

Summary

Kate O'Brien was one of Ireland's best female writers; moreover, she was one of the first to centre on the Catholic Middle Class in her writing, as this class was long neglected. O'Brien was famous for her women-oriented books in which she portrayed the lives of women of the rising bourgeoisie of Ireland at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century. We can trace a certain development in O'Brien's writing, throughout her career she becomes more radical and comes to voice feminist notions about women being equal to men as well women's seeking independence from the world dominated by men.

Most of her novels are family-oriented and may be called *Bildungsromans* as the protagonists, which apart from two books are all female, develop and grow to maturity and learn to understand the world and their place in it. As this thesis examined how the women in O'Brien's novels reflect the situation of women in her home country, it is apparent that throughout her life the writer became more radical and sceptical towards the fate of women in Ireland. Therefore, in her first written pieces she portrays women in their traditional roles as dutiful wives, daughters, or mothers. It is only in her later writing that the women manage to emancipate themselves and lead their lives independently.

In O'Brien's first two pieces, *Without My Cloak* and *The Ante-Room*, we encounter the traditional roles as well those who attempt to break loose from the rules laid on women by the Church and society in Ireland, however, in these early pieces the women still fear the consequences of their actions too much and decide not to rebel and rather return to their traditional roles, although their life does not make them happy. Therefore, it can be said that the heroines of the author's first novels correspond with the fates of Irishwomen the most.

In the mid-stage of O'Brien's writing, we can find two works – *Mary Lavelle* and *The Land of Spices*. In these, the heroines manage to liberate themselves fully and lead the life they

dreamt of after undergoing a heavy shock or epiphany which showed them their way. However, the emancipation of the women in these books is questionable, as the books have open endings; therefore it is uncertain what the real fate of Mary Lavelle and Anna Murphy really was.

Moreover, the novels are also the beginning of O'Brien's critique of the politics aimed against women in Ireland. *The Land of Spices* can even be said to be the first truly feminist writing of the author's as she introduces a convent where all works well and its leader, Helen Archer, governs it with a man's authority.

In the last stage of O'Brien's writing the heroines are entrapped by a system but they challenge it successfully. Ana de Mendoza, the protagonist of *That Lady*, fights the king of Spain for her right for a private life and one's right to decide about it freely. Although she dies during her struggle, she considers her life worthy living. The young heroines of *As Music and Splendour* Clare Halvey and Rose Lennane go even further. They acknowledge being owned by their teachers and the music companies in which they sing, however, they use this relationship for their benefit and their art to sing to become famous. It is their art and their living abroad far away from Catholic Ireland which enables them to be free.

Kate O'Brien was much ahead of her time giving women free will and power to decide how to live their lives. During her writing career she became most sceptical towards Ireland and its treating of women; she not only criticized this in her writing but also offered an alternative to life in Ireland, where living independently was not possible, therefore her last novels are set on the continent where women shared the same rights as men. She went even further in leaving her native country for ever and living in England.