba to choose husbands who treat them well, their rejection of education, their tragic or bitter ends – serve to force the reader to criticize the society not the characters. Further, as Grace
Eckerly posits, the *Trilogy* does not sustain the “happily ever after” fiction, and though this may seem obvious, Greenwood uses this analysis to point to why so many of the same critics who criticized the *Trilogy* as trite were disappointed by the ending (“Representations” 39). In fact, Greenwood cautions readers not to read many of O’Brien’s seemingly romantic passages “straight” but rather to sense in them the foreshadowing of Kate and Baba’s growing sense of awareness and disillusionment with society (“Representations” 57). By subverting the romantic genre through Kate and Baba’s expectations, what seems conventional in O’Brien’s *Trilogy* is decidedly not.

With Greenwood’s detailed analysis of the *Trilogy* as a negative romance serving as an example, it follows to analyze *House* in the same light. Certainly it meets many of the same standards. The reader is presented many scenes of what looks like an opportunity for romance – first of which Josie as a young bride, vain in her “loose fox collar” surveying what is to be her domestic territory (*House* 29). Yet even more quickly, and with even less obfuscation, O’Brien subverts the possibility of true romance. Josie’s husband reveals that he is not the true romantic hero no sooner than her wedding night, a night which Josie herself unequivocally dreads. While the book in its entirety can certainly fit the mold of a negative romance in that it provides a searing critique of the effect of society on an Irish woman, Josie’s lack of self-awareness does not allow for the same evolution in identity that exists in the *Trilogy*. Josie ends the book much as she begins it, full of vain hope and sacrificing herself to society’s expectations, whereas Kate and Baba have progressed, even though they are still trapped.

If the female characters in O’Brien’s work conform to stereotypes, so do the males, but in such a way as to highlight her criticism of the society. Every characteristic
of a man that could be viewed as positive within Irish society – strong, assertive, fertile, dominant – is exaggerated to the point of dysfunction by O’Brien. Her male characters are violent, emotionally abusive, sexually deviant, and incapable of performing their roles as heads of the household. Many of the characters embody combinations of these traits. Kate’s father is physically abusive to her and her mother, emotionally abusive in his rare times of sobriety, and certainly unable to provide for the family, and is in fact a drain on the family. Mr. Gentleman, despite his ironic name, carries on a very inappropriate relationship with a girl less than half his age, and as Greenwood notes there is “more than a hint of pedophilia” in his behavior that suggests disturbing sexual deviance despite the fact that he is a respected community member (“Representations” 38). Eugene is severely emotionally abusive, more concerned with destroying Kate’s confidence than the work he professes to love, especially after their divorce. Frank is physically and intellectually sterile, which emphasizes how unsuitable his match is to Baba. Josie’s husband’s treatment of her suggests both physical violence and sexual deviance in its animalistic nature. While there are male characters that are sympathetically portrayed in O’Brien’s work – Baba’s father and McGreevy are two notable examples – they are trapped by their circumstances even as the women are, which draws a firmer line under O’Brien’s criticism of society. Taken as a whole, the continuation of this trend in O’Brien’s work from Trilogy to House emphasizes that Irish society has not changed despite the march of time, a fact which makes Kate and Baba’s rebellions that much more significant.

A significant difference, many argue, that exists thematically between the Trilogy and House is O’Brien’s use of politics. In fact, according to several critics, it is this element that helps differentiate House as a more progressive novel, because the addition
of this theme makes both O’Brien’s writing and her depiction of gender roles more complex. Yet this theory neglects to take into account both the inclusion of politics in the *Trilogy* and the actual effect of politics on female characters, a situation that O’Brien renders as both tragic and unchangeable. The first facet of this argument owes much to Thompson, who posits the significance of “placing Caithleen and Baba’s upbringing directly into the political climate of the new Irish state” (22). By putting Kate and Baba’s struggles in historical and societal context, O’Brien’s criticism takes on new depth. Byron agrees, arguing that the *Trilogy*, “deconstructs the prescribed roles for women in patriarchal Irish society” with the Catholic Church and the Irish Constitution acting as agents for this inequitable society (15). Thompson devotes an entire chapter of her book to an examination of how O’Brien’s writing in the *Trilogy* focuses on “the effects of rigidly enforced Catholic belief systems” and how O’Brien “undermines” the Irish Constitution (22). Many other critics have examined Kate and Baba’s actions, but not taken them in their entirety as a political statement calling into question the cruel reality of women’s lives in a newly formed Irish state. To argue that the *Trilogy* is not political because of its focus on girl’s and then women's lives is evocative of the same double standards that O’Brien seeks to criticize through her work. If further evidence is needed, that O’Brien’s books were widely burned in Ireland after their publication demonstrates they did not conform to societal expectations, and in Ireland, society, church, and politics, especially at that time were inextricably linked.

While the focus on politics is certainly more evident in *House*, the more overt discussion of the topic does not place Josie, or even the minor female characters, in a more progressive light. Though Thompson notes the inclusion of politics in the *Trilogy*
and argues that this contributes to its place as an overall progressive work, her work also established her in the same body of critics that identify *House* as a more radical work. In contrast to the arguments previously stated in this paper about the futility of Josie’s relationship with McGreevy, Thompson argues that through her interactions with this man, Josie “finds her own agency” (16). Thompson, along with other critics, also argue that *House* marks a departure from O’Brien’s previous work by revising the conventions of an “episodic” story like the one the *Trilogy* embodies, with the format of the newer trilogy which consists of more loosely connected stories with different topical intent (86). However, the unifying factor of both trilogies is “O’Brien’s focus through the lens of gender,” so the effect of politics on women becomes a crucial indicator in the progressive nature of the work (Thompson 86). Ultimately Thompson concludes that Josie refuses “narrative judgment” by spanning “various gaps between North and South, Republican and Loyalist, Ascendancy and peasantry by developing a relationship with McGreevy and substituting herself for his punishment” (90). Other critics, notably Farquarson and Schrank make similar arguments that loosely revolve around Josie’s agency and political involvement as definitive of the more progressive nature of *House* as opposed to *Trilogy*, but there are residual issues with both claims.

It is true that Josie’s relationship with McGreevy, in any form it may take, is a rejection of societal approval due to his political status. As such, this does forge a link between divided groups as Thompson argues, but to use this as evidence of Josie’s political agency is a stretch. Josie understands that the relationship is forbidden because he is a terrorist, not because she understands the nuanced divisions among “North and South, Republican and Loyalist, Ascendancy and peasantry” (90). Josie’s political
knowledge, or lack of it, is best illustrated when, moved by emotional fervor and desire
for McGreevy, she attempts to show support by singing a rebel song, “the only one she
knows, about a woman gathering nettles – ‘Glorio . . . Glorio to the bold Fenian men’
(House 86). This is not the act of a politically awakened woman, but the act of a woman
who desires a man as illustrated by her own actions, and further underscored by the very
male centered verse of the song that she remembers. Further, Josie’s sacrifice at the end
of the novel is not to make a political statement; she dies to protect McGreevy, and sadly
she does not truly substitute herself for his punishment as Thompson notes. She may
delay his punishment, but McGreevy is captured, she has not succeeded in preventing his
arrest, and several narrative voices at the end strongly imply that the political cycle of
violence will continue unfettered. Josie’s act is an act of sacrifice and rebellion, but when
juxtaposed with the stories of Irish female icons that O’Brien frequently references, Josie
remains a merely tragic figure. When none of the female archetypes fit, Josie lived in a
purgatory, embracing none of them, and at the end of the novel, when she attempts to
sacrifice herself, she does not achieve her goals. Perhaps if she had achieved true political
awakening, confronted her own identity through language, or even achieved her goal of
truly protecting McGreevy, her tragedy be considered grand in O’Brien’s terms. As it
stands, it is just a tragedy.

Through a close reading of the texts as well as a thematic examination of the
works comparatively, O’Brien’s more recent work cannot be qualified as more
progressive simply because of the publication date. In fact, such analysis reveals that in
terms of gender, the female characters in the Trilogy are more successful in criticizing the
effects of the inequity of Irish society by undermining that same society with acts of
rebellion and consistently working toward understanding themselves and the world they live in. Like the literary heroes O’Brien references, they do not have magical powers to change the fabric of the world they live in, but they do have the ability to fight back – or to achieve grand tragedy. Kate to some extent, and definitely Baba do achieve this, while Josie does not, rendering the *Trilogy* more progressive in terms of gender roles.
CONCLUSION

On 30 April 1960 – the Saturday of the week in which Edna O'Brien's debut novel *The Country Girls* was published – the Tuam Herald ran articles captioned “Fired Shots at Tinker's Horse,” “A Danger of Spring Grazing” and “Franciscan Pilgrimage at Knock Shrine.” *In Tuam Behind a Mask* – starring Michael and Vanessa Redgrave – was showing at the Mall Cinema and there was a dance at the Phoenix Ballroom. Despite O'Brien's detailed exposition of the society evoked by the *Tuam Herald, The Country Girls* was not among the books which it reviewed – Amanda Greenwood, “Representations,” 31

This slice of Irish rural life as presented by Greenwood underscores by its omission the radical nature of O’Brien’s work and provides an albeit small window into the world that inspired her writing. Much of Irish society was not ready to confront neither her brutal honesty nor her scathing criticism, and as shown by the scarcity of early analysis, neither was much of the academic community. As the volume of work by and about O’Brien has grown, both are evolving, partially due to the inevitable passage of time but also due to the complicated nature of the issues they both rely on to exist. The muddled mix of societal values that O’Brien references throughout *The Country Girls Trilogy* and *House of Splendid Isolation* is deeply complex. As Kate muses when she realizes that her relationships with men have been meaningless, “If the Tube was about to crash and they had seconds’ warning, what was the last thing she would cry out? This newfound knowledge, or Cash’s name, or an Act of Perfect Contrition? Impossible to tell” (*Trilogy* 500). Just as Kate equates sex, motherhood and religion as inextricably and
mysteriously linked, so does O’Brien. All of her characters struggle with gender
stereotypes deeply rooted in these societal forces, whether they embrace or reject them,
and through this process O’Brien places herself firmly amongst the company of authors
seeking to create authentic female characters in Irish literature. However, rather than
giving the reader easy answers, O’Brien’s novels tend to leave lingering questions. Given
the variety of female characters in her work, her own evolution as a writer so evident in
The Country Girls Trilogy, and her continued frustration with gender roles evident in
House of Splendid Isolation – can a woman truly find happiness in a society still
fractured by sex? Neither of these novels satisfactorily answers this question.

However, O’Brien’s female characters do occupy a fascinating space within Irish
literature, and as such, offer some answers about the author’s space in the Irish literary
canon. To merely categorize all of O’Brien’s female characters as progressive is to
overlook the historical context in which they exist and the diversity of the many
characters she has created. By harkening back to previous lyrical Irish female characters
and identifying what made them able to achieve a sense of agency despite their lack of
control over their fates, O’Brien was able to create a new type of character that succeeded
in criticizing Irish society on many levels. That the characters are based on much older
archetypes underscores that Irish society has not changed, and that they all – Kate, Baba,
and Josie – to some extent rebel against that society underscores that it needs to. This is
the thread that truly ties O’Brien’s work together and that is universally recognized by
those who analyze her work. The conclusions of both Thompson’s and Greenwood’s
work focus on the solidification of O’Brien’s work within the Irish canon and the power
of her uniquely poised work in its ability to criticize Irish society, so this one should not neglect to point this out as well.

In the final chapter of *Mother Ireland*, titled “Escape to England” O’Brien chronicles her physical and emotional departure from Ireland, one of which was successful, the other which was not. While she writes, “leaving Ireland was no wrench at all” clearly the country is deeply a part of her, as all of her varied works attest (O’Brien, *Mother Ireland* 126). O’Brien’s work in itself harkens back to the literary women she is so fond of – certainly whether viewed as a lifetime literary quest for self identity or as an academic quest for social criticism and justice, what is unquestionable is O’Brien’s unceasing command of language to explore difficult topics. There is nothing meek or passive about her writing, regardless of personal preference or editorial opinion. O’Brien writes, “I want yet again and for indefinable reasons to trace that same route, that trenchant childhood route, in the hope of finding some clue that will, or would, or could, make possible the leap that would restore one to one’s original place and state of consciousness, to the radical innocence of the moment just before birth” (*Mother Ireland* 129). Just as O’Brien focuses the final words of her memoir on the impossibility of truly recapturing the innocence of birth, so does her work secure the impossibility of Irish literature reverting back to the place she criticizes so eloquently. Whether or not Irish society, or even the literature reflecting that society changes, O’Brien has left her mark on the canon – a radical achievement in itself.
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