

THE IRISH RURAL COMMUNITY IN EDNA O'BRIEN'S SHORT FICTION: NATIONALISM, RELIGION AND THE FAMILY AS ANDROCENTRIC TROPES ¹

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This article focuses on Edna O'Brien's representation in her short fiction of Irish women's experiences during the 1940s and 1950s (the time of Eamon de Valera's Ireland). In particular, it examines the emotional paralysis and entrapment experienced by her female characters in the enclosed and bigoted setting of a small Irish village. O'Brien usually presents women as victims of a patriarchal society, always subjected to the pressure of restrictive gendered expectations. In particular, nationalism and religion are consistently depicted in her fiction as powerful ideologies determining women's role in their rural communities.

Edna O'Brien is nowadays regarded as one of the most emblematic and prolific contemporary Irish women writers. Born in 1930, she is the author of nearly thirty books, which include eight collections of short stories, eighteen novels, five plays, several autobiographical essays, one collection of poetry, various screenplays and other miscellaneous works. This chapter approaches O'Brien's facet as a short fiction writer, by particularly focusing on her 2008 edition *A Fanatic Heart*, which gathers a representative sample of five collections of short stories published between 1968 and 1981: *The Love Object* (1968), *A Scandalous Woman* (1974), *A Rose in the Heart* (1978), *Quartet* (1979-1981), and *Returning* (1981). I will particularly focus on the role that women play in those short stories set in the rural Ireland of the 1940s and 1950s, and which are largely drawn from the author's childhood memories. O'Brien usually presents women as victims of a patriarchal society, always subjected to the pressure of restrictive gendered expectations. In particular, nationalism and religion are consistently depicted in her fiction as powerful ideologies determining women's role in their rural communities.

1. The research for this essay was conducted in the framework of the research project *Community and Immunity in Contemporary Fiction in English*, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (grant reference FF12009-13244).

Indeed, a gender consciousness pervades O'Brien's literary oeuvre. Together with Julia O'Faolain, Leland Bardwell and Maeve Kelly, she belongs to what Christine St. Peter (2000:8) identifies as "the most radical" generation of Irish women writers that emerged in the 20th century, "both in terms of experimental forms and in political perspectives". While acknowledging "the competitive presence of her artistic predecessors", most notably James Joyce (Gillespie 1996:110), O'Brien has made a place of her own in a male-dominated literary genre. As Gordon (1984) claims, one of her merits has been to tell "the Irish woman's inside story", by particularly bringing their real love experiences on to the page. This view is also shared by Irish feminist Mary Kenny (2000:240), who notes that her fiction is "certainly regarded as breaking new ground for women".²

In the stories selected for analysis, the rural setting acquires such an importance that it almost becomes a protagonist in itself. As Colletta and O'Connor (2006:6) claim, "[w]hen writing explicitly about Ireland, [...] O'Brien depicts the constricted, hardscrabble life of the villages and farms of the west". O'Brien's concern with the conservatism experienced in the rural Ireland of her childhood has been the source of much controversy. For critics such as Darcy O'Brien (1982:189), in his article in *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists*, O'Brien is frozen in the past, and consequently, she lacks the "will or interest to seek out characters, stories or themes in the everyday world around". Similarly, she has been accused of being "obsessed with an Ireland that no longer exists" (Cooke 2011) or, in Christine St. Peter's words (2000:73), of showing "a tendency to essentialize the Irish and the Irish 'soul'".³ In spite of these criticisms, it is important to bear in mind the contextual period in which O'Brien writes these rural stories. As Ingman (2009:230-233) explains in her survey of contemporary Irish short fiction, the 1980s was "outwardly a regressive period" in Ireland, characterized, among other things, by a "right-wing backlash" in

2. This does not mean, however, that O'Brien's work can be easily labelled as 'feminist'. Indeed, it is very difficult to pigeonhole her work. To start with, A. Greenwood (2003:8) claims that her fiction is not easily categorized as "women's writing" due to its tendency to "transcend gender lines". Others claim that it should not be considered feminist literature, because of its fondness for romantic love and women's excessive dependency on men. As well-known literary critic Anne Owens Weekes (2003:x) claims, O'Brien's "perspective is women centered but not feminist", because "her works usually depict the traps of femininity rather than liberation". O'Brien acknowledges this reluctance to consider her work as feminist in an interview with S. Guppy (1984): "I am not the darling of the feminists. They think I am too preoccupied with old-fashioned themes like love and longing". Because of this, she has been accused of following "the sentimental and the 'romantic novel' formula" (*ibid.*), or of being too "repetitive" in her "chronicle of romantic love" (Greenwood 2003:1). Some other critics prefer to consider her work as somehow traditionalist or regressive, because of her conservative representation of Ireland, as a country everything but modern (Cooke 2011; Darcy O'Brien 1982:189). Finally, others relegate her work "to the realm of popular fiction" because of the 'sensationalism' implicit in her novels and short stories (Pelán 1993:67).

3. In light of such criticisms, it is important to note that O'Brien starts to explore different topics in a series of novels that she publishes since 1994 about modern Ireland, where she deals with contemporary social and political issues: *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), about terrorism and the Troubles, *Down by the River* (1996), which addresses the controversial topic of abortion through the historical "X Case", and *In the Forest* (2002), inspired by the case of the real murderer Brendan O'Donnell.

political and sexual matters. Bearing in mind this contextual factor, it is not surprising that O'Brien returns in the short fiction she writes in this period to the settings and atmospheres of her Irish childhood. The Ireland of the 1980s still shows traces of the ideological conservatism experienced in that old Ireland that, according to Cooke (2011) "no longer exists".

Furthermore, it is also important to consider that O'Brien is not the only contemporary Irish writer evoking this rural aspect of Ireland. As well-known cultural critic Joe Cleary (2004:233) notes, the scenery of a small town in rural Ireland is also "the fictional territory" of writers such as Kate O'Brien, Sean O'Faoláin, John McGahern, Tom Murphy and William Trevor, among others. All these writers belong to a 20th century revolutionary movement that Cleary identifies as "Irish naturalism", a literary tendency antagonistic to the Irish Literary Revival of the beginning of the 20th century in its dissociation from the romantic portrayals of rural life:

Like its French counterpart, Irish naturalism was also in its inception a dissident and reformist aesthetic: it measured the distance between the official stage ideology of Irish Ireland and its tawdry reality. The naturalist writers probed – with an intimate knowledge of the local terrain conspicuously absent in much of the literature of the Revival – the social and sexual traumas that official Irish culture would not acknowledge. (Cleary 2004:233)

Indeed, O'Brien's raw descriptions of the harshness of rural life stand in sharp contrast with the Irish Revival's portrayal of a romanticized, premodern Irish homeland exemplified, for instance, by William Butler Yeats's famous poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree". She challenges the idealizing tendencies of this literary movement through her fierce critique of the androcentric foundations on which the rural Ireland of the 1940s and 1950s was constructed. In iconic short stories such as "Savages" and "A Scandalous Woman", O'Brien describes with accuracy the communal identity of the Ireland that the writer left behind when she emigrated to England in the 1950s. In particular, her critique is oriented towards three interrelated forms of organicity which have determined the orthodoxies of her childhood upbringing in Ireland: a rigid parochialism; an insular, narrow-minded nationalism; and a restricted religious doctrine.⁴ These three saturated communal forms are described as utterly patriarchal, and therefore, they act as powerful oppressive forces for O'Brien's female characters. As Colletta and O'Connor (2006:8-9) claim,

4. The rural stories analysed could be partly autobiographical, bearing in mind Edna O'Brien's childhood in Tuamgraney (a small Irish village in County Clare), in an environment she has described as "small, claustrophobic" and "ingrown" (Guppy 1984) and "fervid, enclosed and catastrophic" (O'Brien 1976:42). Indeed, O'Brien frequently uses sources of her own life for her fiction. Her 2006 novel, *The Light of Evening*, for instance, includes real letters her mother wrote to her. For an autobiographical reading of O'Brien's fiction, see Darcy O'Brien (1982).

[t]aught by mothers to submit to men and warned by the church to remain chaste, O'Brien's women soon find themselves rejected by lovers and humiliated by husbands.

In their role as masculine archetypes, the depiction of male characters is usually consistent in her fiction: men are generally represented either as violent, callous and treacherous characters, or as lazy and incompetent ones.⁵ On the other hand, there are two particular images of women that O'Brien bears in mind in her literary representation of female characters. As she asserts in an interview:

The Blessed Virgin and Caitheleen Ní Houlihan were probably the two most dominant female icons in my thinking – the one being religious and the other poetic and romantic. (Thomson 2003:201)

The powerful influence that such gendered stereotypes exert in the rural Ireland O'Brien portrays is clearly reflected in the opening sentences of her short story "Courtship". The sense of locality and provincialism that the writer describes in this collection is astonishing. In "Courtship", O'Brien defines an Irish rural community centred on influential organic tropes, the most predominant ones being nationalism and religion. As is typical of O'Brien's short fiction, this story is narrated in the first person by an adult woman who looks back at her childhood years in the Irish countryside.⁶ In her recollection of her childhood, one of the first memories the narrator has is of a nationalist poem, "The Mother", that she was bound to learn in her primary school:

A favourite school poem was "The Mother" by Patrick Pearse. It was a wrenching poem condoling the plight of a mother who had her two strong sons go out and die, 'in bloody protest for a glorious thing'. (O'Brien 2008:97)

This nationalist poem stands as a powerful emblem of collective identity and community consciousness. It symbolizes the myth of blood sacrifice for the sake of nationhood. In poems such as this, the blood of the dead heroes is constantly recalled, their deeds endlessly recited in the present, in order to maintain the fictional essence of *nationness*. The romantic remembrance of a heroic (communal) death is a process that Jean-Luc Nancy (1990:9-12) has conspicuously analysed in his theorizations of the immanent community in *The Inoperative Community*. As Glowacka (2006) explains, in Nancy's view,

5. O'Brien's portrayal of men could partly stem from her vision of her father in real life, whom she describes as "the 'archetypical' Irishman – a gambler, drinker, a man totally unequipped to be a husband or a father" (Guppy 1984).

6. In this respect, as Barros del Río (2005:93) explains, O'Brien is a precursor of the fictional writing of "the Irish literary childhood" ("novela de la infancia"), in which the narrator looks back at his/her own childhood years, revealing much about the social and historical context at the time. Other writers which practice this genre are Clare Boylan, Maeve Binchy, Bernard MacLaverty and Frank O'Connor.

the truth of death is *the* truth of the community that immortalizes itself through will to immanence. Community reveals itself through death, whereby the death of its members must be transformed into works, into operative immortality that perpetuates the life of the community.

This idealization of death through the encouragement of the martyrdom of heroes is also observed in "A Rose in the Heart of New York", when the two main characters visit "the home of the liberator Daniel O'Connell, the man who had asked to have his dead heart sent to Rome, to the Holy See" (O'Brien 2008:397). For the protagonist's mother, this was "the most rendering thing she had ever heard, and the most devout" (*ibid.*:397). As in Pearse's poem, the patriotic topoi of fighting against the English oppressor and dying for the sake of nationhood are here infused with religious references. O'Connell's decision to donate his heart to the Vatican recalls the sacrificial death of God and the Christian myth of salvation. This heroic myth provides common substance for the immanence of the community, who perpetuates itself by remembering its glorious birth in the past, with the presence of such selfless heroes.⁷ As Glowacka (2006) claims, "[b]y infinitely (self)communicating the story of its inauguration, community ensures its own transcendence and immortality".

Such a strong link between nationalism and religion has important repercussions in the way women are represented and treated in the rural community O'Brien portrays. In "Courtship", Pearse's poem "The Mother" does not only symbolize the foundational myth of the Irish nation. This poem is also emblematic of the power of religion, as the maternal figure in the poem resembles, in her passive suffering, the Catholic iconography of the Virgin Mary. In this sense, womanhood is simplified and idealized for the sake of nationhood. In the particular context of Ireland, it is important to bear in mind that idealized motherhood has become a metaphor intrinsically tied up with national identity. Together with the Virgin Mary, pre-colonial images such as Mother Ireland and The Old Woman of Beare, among others, were repeatedly employed by nationalists in order to incite patriotic feelings. This image of the idealised mother sponsored by both nationalism and religion was later reinforced by the model of the mother officially endorsed by the 1937 Irish Constitution, particularly by Article 41:

2-1. In particular, the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

2-2. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to neglect of their duties in the home. (Quoted in Innes 1993:9)

The effects of such links between nationalism and religion upon the lives of ordinary Irish women are reflected through various ways in "Courtship". To start

7. The related trope of the patriot prepared to sacrifice his life for the sake of nationhood also appears in O'Brien's novel *House of Splendid Isolation*, which deals with the violence in Northern Ireland.

with, it is remarkable that the first remembrance the narrator has when recalling her childhood years in the Irish countryside is her learning at school of Patrick Pearse's poem "The Mother". Such legacy symbolizes the organic immanence of the Irish Catholic community in which the narrator was brought up. According to Colletta and O'Connor (2006:6), the image of the remote village or hometown "where the whole of Irish culture and history is preserved" can function "metonymically for the nation in O'Brien's fiction, which insists on the link between domestic and political colonization and between obsessions about the control of land and the control of women". It is precisely this link between nationalism and patriarchy, or between "domestic and political colonization" that we find in the community O'Brien describes. Furthermore, the strong effect that the model of the Virgin Mary exerts on the ordinary lives of Irish women is clearly acknowledged as the narrator introduces the first female character in the story. Interestingly enough, the archetype of femininity represented in Pearse's poem is immediately followed by the description of the widow Mrs Flynn, for whom the narrator worked as an assistant in a shop:

Mrs Flynn had also known tragedy, her husband having died from pleurisy and her youngest son, Frank, having drowned while away on holiday. For a time she wept and gnashed, her fate being similar to the poor distraught mother's in the poem. (O'Brien 2008:97)

By comparing both figures, the narrator (unconsciously or not) offers a projected vision of this character through patriarchal eyes, as "the idealized mother in the hierarchical family structure" (Pelan 2006:60). As a selfless, all-sacrificing, pious widow, Mrs Flynn resembles Pearse's idealised figure in "The Mother". She is institutionally imprisoned in her role of motherhood and domesticity, feminine archetypes which have been raised to iconic status in Ireland by both nationalism and religion.⁸ Nevertheless, the general tendency in O'Brien's short fiction is to depart from the conventional notions of femininity endorsed by Irish nationalism and Catholicism, by depicting characters who openly challenge sexual repression and the authority of the State and the Church.⁹

8. In her autobiography *Mother Ireland*, O'Brien describes the maternal figure of her childhood community in similar terms to the stereotypical view of the Irish mother:

Only mothers were safe to be with. Mothers were best. Mothers worked and worried and sacrificed and had the smallest amount on their plates when the family sat down to eat, mothers wore aprons and slaved and mothers went to the confraternity on a Sunday evening and whispered things to each other in the chapel grounds about their wombs and their woes. (O'Brien 1976:50)

For an interesting study of the characterization of women in the short stories of Edna O'Brien from the perspective of the suffering Madonna stereotype, see Shumaker (1995). This author particularly studies O'Brien in relation to Mary Lavin's short fiction.

9. Given the unconventional development of some of her female protagonists in their gradual distancing from traditional notions of femininity (i.e., Baba and Kate in *The Country Girls*), O'Brien's fictionalized work has often received the nomenclature of "anti-Bildungsroman", "truncated" or "failed Bildungsroman" and "novel of disillusionment" (Barros del Río 2005:94).

In this sense, O'Brien describes an Irish rural community chiefly determined by convention and by the authority of religious doctrine. Her short stories usually portray religion as a habit or superstition: her characters pray rosaries every night ("My Mother's Mother", O'Brien 2008:23; "A Scandalous Woman", 245) and they go to church regularly to devotions and mass ("The Small-Town Lovers", 341). The priest is portrayed as an authority within such a local community: while in "The Bachelor" he is presented as someone in charge of arranging the marriages, in "The Creature" he intercedes with the local authorities in favour of a widow to have a reduction of the fees when sending her boy to boarding school (286). In "The Connor Girls", religion is also depicted as an influential force deeply embedded in the lives of all the rural characters. In particular, the story reflects the polarization of religious identity in Ireland, by portraying the tensions arising between the two separate communities of Catholics and Protestants, exemplified in the story by the narrator's family on the one hand, and on the other by the Connor girls, the daughters of a local Protestant landowner. When Miss Amy, one of the Connor girls, falls in love with a local bank clerk who turned out to be "a lapsed Catholic" (8), the reaction of the parish is immediate and drastic. The narrator's mother, in her inflexible disapproval of this marriage, exemplifies the narrow-mindedness of her community: "She could not abide it, she said that Catholics and Protestants just could not mix" (9). In this sense, this story defines a conservative community clearly compartmentalized on account of religion and social class.

Being brought up in a convent (in particular, the Sisters of Mercy), Edna O'Brien also experienced as a child a strict Catholic education, which she now defines as "coercive and stifling" (Cooke 2011). That is why O'Brien denounces in her fiction the inordinate influence of Catholicism upon the lives of Irish women. Usually, religion comes into conflict with the sexual behaviour of most female characters. In such an organic society, hidebound in traditions, pregnant women outside marriage are viewed as "sinful people" ("The Rug", O'Brien 2008:204). The Magdalene Laundries are mentioned several times in her short fiction as accomplice institutions where these "fallen" women are sent in order to atone for their sins ("Savages":83-84; "The House of My Dreams":299). Furthermore, O'Brien also reveals the hypocrisy of religious standards. Whereas in "Savages" the priest and the locals at Mass shun Mabel for being pregnant outside wedlock (91-92), in stories such as "Ghosts" we are shown through the eyes of the innocent narrator a sexual scene between a priest and a woman (118).¹⁰

The strict religious doctrine that O'Brien portrays is usually accompanied by an oppressive sense of habit and routine. As James Joyce did in his portrayal of Dublin, O'Brien depicts the emotional and spiritual paralysis experienced by those living in the parish. In "Savages", for instance, the only sense of excitement is brought by Mabel's arrival from Australia. Given the sense of

10. This theme is also briefly touched in Edna O'Brien's 1970 novel *A Pagan Place*, which tells the story of a girl who is seduced by a priest.

routine experienced in the village, Mabel brings “hope and renewal” to the lives of her relatives and neighbours (74). In this story, as in many others, there is a striking absence of contemporary references which enhance the timeless (and almost ahistorical and mythical) effect. As in Joyce’s “The Dead”, the lives of the inhabitants here seem to be suspended in time, paralysed by habit and by a destructive, narrowly conventional morality. According to the narrator, this “godforsaken townland” was defined by routinized acts: “Nothing happened except the land was plowed, the crops were put down, there was a harvest, a threshing, then geese were sent to feast on the stubble, and soon the land was bare again” (74).

This air of claustrophobic provinciality is also portrayed in “Ghosts”, a story set in a town where “[m]otorcars were still a novelty” (119). Here, the daily life of Mrs Keogh “had no variety. They said the Rosary every evening after their tea. They were in bed while it was still bright in summer, and she was up at five or six washing” (120). The sense of paralysis experienced in the Irish countryside also extends to the convent, where the nuns’ lives are defined by customary daily tasks (“Sister Imelda”, 130-131).¹¹ Indeed, “habit” is a recurring word in *A Fanatic Heart* (see for instance, pages 178 and 206), and it is sometimes used purposely in order to suggest women’s enclosure into a claustrophobic, patriarchal rural community.¹²

Apart from religion and nationalism, O’Brien also presents the family as the framework for the consolidation of patriarchal values and the perpetuation of conventional gendered roles. Her rural stories focus predominantly on the private lives of women and the repressive influential force of their families. Challenging the idealization of this “institution” in Irish culture, O’Brien’s short stories are overloaded with images of broken homes, brutal fathers and inefficient mothers. In “My Mother’s Mother”, the narrator’s mother and grandmother are both subjected to the violence of their husbands (18,24-25). Similarly, in “A

11. The paralysis experienced at the rural parish is also caused by the importance of the past and the influence of the dead, a presence which still determines the lives of the living (as in Joyce’s “The Dead”). That is why the narrator in “Ghosts” is still haunted by three women she met in her childhood years. As she says towards the end of the story, even though they are long dead, “I still can’t imagine any of them dead. They live on; they are fixed in that far-off region called childhood, where nothing ever dies, not even oneself” (O’Brien 2008:123). In “The Small-Town Lovers”, O’Brien also depicts a provincial world in which the dead still linger in the mind of the living. Here, the narrator is haunted by the presence of past memories: for herself, Hilda “has become a ghost, and the trouble with ghosts is that no one but oneself knows how zealously they stalk the everyday air” (353). Similarly, in “The Bachelor”, Jack’s life is marked first by the death of his brother and later by the death of his sister Maggy. The traumatic deaths of beloved ones also monopolize the life of Mrs Flynn in “Courtship”. The identity and image of this ordinary shop owner is irremediably determined by the death of her husband and later one of her sons (97).

12. “The Rug”, for instance, ends by portraying the narrator’s mother undoing “her apron strings, out of habit”, and then retying “them slowly and methodically, making a tighter knot” (O’Brien 2008:206). This gesture coincides with her disappointment when she discovers that the parcel that she received was not meant for her. In “Irish Revel”, Mary’s thoughts at the party centred on what her family, her parents and siblings would be doing at that time, and she concludes that “[i]n another hour they’d be saying the Rosary in her house and going to bed; the rhythm of their lives never changed, the fresh bread always cool by morning” (*ibid.*:186).

Scandalous Woman", Eily's father is depicted as a "gruff" man with "an atrocious temper" (248), from whose thrashings she is constantly forced to escape (239). This aggressive image of masculinity in relation to husbands and fathers also appears in "The Bachelor" (59,61), "Savages" (74-75,76), "Ghosts" (120), "Tough Men" (43), and "A Rose in the Heart of New York" (380,382). Fathers are not only presented as alcoholic and violent figures. They are also lazy characters. In "The Bachelor", the speaker's father is most of the time absent, playing cards, "though it was something we could not afford, being heavily in debt" (57). In "The Rug", the narrator's father is portrayed as "foolish" and "idle" (199); he is always sick and consequently useless at home (200). In "A Scandalous Woman", it is Eily's mother the one who has to go into town to draw her husband's pension (242).

O'Brien's mothers are also represented as non-idealized figures, challenging the conventional view of maternity sponsored by nationalism and the Church. In "My Mother's Mother", the speaker's idealization of her mother is counteracted by the cold attitude she encounters when returning home after a long stay at her grandmother's house: "All I thought was that the homecoming was not nearly as tender as I hoped it would be, and there was no embrace and no reunion" (32). Similarly, in "The Doll", the speaker's mother is presented as an imperfect, limited character. Suffering from constant "dizziness and suffocations" (51), she is unable to help the narrator when she is constantly bullied by the teacher at her school. Therefore, the protection that the family could afford her is thwarted: "Everyone agreed that it was monstrous, but no one talked to the teacher, no one tackled her. The truth is, they were afraid of her" (51). In this sense, O'Brien questions the sacred institution of the family by disrupting its portrayal as an idealized unit between a devoted, selfless mother and a protective, responsible father. If the mother exerts any agency at all in these stories, this is entirely dedicated to support the androcentric system of the community. In "The Bachelor", for instance, the speaker's mother acts as a repressive figure, complicit with the saturated community in her secret arrangement of her daughter's marriage with Jack Holland, the owner of a wine shop. Overall, and as Thomson (2003:198) asserts, O'Brien "undermines the sanctity of the family by exposing its dysfunctions, highlighting its subsequent disintegration, and showing its repressive and, therefore, debilitating effects on women's psyches".

O'Brien's negative portrayal of the family is also accompanied in her work by her scathing critique of marriage. Matrimony is portrayed as a prison for women, an institution which delimits their freedom and determines their lives of submission and service. As the protagonist of "A Rose in the Heart of New York" claims when thinking about her mother:

When she married she had escaped the life of a serving girl, the possible experience of living in some grim institution, but as time went on and the bottom drawer was emptied of its gifts, she saw that she was made to serve in an altogether other way. (O'Brien 2008:376)

Furthermore, O'Brien disrupts the ideal institution of marriage by describing mothers and fathers who should never have married. In "The Small-Town Lovers", for instance, the Donnellys marriage turns out to be destructive for both husband and wife. At first sight, Jack and Hilda are identified by everyone in the village as an ideal couple, and as such they are called "the town lovers" (339). Their matrimony is, to the outside, a flawless relationship exhibiting true love: "It astonished everyone how they had not got bored with one another" (340); they were "a model couple, known to love one another, not to eat meat on Friday" and "to pay more than enough for their church dues" (341). Nevertheless, their marriage is not as ideal as it seems. To start with, the narrator's mother gradually discovers, through her friendship with Hilda, that their marriage is unhappy (345). Furthermore, various events later unfold in the story: there is a strong suspicion that Jack has killed his wife with the gun he hid at home (348); towards the end of the story he does not appear at the wake and funeral of his wife (349-350), and he sexually seduces the narrator, who is just a girl at the time. This deconstruction of matrimony as a sanctified institution is emphatically illustrated at the end of the story by the portrayal of Hilda and Jack's house, covered by dust and shadows.

In this sense, and overall, it could be arguably claimed that O'Brien portrays a rural Irish community constructed upon the foundations provided by nationalism, religion, and the institutions of the family and marriage. Her female characters feel oppressed by the force exerted by all these institutions. By stressing the emotional paralysis and entrapment of these women, O'Brien denounces the pervasive influence, in the Ireland of the 1940s and 1950s, of traditional passive and subservient images of femininity (i.e. the Virgin Mary and Cathleen Ní Houlihan).

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