

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA  
ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

**Another Way Out: Women in Kate O'Brien's Fiction**

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí diplomové práce (supervisor):

**Clare Wallace, PhD. M.A.**

Zpracovala (author):

**Šárka Homolková**

Studijní obor (subject):

**Anglistika a amerikanistika**

Praha, duben 2013

## Declaration

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

V Praze, dne

.....

## Permission

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům. I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Clare Wallace for the help and advice she has given me during the writing of this thesis. A great thanks goes to the Special Collections Library Staff of the University of Limerick, who allowed me to use their extensive archive on Kate O'Brien, suggested further material for study and moreover for their patience in answering my enquiries. Furthermore, I would like to thank the whole library of the University of Limerick for having such a wide collection of material on Kate O'Brien and on gender studies, which helped me a lot in writing my thesis.

# Table of Contents

Declaration

Permission

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Kate O'Brien in Context

1.2. Organization and Objectives

## CHAPTER 2 WOMEN IN IRELAND IN O'BRIEN'S TIME

2.1 Women's Place and Marriage Customs

2.2 Alternatives to Married Life

2.3 Educational Opportunities

2.4 Working Life

2.5 Irish Independence and Women's Rights

2.6 The Influence of Catholicism

## CHAPTER 3 FAMILY SAGAS: *WITHOUT MY CLOAK* AND *THE ANTE-ROOM*

3.1 *Without My Cloak*

3.1.1. The Portrayal of the "Typical" Women of Her Time

3.1.2 Early Rebels

3.2 *The Ante-Room* – A Contrast of Opposites

3.2.1 Traditional Women

3.2.2 Modern Types

## CHAPTER 4 THE BANNED NOVELS: *MARY LAVELLE* AND *THE LAND OF SPICES*

4.1 *Mary Lavelle*

4.1.1. The Spanish Women and the Misses

4.1.2. The Godlike Heroine vs. Agatha Conlon

4.2. *The Land of Spices*

4.2.1. Helen Archer and Convent Life

4.2.2. Anna Murphy and other Women in the Novel

CHAPTER 5 THE LATE WORKS: *THAT LADY* AND *AS MUSIC AND SPLENDOUR*

5.1. Ana de Mendoza – The Liberated Woman

5.2. The Divas – Clare’s and Rose’s Story

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

Bibliography

Summary

Resumé

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Kate O'Brien in Context

Kate O'Brien is one of the most famous Irish women writers. She was one of the first to portray the Irish Catholic middle class realistically in fiction and not centre on the peasant as it was the fashion of her time. In the portrayal of the Catholic middle class she focuses on the women of this class, openly portrays their fates, therefore, most of her writing is strongly political offering a feminist critique of Irish society. Together with James Joyce she was a pioneer in writing about the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie from within.

Although O'Brien became famous as a playwright in 1926, she excelled in writing fiction in which Irish Catholics from the rising middle class played the main part. Most of her novels are partly autobiographical and apart from two, her first and most successful work *Without My Cloak* (1931), and her least successful one *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938), feature women seeking independence as the main heroes. This was something not very typical for an Irish writer of her time; however, it became her signature and made her famous. Yet, despite this style and her clear idea of woman's position in life and the critique of Irish politics, the interpretations of her work vary.

It is clear that Kate O'Brien was conveying a political message in her work but critics are not in full agreement on the question of whether she was or was not a feminist writer. Adele Dalsimer writes that "The subject of feminism is never openly raised in Kate O'Brien's work. But the theme of her novels is the necessity for woman to be free as man."<sup>1</sup> O'Brien's biographer Eibhear Walshe continues in the same sense calling her rather a traditional novelist who

---

<sup>1</sup> Adele Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990) 128.

managed to smuggle in radical topics such as homosexual love.<sup>2</sup> Another critic, Emma Donoghue, reads her rather as a lesbian writer because O'Brien was lesbian. Although O'Brien never openly admitted being a lesbian, the theme of love between women appears frequently in her work.<sup>3</sup> Patricia Coughlan identifies her as being a typical feminist writer.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, María de la Cinta Ramblado Minero writes about the problem that until recently O'Brien was not studied as a feminist writer because of Reynolds' statement ["The subject of feminism is never openly raised in Kate O'Brien's work. But the theme of her novels is the necessity for woman to be free as a man. [...] The concept of "equal but different" had not yet emerged. None of Kate O'Brien's heroines show the least tendency to imitate men in this way."] <sup>5</sup> that she was not a feminist. She claims that O'Brien can be truly read as a feminist writer without being a radical feminist, in the sense of openly fighting against patriarchy. However, for de la Cinta Ramblado Minero she is mainly a female writer which she explains by using Showalter's stage of women's writing: "Female: writing about women and their history, experiences and perceptions from a female point of view."<sup>6</sup> The problematic is well summed up by Ailbhe Smyth:

Whether Kate O'Brien would have called herself a feminist or not may not matter so much. What her writing gives us is a perspective which is firmly woman-centred, which will accept nothing less for women than the unquestioned (but always questioning) right for women to live their lives as they will, without constraint and without opprobrium. Kate O'Brien does not, I think, write about the experience of women's oppression; she does not, on

---

<sup>2</sup> Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006) 2.

<sup>3</sup> Emma Donoghue, "Out of Order: Kate O'Brien's Lesbian Fiction," *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien*, ed. Eibhear Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993) 36-59.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Coughlan, "Kate O'Brien: Feminine Beauty, Feminist Writing and Sexual Role," *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien*, ed. Eibhear Walshe. (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993) 59-85.

<sup>5</sup> Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987) 128-129.

<sup>6</sup> María de la Cinta Ramblado Minero, "Kate O'Brien as a "Herstorical" Writer: The Personal Story of Women," eds. Patricia A. Lynch, Joachim Fisher and Brian Coates. *Back to the Present: Forward to the Past, Irish Writing and History since 1798, Vol II.* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006) 3.

the whole, linger with the victim. Rather, she strikes out, ventures forth and charts a way towards freedom. And what else is feminism about, however, we phrase it?<sup>7</sup>

What were Kate O'Brien's thoughts on feminism is unknown today just as we cannot call her a feminist, however, the topics which she introduces in her novels are strongly feminist. As her writing career developed she voiced more and more ideas about the position of women in society and so indirectly attacked the politics of her native Ireland.

## **1.2 Organization and Objectives**

This thesis concentrates on how Kate O'Brien constructs her female characters and how her portrayal of these differs from the lives and fates of women of the author's time. Therefore, the aim of the thesis is to show the discrepancies between O'Brien's portrayal of women and reality, and show how the writer was ahead of her time when she started creating fully independent heroines at time when women had few opportunities to realise themselves in such ways. This was connected with the traditional face of the country where the majority of the population lived in the countryside as well the strong influence of the Catholic Church. Kate O'Brien's work can be therefore interpreted as a feminist critique of the situation of women in Ireland as well as of Irish politics.

O'Brien's work develops throughout her career. In her early novels she is still searching for a topic and a way of picturing women, therefore her early women characters like the Considine or Mulqueen women are rather the reflection of the women of their time – they play a subordinate role in their households; their roles are primarily dutiful daughters, wives or mothers. Yet as her writing career went on, her heroines started to be freedom seekers who, finally in her last pieces

---

<sup>7</sup> Ailbhe Smyth, "Counterpoints: A Note (or Two) on Feminism and Kate O'Brien," *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien*, ed. Eibhear Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993) 34.

of writing, liberated themselves fully from the male dominated world and established themselves. If the futures of Anna Murphy from *The Land of Spices* (1941) and the eponymous heroine of *Mary Lavelle* (1936) seem uncertain in the open ended conclusions of those books, then in her later novels *That Lady* (1946) and *As Music and Splendour* (1958) the heroines are fully independent. However, the ways by which they reach liberation are different: Ana de Mendoza was born into one of the richest houses of Spain; as the highest positioned woman in the country and a close friend to the king, she herself holds power, however, her free spirit is what makes her independent and resist the king and live according to her belief. O'Brien's last completed novel follows the fates of two soprano singers Clare Halvey and Rose Lennane who reach independence as successful artists after a lengthy time of training. It is their ability to sing, their beauty and moreover the fact that they live abroad, far away from the constraints of Catholic Ireland and the watchful eyes of their families, that they become freelance artists enjoying their life fully while they can, as Kate O'Brien did during her own life.

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The second chapter, "The History of Women in Kate O'Brien's Time", surveys women's fates in Ireland mainly from the post-Famine times to 1958 when O'Brien's last novel, *As Music and Splendour*, was published. As O'Brien's work was concerned mainly with the Irish middle class, the changes in society affecting this group of women and the way of their life are the main concern of this section. The third chapter deals with her early novels: *Without My Cloak* and *The Ante-Room*. Her first piece of fiction is a family saga about the Considines, a bourgeois family from Mellick; *The Ante Room* is a loose continuation of this novel and is concerned with key events in the lives of the members of the Considine branch of the Mulqueens. In both novels the attention is drawn to the representation of women in these works and how this reflects the lives and behaviour of women of that time and how some of them already attempt to rebel against the society. However, these are still not successful in their struggle in her early pieces. The fourth chapter deals with two completely

different books: *Mary Lavelle* and *The Land of Spices*. These novels share a similar publication history --- they were both banned for obscenity. *Mary Lavelle* is O'Brien's first piece of fiction which is set outside Ireland, in Spain where she had worked as a governess. *The Land of Spices* is also a very autobiographical novel to which the writer inclined after the banning of *Mary Lavelle*. Although here O'Brien turned to topics familiar to the Irish reader such as the highly respected vocation of religious life, and applied her memories of her innocent childhood spent at a convent school, also this novel did not escape the attention of the Irish Censorship Board and shared the same fate as *Mary Lavelle*. Both novels belong among the author's best works and finally present the "liberated" heroine, a woman who attempted to free herself from a conventional life after she experienced an epiphany, however, in both cases the ending of the novels are open and therefore it is uncertain if both Mary Lavelle and Anna Murphy used this opportunity and became fully independent. The last chapter is concerned with O'Brien's latest novels: *That Lady* and *As Music and Splendour*. In these O'Brien finally comes to voice her ideas about the role of women. She becomes most sceptical towards Ireland suggesting that only outside the country women can live independently. In these books Kate O'Brien presents women radically. Although Ana de Mendoza's end in *That Lady* is not a good one, she lived her life as she wanted; the heroines of her last novel find out that a woman's liberation from the world lies only in being an artist. It seems O'Brien viewed woman's liberation in Ireland with prejudice; therefore her last novel is set on the continent where it is possible for Irishwomen to live independently.

Although O'Brien's writing career was not a very long one, she managed to capture the abrupt changes in women's lives in Ireland in her novels very well. Her books are set in the past in most of the cases; however, they critique the situation and events which affected the author's life. Kate O'Brien was strongly influenced by the events happening in her home country and the political situation, mainly the laws aimed against women, and all of that is reflected in her

novels. The progress in the author's writing is also very obvious. Life in Britain and on the continent opened her eyes and she developed similarly to her heroines. Thanks to the possibility of leaving Ireland, O'Brien became a skilled observer of the changes taking place in Ireland. She managed to capture them well in her writing and also critique the lives of women in her native country.

## **Chapter 2 Women in Ireland in O'Brien's Time**

### **2.1 Women's Place and Marriage Customs**

The position of women in Irish society developed dramatically throughout the centuries.

Women's place changed from the female warriors of pagan times, to independent women equal to men in their rights in the Early Middle Ages to a submissive role of a minor in the seventeenth century after the introduction of the English Common Law. However, the most dramatic changes occurred after the Great Famine and in the twentieth century.

Thanks to the devastating effects of the Famine, the traditions of property division were remodelled and from that time on, the farmers kept on living on their property as long as it was possible. Moreover, only the eldest son now inherited property and the other siblings had to search for means of survival elsewhere. The effects of these changes were, firstly, the rising emigration and men marrying older.

Both the middle and working classes were affected by these changes. Nearly all marriages were arranged in Ireland in that time; however, the fates of women in both classes differed.

Women from the working class had to have an occupation before the time they married. O'Brien represents the rising bourgeoisie in her novels in which the women were more financially secure and did not have to work. If they did choose to find paid work they were mainly occupied as teachers or governesses as was the case of Mary Lavelle. Moreover, the women of the middle classes did not have such a difficult time as the poorer women as they did not have to work to secure a living. In contrast they were married off to a man they often never saw before, but

whom their family chose for them because of his social role and wealth<sup>8</sup> to secure the family's economic stability. In the better cases a man who was impressed by a young woman's beauty courted the woman and when the connection was seen as favourable for both sides, the couple married, however, the woman was the last one to be asked. Similar scenes appear in *Without My Cloak* when the beautiful Caroline Considine remembers how she came to marry her now hated husband Jim Lanigan. She married him not out of love but because he was a successful and rich lawyer and her family saw it a proper match. Similarly, Millicent Considine is thrilled when a Hennessey starts courting her. He comes from a very respectable and rich family, every woman in town would want him for a husband, otherwise, he is a complete stranger to her. All this shows the situation of young middle class Catholic Irish women, who were under pressure to marry well, definitely not under the family's standards. Duty towards family and Church prevailed over everything in the life of a woman in the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century.

However, because it was hard to find a proper match in the country, many women did not marry. The decrease of work and the low probability of a good marriage meant many Irish women chose to emigrate. Their reasons for leaving their home country were numerous: going to a foreign county, mostly Britain or America, meant for the women the possibility to freely choose a suitable future partner, it also meant freedom for the woman who escaped the tight bonds of society and family and now could work other than inside the household, and receive payment for her work and become more independent. Mostly, the chance to find work was the reason why most of the people, women included, emigrated. In some years the number of women emigrating from Ireland largely over-numbered men (from 1871-1911 86,294 men to 89,407 women).<sup>9</sup> In many cases emigration was considered a common fate of Irish women. Also

---

<sup>8</sup> Margaret McCurtain, "The Historical Image," *Irish Women: Image and Achievement*, ed. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Dublin: Arlen House, 1985) 41.

<sup>9</sup> Maria Luddy, *Women in Ireland, 1800-1918* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999) 6.

Christina Roche of *Without My Cloak* was destined for it. As the women were sending money home it was also a welcome source of income to the families in Ireland.

## 2.2 Alternatives to Married Life

Another effect of the Famine was the fact that more people lived in celibacy; this was mostly the case of women. According to Maria Luddy, in 1841 forty-three per cent of women between the ages fifteen and forty-five stayed unmarried, compared to twenty-eight per cent men. The figure fell to thirty-six per cent in 1911 compared to thirty-three per cent of men being single in the same year.<sup>10</sup> A high percentage of these women who decided to stay unmarried and childless were women who dedicated their lives to God and lived as nuns. Entering a convent in that time was not only a vocation, but was a highly esteemed life path for a woman and an alternative to married life and motherhood, Beale even does as far as calling a vocation “the only way for a middle class girl to a professional job.”<sup>11</sup> Nuns had a high status in the eyes of the nineteenth and twentieth century society; a society where sexuality was strongly repressed, therefore the chaste and celibate nuns who followed the example of the Virgin were highly viewed and moreover joining an order was often the only possibility for a woman to increase her social status.<sup>12</sup> Nuns were also active as nurses or teachers. Kate O’Brien introduces this theme in *The Land of Spices*. Her nuns from the La Compagnie de la Sainte Famille found their place within the convent walls, where they lived happily in their own world governed only by women. And as Mother Marie Helen proves, religious life brought freedom to the women and a certain authority. Moreover, as Helen rises to the position of Mother Superior of the order, shows that in dedicating her life to God was a very fruitful and only possible way for a woman how to make a career. Furthermore, being a Mother General or any leader of a convent gave her power and the authority to be treated equally with men and to use her position if necessary.

---

<sup>10</sup> Luddy, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Jenny Beale, *Women in Ireland: Voices of Change* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986) 174.

<sup>12</sup> Beale, 174.

### 2.3 Education Opportunities

As the time was changing, women were gaining access to education. In 1872 women gained full access to higher education,<sup>13</sup> Trinity College opened its gates to women in 1904.<sup>14</sup> The higher level of secondary education was still mostly only for boys, as it was fee-paying, therefore, families often did not want to waste money on educating their daughters after they finished their basic secondary schooling. This is illustrated on the example of O'Brien's *Land of Spices* and in *Mary Lavelle*, where the girls are denied education at third level for many reasons: in Mary Lavelle's case it is believed that her beauty will secure her a good marriage, therefore her father will not pay for further education. Likewise, it is only thanks to the intervention of Mother Superior that Anna Murphy can go to university, although this is against her family's wish.

Special institutions for educating women were founded in the nineteenth century and the number of female graduates grew rapidly. Despite these inequalities by 1930 Ireland had more female secondary school graduates than Norway and only Finland had a higher percentage of women university students. However, gaining a good education did not mean that a woman had better chances in life, women with a university diploma did not have many opportunities as only a few occupations were open to them: they were usually working as teachers and governesses,<sup>15</sup> or leaving the country and making a career abroad.

### 2.4 Working Life

Young women from the working class, worked before getting married, however, they were usually employed in the lowest paid jobs, mostly as farm labourers, or in linen factories or as household servants. Until 1901 the legal age to start work was eight, at the beginning of the twentieth century this was raised to thirteen.<sup>16</sup> However, only a small percentage of women

---

<sup>13</sup> Luddy, 116.

<sup>14</sup> Luddy, 128.

<sup>15</sup> Luddy, 153.

<sup>16</sup> Myrtle Hill, *Women in Ireland: A Century of Change* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2003) 15.

worked compared to other European countries. Traditionally, women from the middle class houses stayed in the household until their marriage where they received some education and took care of the house. Daly offers the data from the 1926 Census, according to which 48.6 per cent of single women and only 5.6 per cent of married women participated in the labour market in 1926.<sup>17</sup>

## 2.5 Irish Independence and Women's Rights

The beginning of the twentieth century brought a number of changes for women in Ireland. Many supported the nationalist struggle for independence during the Easter Rising, in which women played an important role. *The Proclamation of the Republic* also offered equal rights to all citizens:

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, [...] oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government.<sup>18</sup>

As Abigail L. Palko adds “In resolving to “cherish all the children of the nation equally,”’ the *Proclamation* identifies the aforementioned historical socioeconomic division as a key inequality to be remedied.”<sup>19</sup> The time of the Rising was filled with high hopes for Irishwomen; its failure meant the end of hopes for women for a time. In 1918 the franchise for women was extended in the United Kingdom, however, the vote was again strictly limited:

---

<sup>17</sup> Beale, 103.

<sup>18</sup> Fionnuala McKenna, “Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 24<sup>th</sup> April 1916.” *CAIN*. 14<sup>th</sup> Jan 2012. 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2012. <<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/pir24416.htm>>

<sup>19</sup> Abigail L. Palko, “From The Uninvited to The Visitor: The Post-Independence Dilemma Faced by Irish Women Writers.” *Frontiers* 31.2 (2010) 1.

[...] to women who were 30 years and older who were occupiers, or wives of occupiers, of land of premises of not less than £5 annual value and to women of 30 and over who held university degrees. The local government franchise, which since 1869 had include all women aged 21 or above who held property on which they were liable to pay local taxes (“rates”) – mainly unmarried and widowed women – was extended to include the wives of male electors.<sup>20</sup>

Already in 1922, as the Irish War of Independence ended, the rights of women were extended to equal vote with men. This was full six years before the same happened in Britain. Shortly afterwards, their rights started to be slowly eroded. However, as Mary E. Daly states, the emphasis on women’s place in the household bearing children was a common idea shared by most European counties after World War I in adopting measures against drastic populations decline, however, this was not the case of Ireland --the birth rate sank after the Famine, but the numbers were not as devastating as in other parts of Europe, and Ireland still had the highest fertility rate on the Continent.<sup>21</sup> Despite many measures were made to prevent women from working, the effect was the contrary and more women than men found work in the newly founded industries.

However, preventions were soon taken to ban women from working. In 1925 the government sought to restrict the number of women employed in the civil service, in 1932 the marriage bar for teachers was introduced despite the fact that only six per cent of married women worked in

---

<sup>20</sup> Pat Thane, “What Difference did the Vote Make?” *Political Systems and Definitions of Gender Roles*. ed. Ann Katherine Isaacs (Pisa: Università di Pisa – Edizioni Plus, 2001) 53.

<sup>21</sup> Mary E. Daly, “Women in the Irish Free State, 1922-39: The Interaction between Economics and Ideology.” *Journal of Women’s History*, 6, 4/7. 1 (Winter/Spring, 1995) 109.

that time.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, in 1937 de Valera's famous constitution was published. The constitution primarily aimed to promote the family as something almost untouchable on which the welfare of the whole state depended. Article 41 also defined the position of women in society:

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 the neglect of their duties in the home.

2.3° The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack.<sup>23</sup>

As many critics and historians have observed, although the aim of the constitution was to protect women and their rights as mothers in the times where they had to find a job to support their family, the effect of it was that women were being discharged from employment and by law were confined to the role of mothers and wives. In giving a high status to the family, they wanted to encourage women to stay at home and have as many children as possible so the population would reach pre-war levels. Unfortunately, although the constitution was well meant, its effect was a devastating one to women's lives. As Ingman well sums up its effects: "For the sake of the nation, woman's role was to be confined to the home where she was to ensure the stability of the state, the preservation of the family and the upholding of the Catholic values."<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Heather Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007) 10-11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ireland, Bunreacht na hÉireann, Constitution of Ireland*. (Dublin: Government Publication Sale Office, 1942).

<sup>24</sup> Ingman, 11.

As Sarah O'Connor describes, women were reduced to their "biological functions as mothers," and they were made marginal in the public life of the state where, thanks to the emergence of censorship, their voices were made silent for years to come.<sup>25</sup> The role of the woman was seen primarily in the household where she would provide care for the well being of her husband, bear him children and be a dutiful mother. Because of this, the words woman, mother and wife became almost synonymous in the time.

## **2.6 The Influence of Catholicism**

Thanks to the enormous and post-Independence, State approved, influence of the Catholic Church the idea of the domestic role of woman, this interchangeability of the terms womanhood - motherhood and woman - mother became widely accepted by the society as Pat O'Connor asserts:

It is still the case that womanhood and motherhood are represented as synonymous realities [...] for the bishops, only mothers are real women [...] womanhood is symbolically and materially non-existent until non-sexually osmosed into motherhood.<sup>26</sup>

Having in mind the power that the Catholic Church had on the people in O'Brien's time and how the Catholic doctrines influenced Irish politics, it is no wonder that Ireland became what it was. Women were not allowed to have children outside a marriage, and when it was not only a great scandal but the woman was banished for life in a Magdalen Asylum. Therefore, the only women living in Catholic Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century were either young and still

---

<sup>25</sup> Sarah O'Connor, *No Man's Land: Women and the Cultural Present* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2011) 12.

<sup>26</sup> Pat O'Connor, *Emerging Voices: Women in Contemporary Irish Society* (Dublin: Institute for Public Administration, 1998) 91.

unmarried and therefore childless, or married and mothers. This ideology was connected with the image of a woman as the Virgin, because of that women had to be chaste and dutiful mothers and wives and follow the example of Mary's in their lives. Therefore, a woman had to choose between becoming a nun or marrying and being a mother, there were no other possibilities for her in Catholic Ireland. When a woman was infertile and could not have children, it was considered a terrible misfortune. As Hill writes, the women were even secretly despised for not having children and were thought to be selfish and doomed by God.<sup>27</sup>

Although the birth rate declined in the twentieth century, the size of the Irish family was much higher; the average Irish family still had seven children. Contraceptives were banned in 1935 and women were not told how to regulate the number of pregnancies, therefore the number of children per family stayed above average in Europe. Traditionally, women could have children only when being married, other cases were viewed as disgraceful and the women were seen as heavy sinners.<sup>28</sup> To have a child outside wedlock was scandalous thanks to the Catholic doctrine that only a married couple could have children, for the good of the whole society unmarried pregnant women were regularly institutionalised. The role of the Magdalene Asylums<sup>29</sup> which made unmarried mothers and their children disappear proves the social intolerance of behaviour disapproved of by the Catholic Church.

These remained the conditions of women's lives in Ireland until the late 1950's, when Kate O'Brien was at the end of her career as a fiction writer. Significantly by that time the writer had

---

<sup>27</sup> Hill, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Hill, 113.

<sup>29</sup> Some References on Magdalene Asylums:

McCarthy, Rebecca Lea. *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries: An Analytical History*. Jefferson, NC: McFarlan, 2010

Smith, James M. *Ireland's Magdalene Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*. Notre Dame Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007

Finnegan, Frances. *Do Penance or Perish: Magdalene Asylums in Ireland*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004

O'Beirne, Kathy. *Kathy's Story: A Childhood Hell inside the Magdalene Laundries*. Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2005

Ramblado-Minero, María de la Cinta ed. *Single Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Cultural, Historical and Social Essays*. Lewiston. N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 2006

moved to Britain where she was unaffected by the laws and customs of her native country, however, in her novels she strongly criticized the Irish politics aimed against women. The rights of women started to change slowly in the 1960's, but it was not until Ireland's entering of the European Economic Community in 1972, that Irishwomen started to gain the same rights as in other parts of Europe. However, thanks to the continuing influence of the Catholic Church (although not so big as in the past), much was reformed only recently and some rights, as a woman's right for abortion, are still taboo.

## **Chapter 3 Family Sagas: *Without My Cloak* and *The Ante-Room***

Although O'Brien established herself as a playwright, she became famous and known to a wider public as a novelist. Her first novel *Without My Cloak* was published in 1931 and became an immediate success. Kate was awarded the James Tait Black Prize and the Hawthorden Prize. Three years later, in 1934, the novel was followed by *The Ante-Room*. In *Without My Cloak*, O'Brien presents the reader with a family saga similar to the Forsytes. However, the novel is unusual in comparison with her later work as it follows the fates of male heroes, mainly Denis Considine. *The Ante-Room* continues to depict the fates of a branch of the Considines, the Mulqueens.

### **3.1. *Without My Cloak***

Published in 1931, O'Brien's debut remains her most successful novel, although it is not a typical Kate O'Brien piece because it is a long family saga where, moreover, the main heroes are male. The novel centres on the fates of the family members, but mainly on the head of the Considine clan, Anthony, and his firstborn son Denis. The book, although mainly traditional in the portrayal of women, also features some who try to hold their fates in their hands, as it is a feature of O'Brien later novels.

Although the protagonists are male, their characteristics are rather female. They are described as too handsome for men, they passionately love each other. Anthony sacrifices his wealth and nearly also his good social status for Denis in not taking another wife after his first one's death and sends his son to a school which is not well looked upon by other family members only to keep him close and not alienate him. In contrast Denis, even more handsome than his father, is

the rebel and the spoiled child of the family, however, he loves his father so much that he abandons his true love, sacrifices his dream to fit into the family and his father's expectations. Therefore, the portrayal of the Denis's and Anthony's relationship is reminiscent of a mother-daughter relationship. Denis's features are those of a woman as he is submissive to his family, he does not want to disappoint them and cannot free himself from family bonds.

However, the novel features also some women who strike out. They are portrayed mainly in their traditional role as mothers and wives, but some already try to take their lives in their own hands and escape their family, as Caroline Lanigan attempts but fails. Moreover, the novel not only features for the first time women who try to live independently but also a homosexual man, Eddy Considine, who openly states in the book that he loves a man. Despite this and the fact that sexual love between Denis and his lover Christina Roche are portrayed openly in the novel, the book was never banned and became the author's most selling novel.

### **3.1.1. The Portrayal of the "Typical" Woman of Her Time**

O'Brien was a writer who centred on the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie, she does not write anything about other classes, she only mentions servants or shop assistants briefly when needed. Although Christina Roche, Denis's lover, is of working class origin, she is anything but a simple peasant girl and acts very nobly; in this sense she is also closer to the women of the middle class.

Moreover, her father came of a higher class.

The reason why O'Brien wrote about these women characters, as Dalsimer puts it, was to:

quietly protest against the fates of the middle class Irish women who are sheltered, stifled, and forced into prescribed roles as wives, mothers, or spinsters who must care for ageing parents. Her most extreme portrayals depict the lives of women starved by a lack of passion or driven to their deaths by its excesses.

As mothers, Kate O'Brien's characters, denied educations, careers, even political opinions, frequently lose themselves in the lives of their children.<sup>30</sup>

Her novels are set in the past, although the matters which she criticised in her writing were still current.

As Kate O'Brien was famous for inventing women who tried to make an end to their subordination and live their life independently, *Without My Cloak* presents mainly women who resemble the roles of the real Irish women of the nineteenth century. O'Brien constructs the fates of middle class women who live in the household; they are dutiful mothers and daughters, bear their husbands as many children as possible and love these above all. This is the way Molly, the wife of Anthony, is portrayed in the novel. Molly is known as a beauty who is very typical for the upcoming middle class: she likes to boast about her children, for whom she does not care nor have any affections towards, only dutifully bears them; she likes to show off her wealth and social status by parading herself in town, however, she is presented above all as a dutiful and passionately loving wife. The couple's love is transformed into Molly's constant pregnancies. For her love means a sacrifice --she sacrifices her body to her husband and is repaid for this by becoming pregnant. As Walshe states: "Molly resigns herself to the burden of numerous pregnancies in exchange for her improper employment of sexual pleasures of marital love [...]."<sup>31</sup> Consequently, she dies at the age of thirty-four giving birth to her ninth child, having paid "the price for his [Anthony's] passionate love."<sup>32</sup> In fact she submits totally to her husband, and gives him all she has as it was expected by her by the family and Church. Ailbhe Smyth goes even further by writing: "Molly Considine dies, literally, of dependence and silence: the price she pays for experiencing sexual pleasure (which she cannot even name) is death though

---

<sup>30</sup> Dalsimer, xv.

<sup>31</sup> Walshe, *Ordinary People Dancing*, 108.

<sup>32</sup> Kate O'Brien, *Without My Cloak* (London Virago Press, 2001) 22.

childbirth.”<sup>33</sup> In contrast, Lorna Reynolds argues that the reader should not pity the woman: “Molly is no victim: she loves her husband and had from the beginning made her bargain with fate: if death in childbirth is the risk she has to run for her husband’s love, she is prepared to take that risk.”<sup>34</sup> Although Molly’s fate was nothing unusual for the time, death is a too high price having to pay for love and its consummation. However, as in all O’Brien’s work, love is condemned to end unhappily.

A similar experience is shared by Teresa, the oldest of the Considines and also the boldest. Despite being a woman, Teresa has a special position in the family. Nothing important can pass though without her consultation, she is the main gossip of the family but also one who sees that everything happens according to the Catholic middle class decorum and the family’s image is not harmed. Teresa is definitely a matriarch of her big family, but is at the same time a woman who bore her weak husband eight children and a mother who would sacrifice all for her children’s well being. Teresa is also unhappily married, although she does not seem to suffer as her love is dedicated to her syphilitic son Reggie. As Reynolds comments explains: “She is one of the many Irish women who have tried to compensate themselves for an inadequate husband by lavishing all their tenderness on a son; in this instance, ironically, a son less deserving than her husband.”<sup>35</sup> However, also Teresa is condemned to unhappiness and later death by O’Brien. Another member of the family, Sophia, wife of Joe Considine, pretends to be happily married, a loving mother, however, she drowns herself in alcohol at every occasion. Also Agnes, the youngest woman of the clan, although a spinster, is unhappy in her life. No one takes her seriously and in fact she only presents a burden to the family.

In *Without My Cloak* the women are not portrayed in a very positive light. This portrayal is typical for O’Brien: in none of her works relationships between women and men end happily.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ailbhe Smyth, “Counterpoints.” *Ordinary People Dancing*, ed Enda Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993) 31.

<sup>34</sup> Reynolds, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Reynolds, 45.

However, although these women described in her first novel seem to be only caricatures, Molly and Sophia represent the typical picture of an Irish woman of the nineteenth century. Thanks to the influence of the Catholic Church, the typical image of a woman was inspired by Virgin Mary, therefore it was expected of women to be modest, chaste, loving towards their husband, and subordinate. In this case, it is only Teresa who stands out and rather takes up male roles.

### 3.1.2. Early Rebels

Kate O'Brien is famous for her picturing of women as freedom seekers. An attempt of this appears already in her first novel *Without My Cloak*, although the liberation of women in this book is not fulfilled but only attempted. In her early piece O'Brien appears to be still looking for her theme and clearly her ideas at that time were also not as radical as later in her life. As a result, in *Without My Cloak* some heroines try to break with their family ties and the tradition imposed on the people by the models of the Catholic Church, but they fail because as they were shaped by this society, their conscience does not allow them to. It is only Christina Roche, an outsider and a member of the serving class, who manages to escape the strict family ties of the Considine clan. She becomes therefore the only woman in the book who truly rebels against the rules of the Catholic middle class as she is not its member; the others who are a part of this world cannot abandon it because of the feared consequences their actions would cause.

The first example of an attempt to break from the traditions is that of Caroline Lanigan, a beauty of the Considine family, mother of six, and wife of a successful and respected lawyer. Although she seems to have everything a woman of her time desired, Caroline longed for more--happiness, love, and freedom. As we are told in the novel, she has not loved anyone for twenty-years.<sup>36</sup> Her seemingly perfect marriage has left her only a shadow of her former self, as she is once encountered by the novel's hero Denis:

---

<sup>36</sup> O'Brien, *Without My Cloak*, 191.

This was a figure of woe, if it wasn't Aunt Caroline. If it wasn't Aunt Caroline, it could be only an abstraction of Despair. [...] It was Aunt Caroline, a figure of woe and despair, weeping for unsated youth, for twenty years of wifedom [...] Aunt Caroline was weeping for unimportant things of whose existence she only knew by hearsay – love and frivolity and foolish talk and lover's friendliness, and the pleasures and satisfactions of passions for which an ironic god had surely built her.<sup>37</sup>

Although she hates her husband, Caroline does not use her chance, when she successfully runs away from Ireland and for the second time in her life falls in love and finally experiences happiness, she is fully aware of her family bonds. As she tells her lover: "I'm crushed by them, Richard. I'm owned by them. [...] I took him [my husband] for better, for worse! [...] Isn't it terrible how there's no getting away from that?"<sup>38</sup> She returns, dutifully and defeated, home to her family. Caroline is not able to break loose from the bonds and traditions of her society. She is a typical Catholic for whom the teaching that marriage is holy and for life is a law, and therefore she was to stay in it, no matter how unhappy. Moreover, she fears the consequences of her actions too much and therefore sacrifices personal happiness to save the family from gossip and social degradation. In this Caroline embodies the typical middle class woman of her time secretly complaining and suffering during her life. Because she fears the condemnation of the society and the consequences her behaviour would cause to her family, she cannot do as she wants and has to subdue herself fully to her duty of a woman.

Christina Roche is the only one who can escape the Considines as well as the Irish society. Although from low birth, Christina appears to be the only figure in the novel untouched by class prejudice. She is unspoiled by money and social status, and lives strictly according to the rules of

---

<sup>37</sup> O'Brien, *Without My Cloak*, 143.

<sup>38</sup> O'Brien, *Without My Cloak*, 195.

the Church and works hard to provide for her living, by that she is one of the few significant working class heroines of O'Brien's novels. She resembles the fates of many working class women of the time: born out of wedlock and raised by her family to whom she is only a burden and must work to repay them for their deeds. Although Christina and Denis Considine fall in love and become lovers, Christina keeps a clear head and knows that their relationship is not proper because of her low social status. Although they both love each other, Christina refuses Denis' offer to marry him because she fears the consequences of this deed: she knows that the proud family would never except her but that moreover Denis would be humiliated and laughed at by the whole town.<sup>39</sup>

Denis' and Christina's relationship symbolizes one of the few true love relationships in O'Brien's novel, nevertheless, like all the others is doomed to fail as Christina is sent over to America by the Considines. Although Denis manages to find her, she refuses him again. With this act she in fact saves herself from both the power of this family and gains full independence in America where she can choose a husband herself. Despite being poor and broken-hearted, Christina is the only one, who thanks to the extreme of emigration managed to escape the duty towards the family, tradition and Church.

A compromise between Caroline's and Christina's fate is symbolized by Anna Hennessy. She is being described in the novel as a new woman:

She was what is called a difficult girl, over-educated according to the notions of her day, and lonely and proud. [...] She despised her pretty, fading, refusing-to-fade mother, looking at her and though her with the hard, contemptuous eyes of youth. Hardness, integrity, fastidiousness, and pride controlled in Anna Hennessy a deep-flowing emotional capacity. She had read too much and seen

---

<sup>39</sup> O'Brien, *Without My Cloak*, 320.

too much to be content in the genteel, virginal idleness that filled the days of her contemporaries and that was all that was expected of her now.<sup>40</sup>

This modern woman now returned to fulfil her duty to her family by marrying. Dalsimer calls her a *dea ex machina*,<sup>41</sup> which she truly is. Embodying tradition as well future hope in coming from a well established Catholic family from Mellick, however being liberal minded, she forces the hero Denis to stay at home and reconcile with his family and past. She is also the future: Anna is a modern thinking woman who already has seen the world, knows what to expect from life and will marry for love because she has the means and will to choose her husband freely.

*Without My Cloak* is not yet radical enough to present the typical O'Brien heroine. Although Caroline Lanigan attempts an escape, she is still governed by tradition and her consciousness and therefore she cannot liberate herself fully, Christina Roche is the only one in the novel who can reach liberation, however, with a bitter cost of losing her love and former life. As many Irish women of her time and class, seizes a chance to start new in a country which offers more freedom and possibilities to members of her sex. Anna Hennessy symbolizes the compromise in the novel; rich, beautiful and travelled, she has lived her life already earlier and now is ready to settle down and bow down to tradition. Therefore, in O'Brien's first novel we cannot truly find her typical heroine yet.

---

<sup>40</sup> O'Brien, *Without My Cloak*, 456-457.

<sup>41</sup> Dalsimer, 19.

### **3.2 *The Ante-Room*: A Contrast of Opposites**

*The Ante-Room* is O'Brien's second novel and also her most religious one. It is another of the writer's family-oriented novels and offers a continuation of the fates of few family members of the Mulqueens, a branch of the Considine family of *Without My Cloak*. The novel centres on the last three days of life of Teresa Mulqueen and her daughter Agnes, now head of the household and unhappily in love with her brother-in-law.

We can find four types of women which all reflect the social stand of real women in Ireland of the end of the nineteenth century in O'Brien's second novel: a loving mother, a wife who seems to have it all but is utterly unhappy in her marriage, a poor woman who uses her charm to raise in society through marriage, and also a new type – an independently thinking woman who attempts to decide by herself.

#### **3.2.1. Traditional Women**

The most traditional woman of the novel is Teresa Mulqueen, the mother and head of the family who lies dying of cancer. Teresa is a loving mother, however, all her love is directed to her syphilitic son Reggie and the worry who will keep him safe is the only thing that keeps her alive. Teresa is an example of many Irish mothers who loved her oldest son (in this case second oldest) more than their own husband, as Reggie's case is worsened by his bad health and his total dependence on his mother, Teresa finds only peace when her son is taken care of. Although her other children and her husband love and cherish her, they do not seem to exist for her. This depiction of Teresa is as a person who loves her son more than husband is common in Irish literature, and moreover is understandable, the son was brought to life by her, raised, spoiled, and is also the woman's future – after her husband's death he will inherit all the property and will have to take care of his elderly mother. Therefore, mothers in Ireland always loved their sons more than the daughters because, although they were of the weaker sex, their husband would

provide for them, however, the son would provide for the mother, protect her and he had to be helped in finding the proper replacement for the mother.

However, Teresa is used more symbolically. She was the centre of all being in the novel. Although Agnes is the main heroine, all important events circle around Teresa, the head of the family clan. As her health worsens this task transfers to her daughter Agnes who takes on the responsibility. Her being named Teresa evokes the connection with St Teresa of Avila, O'Brien's favourite saint, and therefore can explain her deep devotion to God or her strong will and enormous power for a woman to lead her family through all turmoil. As the saint had to struggle against the church for her establishing of her order and its recognition and keeps alive until all is well, similarly Teresa Mulqueen fights for her hopeless son Reggie and can leave the world with a clear conscience only when he is taken care of. Even her death at the end of the novel may be interpreted as symbolic, the rise of a new era where the new type of woman, personified by Agnes, takes the rule.

Mary-Rose, Mrs. De Courcy O'Regan, is the prototype of a woman who seems to have it all. She is "fair, small and most delicately made [...] the classic feminine of polite literature,"<sup>42</sup> married to one of the most handsome men in the country and married him for love. She is rich and comfortable in her life. However, she and her husband cannot stand another anymore and rather live a "cat-and-dog life."<sup>43</sup> After a few years of married life Mary-Rose and Vincent find they do not make the ideal couple they thought and everybody still thinks them to be, although some see certain cracks in their relationship. In this the couple shares the fate of many married people in Ireland until divorce became legal in 1997. At the time of the story, in 1890, it was expected of married people to make the best of their marriage, get used to each other and learn to love one another. Despite Vincent's love for Agnes and his lack of feelings for his wife, Mary-Rose admits: "I've been married to him- and I – I don't want anyone else! That's the

---

<sup>42</sup> O'Brien, *The Ante-Room*, 93.

<sup>43</sup> O'Brien. *The Ante-Room*, 108.

terrible thing! That's what makes me hate him!"<sup>44</sup> Both Vincent and Marie-Rose feel the entrapment of their life, the only solution for their situation is death of one of them. This perilous situation was solved by Vincent by committing suicide thus giving his wife freedom.

### 3.2.2 Modern Types

Another type appearing in the novel is Nurse Cunningham. At first sight she seems entirely different from all women in the novel as she comes from a different background, however, this might not be the case as Declan Kiberd suggests:

Nurse Cunningham's true analogy in the story is Marie-Rose, the vain and comely sister of Agnes, who is also a victim (but in a different way) of the market in marriageable females. Both women are about the same age, though one was born to riches and the other to poverty, both are known in an emotional cul-de-sac, living as marginal figures in houses not their own. Even worse, both have become willing creatures of the male world, brightening visibly when an appreciative man enters the room. To all intents they exist only in their perception of and by men. Yet Agnes (for she is no paragon) can idealize her sister even as she despises the manipulative nurse.<sup>45</sup>

In fact the only choice for the Nurse to change her prospects is marriage with a wealthy man, and as this is not very probable, she is doomed to take her chance with Reggie and live a loveless life, however, comfortable and rich. The Nurse is an opportunist, however, she, as other women of her social standing had no other way of rising in society than through marriage, therefore, she uses the opportunity given to her and rather sacrifices love to a life in comfort. However, the

---

<sup>44</sup> O'Brien, *The Ante Room*, 198.

<sup>45</sup> Declan Kiberd, "Kate O'Brien: The Ante-Room," *Irish Classics* (London: Granta Publications, 2000) 564-565.

problem in this case is that for the rich middle class family, the proposed marriage is a scandal as Reggie, the heir of the family, will marry below him and to make it worse to a nurse of his mother's. Dalsimer comments on the Nurses cleverness:

Nurse Cunningham is the future. Her life [...] suggests what awaits the woman who has no family to protect her or has no one but chooses to free herself from its refuge. In today's terms a professional woman, she is the antithesis of Agnes and Marie-Rose. [...] With no thought that God will provide, she cleverly arranges her marriage with Reggie, acquiring at last the social and economic status that Agnes and Marie-Rose have always taken for granted.<sup>46</sup>

The Nurse had to take her fate in her own hands, therefore, she is better off than the middle class heroines who are married off, she takes her future ill husband willingly, facing the consequences of her decision. Moreover, her act may not even be seen as a sacrifice as she will lead the life she had desired and may even find happiness in her marriage as welfare and security were the only things she wanted. In this her desire is won in the marriage, and she becomes much more better of than the middle class women who were often married against their will and moreover were never happy with their partner, but they still had to do their marital duties. The Nurse, despite becoming Reggie's wife will continue in her profession rather than playing the role of his wife.

Agnes Mulqueen represents the breaking point of Kate O'Brien's heroines. She attempts to decide about her own future by herself, however, she still has to face the Catholic Church and her family, therefore she also fails to free herself. As the book has an open ending, also Agnes's future stays open. As Dalsimer sees this problem:

---

<sup>46</sup> Dalsimer, 30.

Agnes is the first to be distinguished by her need and capacity to act as *she* believes she should. Yet so strong is Agnes' morality, so organic is her relationship with her upbringing, that her choice accords fully with her Catholic training.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore, Agnes has the most complicated decision to make in *The Ante-Room*. She can accept Dr Curran's hand and take on a pragmatic but loveless life, follow her sister's fate but with the possibility that she may learn in the future to love her husband; or she can follow her heart and run away with Vincent, her sister's husband. Not even the second option would make her happy because she knows she would bring shame on the family and lose her beloved sister for ever. Agnes is one of the first O'Brien heroines who has the right to choose, although her choice is not an easy one, she holds her fate in her own hands. Thanks to her conscience and upbringing, Agnes fails in this, however for O'Brien "*The Ante-Room* is the last of her works in which the central character fails to sever her ties with family and country."<sup>48</sup> Both Lorna Reynolds and Deidre Madden see the failure of Agnes's love as a result of being not born out of freedom;<sup>49</sup> however Madden goes even further by suggesting that:

The love between Agnes and Vincent is doomed, in part because it is has not been born out of freedom (and for Kate O'Brien, rightly, freedom is a prerequisite of love). It is also doomed, one feels, because it is a love between a woman and a man. In the world of Kate O'Brien's novels, such a love seldom, if ever, develops into lasting joy."<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Dalsimer, 21.

<sup>48</sup> Dalsimer, 21-22.

<sup>49</sup> Reynolds, 56.

<sup>50</sup> Deidre Madlen, "Afterword," *The Ante-Room* Kate O'Brien (London: Virago Press, 1996) 311.

Despite her failure to choose properly, Agnes is the breaking point in O'Brien's work. She is the last of her heroines who still suffers under the conventions and bows to them. Although Agnes finally submits to tradition and her love to her sister, which is stronger than all emotions she feels to a man, she is different from previous O'Brien heroines: she is an ugly duckling whom everybody overlooked and now has become attractive because she is a clever and strong woman. However, she is not the perfect drawing room beauty but, in the words of Mary-Rose, "a disillusioned woman. A new type,"<sup>51</sup> or one of "those legendary sorts of women."<sup>52</sup>

*The Ante-Room* is in many ways a novel which clearly illustrates Kate O'Brien's ideas. Death is the only escape from an unhappy marriage, and the only marriage which can result in happiness is a pragmatic one. In this her ideas fully correspond to Kiberd's: "Marriage is the trap into which women walk as a prelude to the discovery of their real desire,"<sup>53</sup> which is proven in *The Ante-Room*. The novel brought to light two fascinating female characters: Nurse Cunningham who succeeds because of her proposed marriage to the heir of the Mulqueen estate, however, the cause of happiness is not love but status and security, as she cannot expect love and fulfilment by marrying a man who has syphilis. Agnes Mulqueen, the proposed femme fatale of the novel is the other woman. She has to choose between three loves: the one to Dr Curran would be pragmatic, the one to Vincent is passionate and true but sinful, and finally the love and duty to her sister and family which are natural and represent the ever lasting bonds. Like all O'Brien's heroines before her, Agnes follows her conscience and chooses the life-long love for her sister and decides to abandon her lover. However, she is the last heroine of O'Brien to do so; all the others to come will not have a problem to put their personal happiness before duty.

---

<sup>51</sup> O'Brien, *The Ante-Room*, 206.

<sup>52</sup> O'Brien, *The Ante-Room*, 239.

<sup>53</sup> Kiberd, "Kate O'Brien: The Ante-Room," 566.

## **Chapter 4 The Banned Novels: *Mary Lavelle* and *The Land of Spices***

*Mary Lavelle* and *The Land of Spices* introduce another stage in the development of Kate O'Brien's writing. In this period she presents the heroine who decides to change her life path, liberate herself from the traditions and take her chances. However, as both novels have an open ending it is not clear how far the main heroines of the novels, Mary Lavelle and Anna Murphy, go in their life and if they establish themselves in their lives independently as they thought or if they will follow a classical life path of a woman of their time.

The novels not only share their theme but also an unfortunate fate: they were both banned by the Irish Censorship Board for obscenity. This meant not only a huge shock for the writer but also an impulse to turn her back on her home country and it moreover changed her writing style which became more critical towards Ireland's politics and woman's fate.

### **4.1 *Mary Lavelle***

*Mary Lavelle* is a crucial novel for O'Brien, not only was it her first piece to be banned, but also the very first novel which did not take place in her native country but in Spain. Like her preceding books, it was based on her life experience - on her life as a governess to the Areilza family in Spain. Moreover, it was her first writing in which the heroine decides to break from the conventions of her time and live independently. It is also the only novel of the author to be named after its protagonist.

The novel centres on its main heroine Mary and her development in the foreign country; therefore, it can be described as a short *Bildungsroman*. It is also a novel only about women, although the two main men characters John, who influences the actions only by his letters from

Ireland, and his Spanish counterpoint Juanito, play an important part in Mary's life and contribute to her decision to take her life in her own hands, the novel abounds with women. All of them contribute to Mary's development. It introduces the Misses, the Spanish women Dona Consuelo and her daughters, Luisa, Juanito's wife, and the woman most responsible for Mary's change, Agatha Conlon.

#### **4.1.1 The Spanish Women and the Misses**

Apart from the eponymous heroine of *Mary Lavelle*, the other women who appear in the novel are either other Misses from backgrounds similar to Mary's or Spanish ladies. These two groups of women are diametrically different, however, the Misses still think they are ladies and are much better than the Spanish; therefore they keep on rejecting the Spanish culture and way of life because for them it is barbaric. The Spanish women, on the other hand, are very progressive by letting their children be educated in English and thus they are bringing the English culture into their households.

The Spanish ladies are represented in this book by Dona Consuelo Areavaga and her daughter-in-law Luisa. Although they are both married and are mothers, the difference in their behaviour and way of life makes the generation gap visible. Dona Consuelo embodies the past and tradition in which the woman's duty was to care for her children and husband at any cost. Family is sacred to her. In this she is closer to the picture of an Irishwoman. However, for her husband, Don Pablo, she lost all her magic in the years of their married life and as a person she is nearly dead for him now, becoming only the mother of his children than his lover.<sup>54</sup>

The young generation is different. Luisa, Juanito's young wife, is more independent. She loves and admires her husband, however, has her own opinion. She combines tradition with a modern point of view. She is described by Mary as a nearly perfect angelic figure, someone who

---

<sup>54</sup> Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* (London: Virago Press, 2000) 56.

stands out and as well is the mistress of her world, does not lack wealth, sophistication and wit and is nearly perfect in all she does.<sup>55</sup> She is the complete opposite of previous beauties in O'Brien's work. She is capable to use her female power to bring her husband on the path she likes, she is one who decides and is not passively waiting what will happen, she actively lives her life and marriage and motherhood seem not to have changed her life habits.

The Irish Misses educate the children of the wealthy Spaniards, however, despite living many years in the foreign country, they keep on rejecting its customs and are still keeping to their habits. They are strongly displaced. Moreover, they are very rude to each other as Mary remarks:

She found the crudity of the misses' intercourse surprising; their rudeness to each other, their use of surnames *tout court*, their interest in the male sex, their prudery, their vindictive attitude towards their employers, and non-intelligent insolence toward the life that went on about them, their obvious poverty and social isolation, their distorted self-respect, their backhanded decency and *esprit de corps* [...] <sup>56</sup>

They differ from Mary in many ways: they come mostly from poorer backgrounds and therefore they had no future in Ireland and had to seek a living elsewhere; being an English speaking Catholic was on the other hand the only education needed for becoming a governess in Spain and securing an easy job where they would be taken care of well. However, despite leaving Ireland or England for ever, they keep on living in an Anglicized world: they drink tea, wear the Irish dresses and hats, and only speak English. Moreover, they perceive themselves as ladies and the Spanish with their strange customs are viewed as barbarous by them, therefore when O'Toole marries a Spaniard everyone is shocked by the match and her marrying under their standards.

---

<sup>55</sup> O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 150.

<sup>56</sup> O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 92.

All this helps to shape Mary's conscience and realize that she is different from the other Misses. As Amanda Tucker explains:

Mary's relationship with the Irish and English women abroad helps to shape her own sense of identity. Mary does not simply define herself in opposition to the other governesses – in fact, part of Mary's process of development involves her recognition of the hardship that the misses face - but her contact with them creates a productive antagonism.<sup>57</sup>

Mary's realisation of her difference from the other Misses allows her to grow mature, the impulse to learn Spanish makes her love the Spanish culture, all this shapes her identity. Moreover, the want not to be like the other bitter governesses who have no other chance in life to stay in the country they despise for life helps her to realize the state of her own life, how entrapped she might be in marriage with her fiancé.

Both the Spanish women as well as the Misses help Mary in shaping her identity. In Luisa and Dona Consuelo she had the opportunity to see two kinds of a marital life: the classical example in which a woman is only perceived as a mother, this example would probably become her fate if she went back to Ireland and married, and that of a marriage where a woman is an equal partner to her husband, which would be possible only outside Ireland. Moreover, on the example of the governesses she saw the arrogance of people and no possibility to change and escape from the entrapment in a world they do not want to be but have no other chance than to bow to their fate. Both points of view help the main heroine to her decision to take her life in her own hands as she has the resources and therefore can decide independently about herself.

---

<sup>57</sup> Amanda Tucker, "A Space Between: Transnational Feminism in Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle*." *New Hibernia Review*, 12/1 2008, 90.

#### 4.1.2 The Godlike Heroine vs. Agatha Conlon

Mary Lavelle and Agatha Conlon are the two main female figures of the novel. Eibhear Walshe calls Mary the personification of O'Brien in the time she came to Spain (both arrived in 1922 and were twenty-three years old) and Conlon her other version in the time when she was writing the novel in 1936.<sup>58</sup> Like many other of her books, also *Mary Lavelle* is strongly autobiographical and features in Mary and Conlon two strong heroines who embody the author's idea of a woman choosing her own life path.

*Mary Lavelle* is a *Bildungsroman* in which its eponymous heroine learns to know herself. At the beginning we encounter a shy and inexperienced young woman who came to Spain to win a year of independence from her family and fiancé and at least for a short period live her dream of being an independent traveller. She comes to the country to become a governess, a Miss; however, she is different from them: she comes of a middle class background, was educated in a convent, moreover, she is engaged and her going to Spain was not for life. Also as Ingman points out, Mary is not such a typical governess because "an Irish Miss will remain unchanged by the encounters with a foreign culture. By contrast, Mary Lavelle's time in Spain leads her to re-evaluate her time awaiting her back in Ireland."<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Mary is exceptionally beautiful and all men seem to fall in love with her at first sight. For Don Pablo, her employer, she is the personification of virginal beauty and "the old eternal poetic myth of girlhood,"<sup>60</sup> his son Juanito is similarly thrilled by his first encounter with her: "The face of an untaken Aphrodite. Beauty as little to be known of held as the rakish Cyprian's, as unlikely to be satisfied or satisfactory in the bread-and-butter world. A myth from a long outmoded heaven [...]."<sup>61</sup> For all men, Mary resembles a pagan goddess, however, thanks to her inexperience Mary is not capable of using the

---

<sup>58</sup> Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life*, 65.

<sup>59</sup> Ingman, 105.

<sup>60</sup> O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 67.

<sup>61</sup> O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 167.

advantage she has in her looks. However, she grows in Spain and becomes a wiser woman influenced by the free-mindedness of the Spanish.

At the beginning of the novel, she is bit naïve and therefore sees no other option for her than later coming back and marrying:

Mary is dimly aware of the limitations of Mellick life but sees no possibility of another sort of life. She has inherited a hundred pounds from her godmother but her father refuses to spend it (“waste it” he calls it) on training her for employment, believing that, since she is a beauty, she will lack no proposals of marriage. Mary’s role is to play daughter of the house and her destiny in marriage.<sup>62</sup>

At first she is emotionally attached to her fiancé John, although she tells us that she does not like being kissed by him;<sup>63</sup> at the beginning of the novel she is similar to the previous heroines of O’Brien’s who reflected on the fates of women of that time. Therefore, also Mary accepted the hand of the first man who courted her and who seemed to be a good match.

However, when attending a bullfight, which John had forbidden her, she for the first time decides to act on her own will. There she experiences an epiphany. As Dalsimer explains:

The bullfight teaches Mary that passion and beauty can both charm and maim.

It is at the *corrida* that Mary first witnesses, in one moment, the contradiction of human life and the power of each person to determine his destiny. The bullfight expresses all the individualism that life in Mellick denies.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Ingman, 104.

<sup>63</sup> O’Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 32.

<sup>64</sup> Dalsimer, 35.

The bullfight was a tough realisation for Mary; she started to re-evaluate her former life and started to realize that John might have not been the right choice. However, it is not until her encounter with Juanito that things really change for her as she falls in love for the first time in her life. However, this realisation makes her turn her back to her beloved Spain and rather forces her to return home than to pursue her happiness at first. Despite the novel's outcome, Mary as well as her lover are Catholics and marriage is a sacrament to them, however, they decide to lead a love affair and before Mary leaves the country she gives herself to her lover fully.

Having sex with Juanito was the last momentum for Mary not to return to her fiancé and her former life. Ingman notes that this experience made her different from the traditional image of an Irishwoman:

This knowledge puts her at odds with her nation's view of womanhood where the sexual purity of the Irish woman guarantees the purity of the nation. Mary knows she is returning to Ireland with a tale that will revolt John into rejecting her. [...] Her love affair with Juanito has placed Mary at odds with her nation. She knows that, whatever she may become in the future, she will no longer fit into the stereotyped role of wife awaiting her back in Ireland.<sup>65</sup>

Therefore, there will be no place in Ireland for Mary anymore. Her returning home would either mean her acceptance of a life with John and lying to him or causing a scandal and running away. She will have to leave Ireland and live a life of a freelance as she anticipated at the beginning. As Dalsimer sums it up: "Mary is the first of Kate O'Brien's characters strong enough to crack the foundations that support her identity."<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Ingman, 106.

<sup>66</sup> Dalsimer, 42.

Another character in the novel that managed to break the bonds of Catholic Ireland's society and lives a happy and free life in Spain is Agatha Conlon. Also she is different from the other Misses; she is adaptable and learnt not to reject but absorb the best from the Spanish culture, therefore she learned Spanish, visits bullfights and rather stays apart from other English-speaking people who mock her because of her difference. Agatha becomes a guide to the Spanish culture for Mary, as she brings her to the corrida, she is the one responsible for Mary's epiphany. Agatha is the only Miss who loves bullfights and visits them as often she can, and as Mary sees the beauty in killing the animals: "I like brutality better than sentiment. I like the look of the thing, and all the rules and ceremonies."<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the bullfight makes her happy and content.<sup>68</sup> This reflects on Conlon's personality: she is a free spirit that admires the beauty of art, loves her freedom, however, holds on to traditions and rules.

Conlon is a strict Catholic, one of many O'Brien's saintly women. Although confessing to Mary "I like you the way a man would,"<sup>69</sup> she feels it is a heavy sin for which she must repent and is heavily ashamed for it. Agatha Conlon and the later heroine Clare Halvey from *As Music and Splendour* are O'Brien's only openly lesbian figures. However, Conlon is not constructed as a full character of the novel but merely as a guide to Mary who opens her eyes and together with Juanito brings her to the realisation that life in Ireland would be impossible for her in many ways: not only did she have pre--marital sex, committed matrimony but moreover, is often being described as a lapsed Catholic or even a pagan, therefore she is not surprised by Agatha's expression of love.

When taking in mind Walshe's theory that Mary is the young O'Brien and Conlon the older and more experienced self of her, Agatha truly well reflects her personality –both are lesbians, although O'Brien never openly confessed to this; she has a clear opinion about everything, is sharp, a lover of art, and moreover a woman of the world, but still a strict Catholic inside and a

---

<sup>67</sup> O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 209.

<sup>68</sup> O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 117.

<sup>69</sup> O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 285.

traditionalist. On the other hand, Mary is still young and is starting her life as an independent woman, who Conlon in the novel already is. However, as the novel has an open ending, it stays a mystery how far will Mary Lavelle go in becoming the freelance she wished to be.

## 4.2 *The Land of Spices*

*The Land of Spices* is O'Brien's fifth novel and is as well her most political one. In the book she voices her ideas about the positions of women in Ireland, the too strong influence of the Catholic Church on the lives of people, or of over exaggerated nationalism. According to Mary Breen "*The Land of Spices* is a novel of growth and development: a *Bildungsroman*. But the conventional format is complicated by the double plot structure. The novel traces the lives of two central protagonists over a period of eleven years."<sup>70</sup> However, it can be argued that the novel is only partly a *Bildungsroman* as it describes the life at the convent school of Anna Murphy, therefore not her whole development takes place in the novel but only that influenced by her years at school. Parallel to her development we get the story of Mére Marie-Hélène Archer, whose past appears in flashbacks and reveals traits of her happy childhood and her motives for entering the convent of Sainte Famille.

Helen Archer's and Anna Murphy's lives are parallels and it could be said that Helen is who Anna would have become if she, in the moment of biggest despair, decided to flee into the safe walls of the convent and become a nun. The protagonists' characters are very similar: they lust for education and knowledge, are strongly attached to a male figure (Helen to her father and Anna to her younger brother) and their loss, although of a different nature, changes them for life. However, the changes in Anna's character were different: she decided to go to university and in this way escape her family, whereas Helen chose to lock herself up and become a nun and by this

---

<sup>70</sup> Mary Breen, "Something Understood? Kate O'Brien and *The Land of Spices*," ed. Eibhear Walshe. *Ordinary People Dancing* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993) 173.

punish her father and also herself by making it impossible for her to forgive and love. In fact, it is only thanks to the presence of Anna that Helen learns to love again, is enabled her personality to grow and achieve the highest post for a woman in that time in Ireland— a leader of a religious order.

*The Land of Spices* is purely feminist novel. Almost all its important characters are women or girls, the men appearing in the novel are shown as negative characters, for example Harry Murphy is a drunkard, Father Conroy over-nationalistic and un-diplomatic, the others are characters appearing only very shortly.

The book is set in violent times, at the outbreak of nationalist struggles in Ireland and on the edge of WWI in Europe, despite that the convent is presented as a secure place where all live together in harmony and peace. In this O'Brien explains her idea that the only a female organisation, i.e. a convent, is the only right one which will survive everything:

The only successful and lasting relationships in the novel are those between women, and these are neither familiar nor sexual. Mother Marie-Hélène and Anna Murphy, the two central female characters, emerge at the end of the novel as independent, successful and detached individuals. The novel offers an alternative to patriarchy, an all-female community which works for the good of its members.<sup>71</sup>

#### **4.2.1. Helen Archer and Convent Life**

Mère Marie-Hélène Archer, the Reverend Mother of the Mellick branch of the convent of The Compagnie de la Sainte Famille, is one of the two main heroines of *Land of Spices*. The novel

---

<sup>71</sup> Breen, 173.

starts and ends with her. Throughout the book, her life story is told in retrospective and slowly reveals her motive for her becoming a nun. In her figure O'Brien created one of her strongest women characters. Apart from Reverend Mother, mainly Mother Mary Andrew, Mother Eugenia, and the Mother General of the order strike out.

In the nuns of the Mellick convent O'Brien used her memory on her happy days spent at Laurel Hill School, a convent run by the nuns of the order of the Faithful Companions of Jesus. Apart from Reverend Mother who was inspired by O'Brien's leader of the convent and became a synthesis of her and her own two aunts living in a Limerick convent, the other nuns appearing in the novel are thought out and thus resemble various types of women, in fact many of them are "rather humorously rendered caricatures of Irish snobbishness."<sup>72</sup> In the novel we find old nuns who come from the continent and lead the French way of life in Ireland and many younger Irish nuns. Mother Eugenia, the School's Mother Assistant, was a member of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy and is snobbish about that that she used to be Lady Eugenia Fitzmichael,<sup>73</sup> however she is very kind and nearly a holy person. On the other hand, Mother Scholastic, Mother Mary Andrew, a not very popular young nun, is being referred to as "that linen-drapeer person from Tyrone"<sup>74</sup> by Mother Eugenia or "old McWhirter" by the pupils. However, she was "young, intelligent and self-opinionated; she was a very hard worker. [...] She was, in fact, erratic and cruel, and Reverend Mother [...] had more than once reported uneasily [...] to Mère Générale, upon the violence of character in Mother Mary Andrew which she found unsuitable for the duties required of her."<sup>75</sup> In contrast to this the kind Mère Generale and Reverend Mother, Mother Mary Andrew is almost the tyrant of the school, feared by all for her non-compromising and strict attitude to the students.

---

<sup>72</sup> Clare Wallace. "Judgement in Kate O'Brien's Lando of Spices." *Back To the Present: Forward to the Past, Irish Writing and History since 1798, Volume II*. Eds Patricia A. Lynch, Joachim Fischer and Brian Diates. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006) 24.

<sup>73</sup> O'Brien, *Land of Spices*, 17.

<sup>74</sup> O'Brien, *Land of Spices*, 17.

<sup>75</sup> O'Brien, *Land of Spices*, 78.

Despite that that Marie-Helen Archer is neither very popular among students nor the Irish clergy, and is being called “a cold fish,” or English, she is the right person for her position. In creating her figure O’Brien was inspired by her childhood memories of the Reverend Mother of Laurel Hill whom she describes:

Reverend Mother was not only just English; she was late Victorian upper-class English almost one might have said (but wrongly) to the point of caricature. [...] The little nun had a very hard role in the Ireland of my childhood. She was cold, nervous, inexpressive, and non-intellectual.<sup>76</sup>

Despite that she won O’Brien’s affection, the Reverend Mother in *The Land of Spices* much different than her and is throughout a positive figure that, according to the novel, has almost no faults.

We encounter her at the moment of doubt however, when she is determined that she cannot stand nor understand the Irish anymore and therefore is persuaded to give up her position and return to her beloved Brussels. However, she experiences an epiphany when the school’s new boarder, the six-year-old Anna Murphy recites a poem by Henry Vaughan called “Peace,” which indeed brings peace to the troubled mind of Helen and reminds her of her happy childhood with her father. Moreover, it again opens her heart and persuades her that the little Anna needs her care and attention, and therefore she decides to stay for Anna’s sake. As Walshe comments on the effect of Anna’s poem: “The reciting of the poem calms Helen and she resolves to stay in Ireland. From this initial moment of identification between woman and child comes an unspoken affinity, a distanced mentorship.”<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Kate O’Brien. “Memories of a Catholic Girlhood.” *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol V: Irish Women’s Writing and Tradition*. Eds. Angela Bourke, Siobhán Kilfeather, Maria Luddy, Margaret MacCurtain, Geraldine Meaney, Máirín Ní Dhonehadha, Mary O’Dowd and Clair Wills. (Cork University Press, Cork, 2002) 574.

<sup>77</sup> Walshe, *Kate O’Brien: A Writing Life*, 85.

Although the years as the leader of the Mellick convent are not easy, she struggles to hold up her principles as well the ideals of the Order. She acts as a skilled diplomat when she challenges Father Conroy in the questions of nationalist education when she argues “Our nuns are *not* a nation, and our business is not with national matters. We are a religious Order,”<sup>78</sup> or later when she tricks Mrs Condon to allow Anna to go to University. Although she is not generally liked, she is kind and fair to all students having their best interest in mind. The misunderstanding of her character comes mainly from her quietness, her seeking solitude, and moreover her being English in a time when Ireland was attempting to gain independence from the Empire and therefore all English people were seen as the invader and enemy.

Generally, she is perceived as a good and saintly nun; her only fault seems to be that “she is afraid of love, even the love of God.”<sup>79</sup> This inability to love was caused by incidentally seeing “Etienne [her father’s student] and her father, in the embrace of love,”<sup>80</sup> at the age of eighteen. “Traumatized by the revelation that the father’s sexuality excludes her, she rejects sexuality *in toto*. She renounces human love as “devilry” and enters the convent out of hatred for him.”<sup>81</sup> This scene was what brought her into the convent, however, her motive was utterly selfish, she did not follow a vocation but wanted to hurt her father like he hurt her in loving someone else than her. It was her jealousy and hatred for her father for committing this sin that made it impossible for her to forgive him and therefore to shut her heart against love.

It is thanks to the presence of Anna and her childhood innocence what makes Helen’s heart open up slowly again. Reynolds comments on how important the two are for each other:

Reverend Mother’s time in Ireland may be seen as a preparation for her call for supreme power in the Order, and Anna, by arousing the suppressed instincts of

---

<sup>78</sup> O’Brien, *Land of Spices*, 16.

<sup>79</sup> O’Brien, *Land of Spices*, 26.

<sup>80</sup> O’Brien, *Land of Spices*, 165.

<sup>81</sup> Wallace, 21.

love in the nun, as helping her. Reverend Mother, before the book opens, has lost her love for life: Anna, before the book end, will have lost the love of her love, her brother Charlie, dead by drowning the previous summer.”<sup>82</sup>

Helen and Anna keep on helping each other throughout the novel and whereas Anna’s help is usually unintentional, Reverend Mother fights heavy battles for her favourite’s sake. However, her time in Ireland, although being a difficult test for her, is awarded in the end by her becoming Mother General of the Order and leaving the country for Brussels.

The women from the convent seem to be, with few exceptions, nearly ideal representatives of the fair sex. By dedicating their lives to God and coming to live in a convent, they created a harmoniously working community. Despite the seeming harmony, O’Brien plays with the fact how the background of one might also influence the character of a person and therefore also a nun might have her faults.

#### **4.2.1 Anna Murphy and Other Women in the Novel**

Anna is the second of the protagonists of *The Land of Spices*. The novel traces her fates during the eleven years at school; however, despite her development, it is ambiguous to call the book a *Bildungsroman*, as Wallace states: “If the text is regarded as a *Bildungsroman*, then Anna is a rather ambivalent heroine; she is intelligent and sensitive but also naïve, asexual and frequently unassertive.”<sup>83</sup> Similarly to Helen, also her development of characters happens thanks to tough lessons she has to learn and epiphanies.

Anna Murphy arrives at school at the age of six and becomes an avid and hard working student at school, but because she is the “baby” she is allowed many liberties which spoil her. A

---

<sup>82</sup> Reynolds, 66.

<sup>83</sup> Wallace, 19-20.

draw back is presented to her by the strict Mother Mary Andrew who, because of a mistake in a test, does not allow Anna to sit for Emulation which was perceived as very important for her. Nevertheless, this and also other shocks Anna has to go through at school have the effect on her character that she closes herself more and studies even harder, therefore she does not have many friends at school as she is perceived as over-educated and odd as she does not participate in the *schwärmerei* of the other girls.

Another setback for Anna is the death of her beloved brother Charlie. The two were very close and as Mary Breen comments: “The relationship between Anna and her younger brother Charlie is the only potentially successful one between male and female in the novel [and also in other O’Brien books]. [...] But this relationship is not allowed to develop.”<sup>84</sup> However, this event has only unhappy circumstances for Anna; she lost her only loved family member and attempts to lock herself up in the convent walls. This event is a life crisis for her, it makes her even consider becoming a nun, but the result of her studying more wins her a university scholarship which makes her path clear, however, she remains uncertain in what to study.

This question is solved in an epiphany Anna has: when she is explaining “Lycidas” to her fellow student Pilar she becomes aware of her beauty and comes to see her as a work of art,<sup>85</sup> which brings her to the idea to study art. However, her gaze at the beautiful student may be also a hint of Anna’s lesbianism. She is being described as asexual, she never participates in the other girls gossiping about men or adoring certain male visitors to the convent, however, O’Brien does not give any context to Anna’s gaze at Pilar than her realisation of the beauty of art personified in the girl.

However, before going to university and becoming independent and not having to follow her mother’s unfortunate fate, she has to overcome all obstacles laid on her by the Irish Catholic society as she is a woman. Anna herself is aware of this problem:

---

<sup>84</sup> Breen. 176

<sup>85</sup> O’Brien, *Land of Spices*, 286-287.

She was learning from his [her brother Harry's ] case that liberty to pursue life can be withheld or made difficult –and, from observation of Granny and talk with Miss Robertson, she saw now that whereas a boy and an eldest son may expect or command the sacrifices and co-operation of others to his ends, a girl can do no such thing. And that in fact if a girl sees liberty as the greatest of all desirables, she will have to spin it of herself [...].<sup>86</sup>

Therefore, she has to overcome all the traps, as Ingman notes:

The most evident of these traps is Anna's financial dependence on members of her family who, though they are prepared to finance her elder brother's university studies, do not believe in education of women. Whereas the nationalist nun, Mother Mary Andrew, hinders Anna's development in all sorts of ways, Helen opens up the future for her by supporting and facilitating her desire to go to university despite the Murphy family's opposition. In this respect, as Ann Owens Weeks has pointed out, the Order of La Sainte Famille is more truly nurturing of Anna's potential than is her biological family.<sup>87</sup>

Reverend Mother not only supports her protégé but helps to overcome all the obstacles that might endanger Anna's future. Thanks to Helen's winning the Murphy family support for Anna's going to university, the girl finally comes to acknowledge the importance of Reverend Mother's role in her life and comes to over evaluate her personality, which leads to her finally seeing the good character of Helen and not listening to the prejudice that the school spread about her.

---

<sup>86</sup> O'Brien, *Land of Spices*, 209.

<sup>87</sup> Ingman, 113.

Anna's mother Maud was not so fortunate. She married Harry Murphy who drinks and has money problems which brings shame to the whole family and is the reason why young Anna is sent away to be protected from this sight. Anne Owens Weeks sees this problem differently, though: "[...] Mrs Murphy is consumed with self-pity over her loveless marriage, and offers her daughter Anna no guidance, comfort or protection. Instead, she abandons the six-year-old to the tender mercies of a convent boarding school."<sup>88</sup> However, "since there was a thing called "duty" which confessors had to insist upon with Catholic wives, Maud's cross must be carried."<sup>89</sup> As divorce was illegal at that time, the wife had to suffer in the marriage, although a separation is being quietly discusses, it was granted only in the rare cases. Maud Murphy is the illustrative example of a typical woman of the time: unhappily married, mother of many children, who cannot get help from anywhere and can be only pitied by others because there is no rescue from her situation than death.

Mrs Condon, Anna's grandmother, is another case. She is the matriarch of the family and as she is also rich, she is the one deciding about the fates of the Murphy children. As she tells Reverend Mother: "I disapprove of money wasted on the academic education of girls,"<sup>90</sup> therefore she does not want to allow Anna to go to university because she is afraid that it would be a significant expense to her. According to her "brains [...] are wasted on a girl"<sup>91</sup> and therefore she wants Anna to find an employment so that she could support her unfortunate mother and lead a traditional life of a woman of the time. Mrs Condon is portrayed nearly as a tyrant in the novel – everyone is afraid of her therefore the characters either run away from her or dutifully do as she wants. Therefore, the resistance of Reverend Mother is a shock for her and Helen's arguments that even the Bishop is Anna's supporter breaks the woman as she believes in the authority of the Church.

---

<sup>88</sup> Ann Owens Weeks, "A Century of Irish Women's Fiction." *Irish Women Writers, New Critical Perspectives*. Eds. Elke D'hoker, Raphael Ingelbien and Hedwig Schwall (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2011) 190.

<sup>89</sup> O'Brien, *Land of Spices*, 41.

<sup>90</sup> O'Brien, *Land of Spices*, 270.

<sup>91</sup> O'Brien, *Land of Spices*, 206.

The secular woman characters are again typical for O'Brien. She portrays various types of women: from aristocratic families of the snobbish the De la Poles, whom she mocks and shows that having a title does not secure good manners, to unhappy women helplessly entrapped in marriage. In the character of Mrs Condon she created a very strong character, who although a woman, acts like a man would in her time, decides about the members fates etc. However, these women stand only in the background. Anna Murphy's growth into an independent and educated woman is the main concern of the novel. In her life story Anna strongly resembles O'Brien's own fate, however, it is again questionable if she would follow the author's steps, because, as many previous novels also *The Land of Spices* has an open ending.

## Chapter 5 The Late Works: *That Lady* and *As Music and Splendour*

In her late works O'Brien finally fully came to voice her ideas about the place of women in society. Her Ana de Mendoza, the protagonist of *That Lady*, Clare Halvey and Rose Lennane, the heroines of *As Music and Splendour*, are the prototypes of free women who liberated themselves from the power of the Catholic Church and tradition and live their lives independently according to their will. Despite the long struggle and heavy price they had to pay for their emancipation, they reached what they wanted and found happiness.

However, O'Brien's final novels also convey a clear message: women's freedom is not possible in Ireland; therefore Clare and Rose have to leave their homeland for the continent where they can live as freelance artists. *That Lady* goes even further. Set in Spain in the sixteenth century the main heroine fights a heavy battle for one's right for a private life that belongs only to oneself and nobody should be able to decide about one's actions as well judge them. Ana's fight against a tyrant is therefore often interpreted as an open critique of O'Brien's of the situation at home and the political events of the 1940's when the book was being written.

### 5.1. Ana de Mendoza – The Liberated Woman

"Private life remains – and cannot be taken away, except by death. Though, as Marvell reminded us very truly "The grave's a fine and private place;"<sup>92</sup> this was an idea that O'Brien wrote into an article of the New Year's edition of *The Irish Times* in 1969. Although the statement was written full thirteen years after the publication of *That Lady*, it could have been used as a motto

---

<sup>92</sup> Kate O'Brien, *That Lady* (London: Virago Press, 2004) Xiii.

of the book. Despite the novel seems to be a book about a romance of the main heroine, Ana de Mendoza, its true theme is one's struggle for freedom and the right for a private life. Moreover, as in the previous novels written in the 1940's, O'Brien was strongly influenced by the situation at home as well by the war in Europe, therefore *That Lady* also conveys a clear political message. For the first time, O'Brien turned her attention to global matters, being herself influenced by the Second World War, and covertly criticised it and Hitler's tyranny in *That Lady*, as Reynolds notes:

*That Lady* was written in 1945 [...] it was conceived in 1940. We cannot but feel that the state of Europe at that time, the Nazi despotism and brutality, is reflected in the brutal despotism of Philip II, and that Ana may be seen as a prototype of the political martyrs of those war years. She is a woman who claims the right to freedom in the conduct of private life and the right to open trial in civil and criminal charges.<sup>93</sup>

*That Lady* is also a crucial work for O'Brien, not only was it a tremendous success and was turned into a play as well as filmed, it finally brought the author fame world-wide and won financial recognition.

*That Lady* portrays few years of life and struggle of Ana de Mendoza, the Princess of Eboli, for personal happiness and freedom. The story was inspired by "an intervention arising from a reflection on the curious external history of Ana de Mendoza and Philip II of Spain," and as she continues, "Historians cannot explain this episode [...]."<sup>94</sup> This is not entirely true as Walshe states:

---

<sup>93</sup> Reynolds. 73.

<sup>94</sup> O'Brien, *That Lady*, xiv.

In reality, historians have no difficulty in explaining this episode: the historical Ana de Mendoza was an arrogant and difficult aristocrat, whose family eventually had to beg Philip to put an end to her dangerous and treasonable intrigues with her lover, Antonio Perez. Philip responded by locking her up.<sup>95</sup>

But as Walshe wrote elsewhere: “The difficult, unlikeable Ana de Mendoza interested Kate O’Brien because she could sympathise with the idea of public disapproval – she could idealise what she saw as Ana’s private integrity.”<sup>96</sup> Therefore O’Brien’s portrayal of Ana de Mendoza is an idealisation of a woman struggling for her rights.

Ana is introduced when she is thirty-six and a widow. Although being set in Spain during the reign of Philip II, the novel introduces many problems which were still current in women’s lives in Ireland in the author’s time, for example the discrepancy in viewing women over thirty as old and men who were the same age as mature. Therefore, although in her mid-thirties, Ana is thought of as old and ridiculous,<sup>97</sup> “past her time, [...] ageing, disfigured and too unusual looking.”<sup>98</sup> O’Brien draws attention to this discrepancy of understanding in contrasting Ana with her lover, Antonio Perez. When Anna asks: “Well, forty-two is young in a cabinet minister, but—” “But in a widow who has had ten children, thirty-six is very old?”<sup>99</sup>

Another topic discussed in the novel is the total submission of a woman to her family and husband. Ana, although a member of one of Spain’s most influential families of the Mendozas, was married off at the age of thirteen to the favourite minister of Philip II, Ruy Gomez, at that time aged thirty-six. She dutifully bore him ten children of whom six survived. She seemed happy in her marriage; however, we are in fact told that she was “train[ed by] her [husband] out

---

<sup>95</sup> Walshe, *Ordinary People Dancing*, 159-160.

<sup>96</sup> Walshe, *Kate O’Brien: A Writing Life*, 103.

<sup>97</sup> O’Brien, *That Lady*, 154.

<sup>98</sup> O’Brien, *That Lady*, 109.

<sup>99</sup> O’Brien, *That Lady*, 33.

of being herself.”<sup>100</sup> Now being a widow, she gained back her independence and decided again to choose about her own life by herself: “I’m nearly thirty-seven, and I’m said to have had more power in my hands sometimes than any woman in Spain. Yet this is only the second time in my life that I’ve decided anything for myself.”<sup>101</sup> This decision was to take a lover in Antonio Perez, a student of her husband, and finally experience what love was. However, her newly found happiness and her independence were the beginning of her problems and downfall.

Her getting a lover brings consolation to Ana. She is fully aware of her sin but she recognizes that only as her private matter: “I don’t need my chaplain to tell me that [I’m wrong]. But it isn’t the servants’ business. It’s mine. [...] No one else’s.”<sup>102</sup> Although a strong Catholic, Ana acknowledges her sinning, but she considers her acts a private matter being only between her and God and nobody can judge her because of it, not even the king, therefore she protests: “My private life is truly private. [...] But I don’t present my private life to the world. [...] I own it, Philip. If I do wrong in it, the wrong is between me and Heaven.”<sup>103</sup> However, as the king protects her and loves Ana in his way, he thinks he must take care also of her soul’s well being and, moreover, feels cheated by her and is afraid what image her scandalous love affair will bring on her children and the memory of her dead husband. As Reynolds comments: “[...] Philip thinks of Ana as a piece of property. He has “given” her to Ruy Gomez. What he has given he is free to withhold. His possessiveness is outraged by her taking a lover and by what he considers her insolence to him.”<sup>104</sup> In this O’Brien again criticizes the society’s views on owning a woman by a man, who could decide what she is to do or not. However, as Ana is a very strong woman, she rebels against this idea of owning somebody; she is not prepared to lose her newly-won independence to the king’s flippancy and therefore decides to use all her powers and challenge, what she sees as her pure right. She also rebels against the king’s order not to see her lover again

---

<sup>100</sup> O’Brien, *That Lady*, 4.

<sup>101</sup> O’Brien, *That Lady*, 59.

<sup>102</sup> O’Brien, *That Lady*, 83.

<sup>103</sup> O’Brien, *That Lady*, 236.

<sup>104</sup> Reynolds, 72.

and live “a respectable” life, however, she cannot and will not be bound by anyone’s orders, not even the kings. As Dalsimer says: “She is her own highest authority.”<sup>105</sup>

She is willing to sacrifice everything for her independence of thought and action; therefore, she is punished by the authoritarian king with imprisonment. Although facing many hardships in prison and nearly dying there, Anna was not prepared to submit and change her ideas. She knew she was right in what she was doing and therefore nothing could break her as she knew that her faults can be judged only by the higher power of God and not anyone else. In her struggle, Ana de Mendoza becomes the personification of an ideal woman for O’Brien: “She becomes Kate O’Brien’s ideal of a woman who wishes to be autonomous and independent. A martyr in the quest for a private life [...] [she is] the only female to have lived fully. She is worldly enough to decide her actions and obligations for herself.”<sup>106</sup> Dalsimer continues in writing that:

Ana de Mendoza becomes Kate O’Brien’s most compelling portrait of the individualist, and, of all her heroines, the one who speaks the loudest and most passionately for the author’s commitment to self-expression. “That lady” is her idealisation of the woman who lives according to her beliefs, who will sacrifice prestige, power, liberty, defending her right to affect her life in action.<sup>107</sup>

Despite many years of imprisonment, this strong woman was not broken and could not submit to the king’s charges, on the contrary, the hardships that she had to go through and the injustice done against her convinced her that she was right.

Ana becomes a spokeswoman for the rights of all. As Dalsimer and Ingman point out: “In Kate O’Brien’s portrait, Ana becomes a spokeswoman for independence, for the safeguarding of

---

<sup>105</sup> Dalsimer, 89.

<sup>106</sup> Dalsimer, 88.

<sup>107</sup> Dalsimer, 86.

private boundaries, and for the preservation of legal rights,”<sup>108</sup> and “Ana is resisting tyranny or the autocratic king on behalf of the people of Spain especially on behalf of her beloved Castile.”<sup>109</sup> In this she attempts to become a political leader of the Castilian aristocracy, defending their rights up to her death, however, as she is a woman, her ideas are unheard and silenced.

Through the years in prison, Ana did not give up her ideals of freedom; the only effect isolation from the world had on her was becoming a nearly ascetic figure. After the death of her husband, she wanted to close herself up from the world and become a nun, but this was not granted to her; now, involuntarily, she was shut up from life and become that. Thanks to this complete isolation from her lover and no contact with the outside world Ana found herself: “Anna needs to find herself though herself privately, rather than through her relations with others.”<sup>110</sup> It is ironic that Philip’s rage towards her and her punishment helps her grow spiritually, evaluate on her life and make closer bonds with the people who really care for her and in all this she finally find happiness, as Hargreaves points out: “Although Ana is willing to die in order to defend her right to love who she wishes, it is her final sense of isolation from the passions of human loving which eventually bring her the most contentment.”<sup>111</sup> Therefore, she does not feel hate towards the king, on the contrary is grateful that he made it possible for her to make peace with herself and God.<sup>112</sup>

In spending her last years in prison Ana could evaluate on her life and came to the conclusion she had made everything right: her private life is entirely hers. Apart from the king, nobody else questioned her decision, on the contrary supported it and did not judge her. In seclusion Ana, her faithful duena Bernardina, and Ana’s youngest daughter Anichu formed nearly an ideal

---

<sup>108</sup> Dalsimer, 94.

<sup>109</sup> Ingman, 127.

<sup>110</sup> Unknown. University of Limerick Special Collection’s Library. Kate O’Brien Archive P12., Lot 248: Reviews and Articles. Piece 49

<sup>111</sup> Tamsin Hargreaves, “Kate O’Brien.” Dublin 1983. University of Limerick Special Collection’s Library. Kate O’Brien Archive, P12. Lot 248: Reviews and Articles, Piece 19.

<sup>112</sup> Ingman, 127.

community based on love, close friendship and support for Ana's cause. In house prison at her estate at Pastrana, Ana and Anichu become very close, although Ana's dilemma if to send her daughter away and give a chance to live freely, she comes to see that live with her, although in prison, is the best for her daughter and the only way how to save her from the hands of the authorities who would marry her off immediately without asking her. This bond between the two women becomes stronger throughout the book and is something which no one can break, not even the king, and daughter stays loyal to mother until the end:

Philip, in his vengeance, had stripped Ana of everything except her child, but Ana and Anichu have both chosen their lots. Here are selfless love and selfhood, choice and conviction, imprisoned in absolute, arbitrary power. The darkness that envelops Ana as she awaits death is Kate O'Brien's bleakest symbol yet for what befalls the woman who demands independence, but Ana conquers the night, the love between her and her child illuminating her sacrifice. When Ana dies, she is buried in Pastrana. Her search for her self has led her home and to her child, for Anichu returns to the convent there as a Franciscan postulant. She never leaves her mother.<sup>113</sup>

Ana's and Anichu's love is the only true and working parent--child relationships in O'Brien's novels. This bond is intensified at the end by Anichu's continuing in her mother's battle against Philip II's will and fulfilling her dream to become a nun as Dalsimer acknowledges:

Anichu's action in rejecting an arranged marriage and returning instead to Pastrana to enter the Franciscan convent empathise the close bond between

---

<sup>113</sup> Dalsimer, 97.

mother and daughter [as Anichu will not leave her mother's side even after death and enters the convent where Ana's remains rest]. It is a bond which [...] Philip has been unable to break.<sup>114</sup>

*That Lady* is O'Brien's most persuasive novel in which she demonstrates woman's battle against patriarchy as well as one's right to live life freely according to one's will. Despite her death at the end of the novel, Ana de Mendoza manages to win against the tyrant Philip II and having her will. As she gives her principles over to her daughter who will continue in her steps, her ideas will live on and she will be remembered. The king was unable to change her thinking; despite his many attempts Ana was never broken. Only by locking her out from the world, he managed to silence her. Walshe points out that "Although supreme controller of her physical fate, Philip proves ultimately powerless in his attempts to colonise her interiority. This, for O'Brien, supports and validates her attack on authoritarianism and realises a confounding and a countering of patriarchy."<sup>115</sup> Ana is therefore the only O'Brien's heroine who not only lives her life freely according to her will when she gains independence after her husband's death, but also challenges the authorities and uses all powers given to her to enhance her right. In this, *That Lady* is not only a strongly feminist novel but also a political one in which authoritarian regimes which suppress the rights of their citizens are criticized.

## 5.2. The Divas – Clare's and Rose's Story

The last completed novel of O'Brien's, *As Music and Splendour*, follows a familiar pattern: it traces the fates of two Irish girls, their education and attempts to be independent. However, this final novel of the author's is more radical than the ones which preceded it. O'Brien comes to the realisation that women cannot gain independence in Ireland, moreover, that freedom for a

---

<sup>114</sup> Ingman, 127.

<sup>115</sup> Walshe, *Ordinary People Dancing*, 164-165.

woman is nearly impossible, as Clare and Rose, the book's protagonists, find out that even artistic creation does not give them their designed freedom, on the other hand, they are caught up in a professional machinery but they can realize themselves and gain recognition in it.

*As Music and Splendour* can be classified, as most of O'Brien's pieces, as a *Bildungsroman*.

It follows the years of education of two Irish girls, Clare Halvey and Rose Lennane, who are taken away from their families at sixteen and sent to Paris and later to Rome to undergo training in operatic singing. Thanks to many sacrifices they become skilled singers, Rose even succeeds in becoming the prima donna of La Scala, however, they have to give up the thought of ever coming back to their beloved home and struggle to find real love in life, not only being adored for their voices and the roles they play on the stage.

Although conceived as a *Bildungsroman*, *As Music and Splendour* is much different from the previous works of O'Brien's and stands out compared with all her other pieces. Although the theme of the novel is the education of girls and the pursuit of an independent life, this is shown as impossible, as Dalsimer proves: "Independence, seemingly the reward for the artistic life, they learn, is an illusion. Singers have little choice or control over their activities, and both Clare and Rose are soon prisoners to their careers."<sup>116</sup> Even as artists, although they enjoy much more freedom as other women, also they are not entirely free but, as Clare acknowledges in the novel "I'm still – a sort of property."<sup>117</sup> Their maestros decide about their fate and their music engagement and, moreover, they belong to the music they sing and the audiences they adore them. However, the presentation of the girls is more liberal than in other novels of O'Brien and reached a climax here as Walshe acknowledges: "From *Without My Cloak* onwards, she had been attempting to express, through her fiction, the possibility for an Irishwoman to live through art, independent of Mellick and its constraints. This final novel realizes her imaginative

---

<sup>116</sup> Dalsimer, 112.

<sup>117</sup> Kate O'Brien. *As Music and Splendour* (Dublin: Penguin Books, 2005) 151.

ambitions.”<sup>118</sup> In *As Music and Splendour* the heroines can be finally themselves. Although they do not have complete freedom, they are much more independent than O’Brien’s earlier heroines or women in Ireland at the turn of the nineteenth century in what time the novel is set. Walshe concludes this by writing that:

Kate’s last novel also charts Rose and Clare’s growth into selfhood and autonomy, and away from Ireland and family. At the height of her brilliant career, Rose comes to realize “Italy and music had educated her temperament as well her talent [...]. She was in short, given to life and the acceptance of its stresses.” The independence that Caroline Considine had sought in vain in *Without My Cloak*, the independence glimpsed by Mary Lavelle [...] is now fully realized by Rose Lennane and Clare Halvey.<sup>119</sup>

Another difference of *As Music and Splendour* and the previous novels is that the heroines manage to overcome all obstacles laid down for them and manage to lead a life they envisaged, as Fogarty remarks:

Where hitherto her female protagonists appeared doomed owing to the limited economic choices and vocations open to them, Rose Lennane, Clare Halvey and Luisa Carriage, [...] are fortuitously saved from the traditional restrictions of women’s domestic and social roles because of their talents as singers. Professional fulfilment, emotional independence and moral detachment and flexibility are within their compass of these heroines in a manner unthinkable for Agnes Mulqueen in *The Ante-Room* and for the protagonist of *Mary Lavelle*.<sup>120</sup>

---

<sup>118</sup> Walshe, *A Writing Life*, 128.

<sup>119</sup> Walshe, *A Writing Life*, 129.

Reynolds adds to this that it is only thanks to their ability to sing well that the girls got this opportunity, an opportunity thanks to which they travel the world, learn languages and receive an overall excellent education; the training will enhance their careers and will bring them fame as well as wealth and moreover, they will be independent.<sup>121</sup> All of this was unthinkable for girls of the time. And it is only in this novel that O'Brien portrays young women who possess all which can make them happy. Although Clare and Rose suffer from the separation from their families and unhappy love, they have what all previous heroines in O'Brien's books lacked – freedom to live their lives as they will. Naturally they are hindered from this by having to do what their maestros decide for them, however, they have a well paid occupation which allows them to live by themselves and not be dependent on a man for financial support. Moreover, they are not only able to live a fully comfortable life themselves but also to support their families back home.

Clare's and Rose's growth is also connected with many love affairs, which are, in Clare's case lesbian. Portrayals of homosexuality are nothing new in O'Brien's novels, but for the first time here a lesbian is the protagonist and does not stand in the background as for example Agatha Conlon in *Mary Lavelle*. Moreover, Clare's and Louisa's lesbianism is not doomed by O'Brien. It is portrayed as normal and an alternative to heterosexual love, moreover, it is shown to be an equal sin as Rose's affairs with men as Clare reveals in a conversation with her adorer Thomas:

I am, I suppose, a sinner – certainly I am a sinner in the argument of my Church.

But so would I be if I were your lover. So is Rose a sinner – and she knows it –

in reference to our education and faith. [...] Rose and I know perfectly what we're

---

<sup>120</sup> Anne Fogarty, "The Ear of the Other: Kate O'Brien's *As Music and Splendour* and Mary Dorsey's *A Noise from the Woodshed*," ed. Eibreach Walshe, *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997) 176.

<sup>121</sup> Reynolds, 91.

doing. We are so well instructed that we can decide for ourselves. There's no vagueness in Catholic instruction.<sup>122</sup>

As Ingman remarks to this, it is “ground-breaking in terms of the treatment of lesbianism in Irish women’s fiction – [as Clare and Rose are seen as] equal sinners in the eyes of the Church and their nation.”<sup>123</sup> Dalsimer goes even further by writing that “By preserving the femininity in both women, Kate O’Brien returns the lesbian to her own sex.”<sup>124</sup> All the relationships of both heroines are, moreover, portrayed freely. In this Clare and Rose free themselves entirely from the Catholic tradition and live their lives as they want. They acknowledge being sinners, but as well as Ana de Mendoza, know that this is only between them and God, however, despite their time abroad from Ireland, they did not forget the Catholic teaching but also adopted their own morality which is much more liberal than the Irish one.

However, the major difference among O’Brien’s last piece all her previous heroines’ lies in their background. Kate O’Brien was famous for portraying women coming from the Catholic Middle Class; however, Clare Halvey and Rose Lennane are both peasants from origin. They come from a humble background and are sent abroad only thanks to wealthy patrons who discovered their potential. Therefore the girls were involuntarily taken away from their families and sent on a journey. However, thanks to their stay in the cultural metropolises of Paris and Rome they become not only polyglots but also highly culturally educated ladies. However, because they left Ireland so young, they keep on idealizing their homeland and hoping to come home once again. As Ingman points out:

Clare’s last visit to Ireland to see her dying grandmother prompts her realization that her previous nostalgia for Ireland has been a fantasy. Life in Ireland, while

---

<sup>122</sup> O’Brien, *As Music and Splendour*, 208.

<sup>123</sup> Ingman, 107.

<sup>124</sup> Dalsimer, 116.

not without its virtues, is too narrow to accommodate the woman Clare has become: “She could not ever live now the simple, clean, courageous and uncomfortable life.” Clare’s acknowledgement that there is no longer a place for her in the lives of her nation matched by Rose’s realization that: “there could never be return to Lackanashee in the old and simple sense.”<sup>125</sup>

Rose and Clare come to a similar conclusion as Mary Lavelle: there is no place for them in Ireland. Mary’s reason for leaving was that she did not embody the ideal of a chaste woman anymore, but Clare and Rose go even further than this. Both grew too much into independent women and the ideal of a homely Irish woman is too far from what they had become. They became free on all sides: they are not only free to decide about their lives as they are economically independent but they are also free sexually. Rose changes her partners and becomes what would be described as a “sexually loose woman” in Ireland and Clare is a lesbian loving her unfaithful and moreover bisexual lover Luisa. This development of both heroines was possible only because of the distance from Ireland and the artistic surrounding in which they lived in Italy.

However, their stay in Italy did not mean only the gain of total freedom which none of O’Brien’s heroines received before; it also meant that the girls adopted other personalities. They became the women they would never have become at home. As Clare contemplates on this, if she and Rose would have stayed at home they would be still Clare Halvey and Rose Lennane which would be different from what Paris and Rome made out of them,<sup>126</sup> but coming to the world of Italian opera Clare became Chiara Alve and Rose Rosa d’Irlanda – the famous opera singers. Although Clare was still close to her original plan to become a nun in her art when she got devoted to sacred music, Rose enjoyed her star status and became a true diva. However, also

---

<sup>125</sup> Ingman, 107.

<sup>126</sup> O’Brien, *As Music and Splendour*, 189.

the fate of these heroines is uncertain as in many of O'Brien's novels, the ending is open.

However, what is certain, the girls will not let their independence be broken.

In her last novel O'Brien makes also an end the myth of the homeland. Throughout her work, her heroines cherished their homes. In the first pieces, the action took place at the family home, Mary Lavelle and Helen Archer still thought of their homes and happy childhoods and even Ana de Mendoza defended her beloved Castile against the king's tyranny, but Clare Halvey and Rose Lennane are different. By experiencing the culture and freedom of Italy, the myth of home was dashed into pieces for them. In this novel therefore, O'Brien's critique of Ireland is the loudest and presents a disillusioned picture of the homeland:

O'Brien succeeds not just in mounting a subtle but firm critique of the small-mindedness of Catholic morality, but also in suggesting that the values of lesbian mode of being which the novel describes are of a piece with the ideals of Irish cultural nationalism. [...] However, O'Brien's final fiction shows that Ireland is still not ready to accept the radical presence of dissent voices, even though it has given birth to and shaped them. When Clare returns home to attend her dying grandmother at the end of the novel, she is shocked by the "primitive life of her own people" and recognises that she could never lead the "uncomforted" experience which is their lot. She is faced with a stark choice between Ballykerin and a "return to the world." [...] O'Brien finally dashes the myth of a pure and romantic Ireland to pieces because it is not capacious enough to accommodate the queer appropriations to which she has subjected in the novel. Instead we are left on the final page with Clare's resigned declaration that sin "was the world of all."<sup>127</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> Fogarty, 190

In this book Ireland becomes nearly a symbol of prison for the women, a backward country in which women are entrapped by their maternal duties. Therefore, Rose and Clare cannot return because they would never be accepted there anymore.

In *As Music and Splendour*, her last completed novel, O'Brien came to fully voice her ideas about woman's place in the world. Her final piece of fiction she became most radical in the treatment of her theme. It is only abroad, outside of Ireland, where the Church and family do not have influence on the women and where they are surrounded by a liberal environment, that an Irishwoman can be liberated and treated as an equal to men. *As Music and Splendour* is a groundbreaking book in many ways, not only by the final disillusionment with Ireland. It is for the first time in O'Brien's work that homosexuality is treated openly and is not in the background but one of the protagonists is a lesbian. Moreover, also heterosexual love is a open topic, it is a love which does not result in a happy ending, but Rose goes on and takes another lover, she nearly uses men to make herself happy. In the novel O'Brien departs from many of her typical motives. For the first time in her fiction her heroines are not of the middle class but are of poor peasant stock, but thanks to their talents to sing and choice they become successful. In fact, Rose and Clare are O'Brien's only heroines who manage to lead a successful career and support themselves thanks to the money they earn and not be dependent on anyone. Therefore, we could call *As Music and Splendour* the climax of O'Brien's work.

## Chapter 6 Conclusion

Kate O'Brien is one of the most famous Irish female writers. Her work was very daring for her time, although she set most of her works in the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century, the topics she wrote about are still modern and are disputed even now. Despite she never considered herself a feminist writer, she criticizes Ireland's policy aimed against women's rights and supports the idea of woman's equality with man and her right for independence.

Although her writing style developed throughout her career, almost all of her novels follow a similar idea: they are about a development and growth of a young girl and her struggling to gain independence. She finds that there are many obstacles on the way but she eventually overcomes them thanks to the help of an elder companion or by having an epiphany. However, it is never certain how far the heroine will go because nearly all of O'Brien's works have an open ending. In O'Brien's early works the heroines found it at first too difficult to overcome these obstacles and failed in the attempt to become emancipated, it was only in her last pieces that O'Brien became more critical and her heroines managed to free themselves from the male dominated world and established themselves successfully.

However, despite the development of her work there are ideas which all of her works share. The main one being her heroines' struggle to gain emancipation and to be different than all the women living in the time in which O'Brien was setting her books who bowed down to their fates and accepted their subordinate roles. As Ailbhe Smyth well acknowledges: "As Clare says to Rose in *Music and Splendour*, talking about female roles in opera: "They seem all to go either

mad or bad – there’s no other way out.” All of Kate O’Brien’s work is about an “OTHER WAY OUT.”<sup>128</sup> Almost all of her heroines attempt to rebel against the society in a way, but only her later heroines are successful in it.

What all of O’Brien’s heroines have in common is their unusual beauty. Moreover, “O’Brien always presents feminine beauty as a given, an essential quality, and as surrounded, in accordance European traditions both visual and literary, by a mystique.”<sup>129</sup> It is mainly Mary Lavelle whose beauty is described as extreme; she is even seen as an Aphrodite or a pagan goddess and all men fall in love only by having a look at her. Even the overlooked Agnes Mulqueen grew up and turned from the family’s ugly duckling to a mythical beauty. It nearly seems that there are only beauties in Ireland according to O’Brien. Even Ana de Mendoza, who is considered ugly by some, because she is too tall and slim for a woman and too old anyway, has a certain charm and for some, these abnormalities are very attractive.

Although the women in O’Brien’s work undergo a development and they establish themselves and become independent, they are still devoted Catholics. Religion is in fact the only thing which hinders them from being entirely independent. In *Without My Cloak* and *The Ante-Room* it was the religious teaching and the effect of their actions against the laws of the Church and society what did not allow the women to break loose from the constraints of society, however, even the fully emancipated women Clare Havey and Rose Lennane are influenced by the Church, however, it does not influence their decisions much anymore, it leads only to their acknowledgement of their life in sin. However, as Hildebidle writes: “O’Brien’s heroines, no matter how apparently scrupulous in their observance of the rites of the Catholic Church, are careful to distinguish between religion – which they accept as a part of themselves – and holiness, to which they make no claim whatever.”<sup>130</sup> Despite that, O’Brien managed to create

---

<sup>128</sup> Smyth, 27.

<sup>129</sup> Walshe, *Ordinary People Dancing*, 63.

<sup>130</sup> John Hildebidle, “Kate O’Brien: To Be a Free Lance,” *Five Irish Writers: The Errand of Keeping Alive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 53.

many holy women in her work – women who acknowledge living a sinful life, who live secluded from the society and according to the rules of the Church. These are Helen Archer and Agatha Conlon and later in her life also Ana de Mendoza. Walshe explains why this is so:

Holy women abound in her work, either as nuns or as figures of austere spirituality and authority. Nuns gave Kate a version of secure authority that was lacking in Boru House, and so family is often the millstone or the stumbling-block for her young female protagonists.<sup>131</sup>

Moreover, many of O'Brien's novels are a *Bildungsroman*. The heroines grow to maturity and start understanding the world and their place in it, but when doing this, they are also educated. Education of girls was very important to the author: "Many of O'Brien's heroines are obsessed with the desire to secure an education for themselves. One is naturally led by the conclusion that the excellence of the education she herself received in the Limerick school [...] established the importance of education in her mind."<sup>132</sup> O'Brien even comes to the conclusion that it is only by being educated, the young women can gain independence from men as they have higher chances securing themselves a well paid occupation thanks to this.

However, not only education is important to her heroines; it is also true love they seek in the novels. However, love between men and women is doomed to end unhappily in all her works. No relationship which she makes up ends happily. On the other hand, forbidden love either between women or a married man and a woman is always welcome in O'Brien as Walshe writes: "Adulterous passion is always approved of and even ennobled by Kate O'Brien's authorial voice."<sup>133</sup> But also homosexuality and love between men or women is also a common topic in

---

<sup>131</sup> Walshe, *A Writing Life*, 19

<sup>132</sup> *For a Special Occasion in the University of Limerick: Some Writings by Kate O'Brien*. Eds. Lorna Reynolds and Micheal O'Toole (Limerick, May 2005) 35

<sup>133</sup> Walshe, *A Writing Life*, 56

her work and is treated as an equal relationship to that of a man and woman. However, also these relationships do not end happily either: Eddy Considine's lover falls in love with his sister Caroline, Harry Archer's love relationship with his student Etienne is crushed by his daughter Helen's entering a convent and also Luisa's and Clare's love is unstable. It could be said that "The only successful and lasting relationships [...] are those between women, and these are neither familiar nor sexual."<sup>134</sup> Friendship and respect towards each other is what bounds the women together, as in the case of Mary Lavelle and Agatha Conlon or Clare Halvey and Rose Lennane. In this, O'Brien shares the feminist idea that the only ideally working relationship is that between women; she even goes as far as describing a community created only of women and ruled by them is the only properly functioning one in *The Land of Spices*.

However, what is O'Brien's trademark is writing about Irishwoman from the Catholic Middle Class. This was what she knew the most and therefore it was not difficult to write about it as she confessed in one of her speeches:

I've written mostly about Irish characters, because I am one myself, the Irish are the people I understand best – and for a novelist it is absolutely essential to know most deeply, most soundly, I think, the ones one was young with – and of whom one is a member, so to speak.<sup>135</sup>

However, as Kevin Casey acknowledges: "She takes the Irish people as she finds them but she scalpel-cuts so deeply that the emotions and reactions she finds are universal."<sup>136</sup> Despite her deep knowledge of the Irish, most of her characters are not true-to-life figures and some are used

---

<sup>134</sup> Breen, 173.

<sup>135</sup> Kate O'Brien Papers P/12 155, A 12th November 1965 Dated Draft of a Lecture for Sir William Gibb School for Girls in Faversham, Kent. Special Collection Library of University of Limerick.

<sup>136</sup> Kevin Casey, "What Chance Have Our Young Writers?," *Sunday Independent Magazine*, 8<sup>th</sup> Dec 1963. Kate O'Brien Papers P/12 248, Special Collections Library of University of Limerick

only symbolically to demonstrate O'Brien's ideas. This idealisation of the middle class very typical for her and went directly against the politics of Ireland in her time:

While de Valera was creating an imaginary sense of nationhood by idealising Gaelic rural self-sufficiency and frugality, Kate was actively countering this with her mythical version of an Irish bourgeoisie, made noble by a kind of gentrified austerity and by the civilising traditions of European Catholicism.<sup>137</sup>

The time in which O'Brien was setting her works, the poor peasant was the main character of nearly all Irish writing, however, O'Brien was among the first to dare to write about the rising middle class and idealise it in the same way as the peasant was. All her characters belong to the bourgeoisie, only Christina Roche, a side character of *Without My Cloak* is a peasant; but also she does not fit into the typical picture of an Irish peasant as she is a bastard daughter of an aristocrat and eventually finds fulfilment in America. Also the heroines of *As Music and Splendour* are of peasant background; however, their life abroad makes cosmopolitans out of them who can no longer understand nor fit in into the world of their families back home in Ireland.

Despite Kate O'Brien's novels usually follow a similar pattern and the characteristics of her heroines are alike, her work was very innovative for the time. Together with James Joyce she was a pioneer in writing about the before neglected Irish Catholic middle class. She was one of them and therefore was well aware of its traditions and could therefore also well mock them. Her most pioneering work is however, in the field of Irish women's rights. In her books O'Brien was challenging Ireland's politics as well as the strong influence of the Catholic Church on the people. In her works, it was possible to gain independence for women, although sometimes at a

---

<sup>137</sup> Walshe, *A Writing Life*, 77

heavy cost. She also introduced controversial ideas as homosexual love or matrimony, and therefore two of her works were banned and O'Brien was marked as a scandalous writer. This image did not do well to her career, her books lost on popularity. It is only in the recent year that thanks to new editions of her books that she again became a part of the Irish canon.

## **Bibliography:**

Kate O'Brien. *As Music and Splendour*. Dublin: Penguin Books: 2005

--- *The Ante-Room*. London: Virago Press, 1996

--- *The Land of Spices*. London: Virago Press, 2007

--- *Mary Lavelle*. London: Virago Press, 2000

--- *Presentation Parlour*. Dublin: Poolbeg, 1994

--- *That Lady*. London: Virago Press, 2004

--- *Without My Cloak*. London: Virago Press, 2001

## **SECONDARY SOURCES:**

Beale, Jenny. *Women in Ireland: Voices of Change*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986

Cahalan, James M. "Female and Male Perspectives on Growing up Irish: Edna O'Brien, John McGahern, and Brian Moore." *Double Visions: Women and Men in Modern and Contemporary Irish Fiction*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999

Daly, Mary E. "Women in the Irish Free State, 1922-39: The Interaction between Economics and Ideology." *Journal of Women's History*, Vol.6 No. 4/Vol. 7. No. 1 (Winter/Spring), 1995, p.99-116

Dalsimer, Adele M. *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990

D'hoker, Elke, Raphaël Ingelbien and Hedwig Schawall eds. *Irish Women Writes, New Critical Perspectives*. Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2011

Fogarty, Anne. "The Ear of the Other: Dissident Voices in Kate O'Brien's *As Music and*

- Splendour and Mary Dorsey's A Noise from the Woodshed*. *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*. Ed Éibhear Walshe. Cork: Cork University Press, 1997
- For Special Occasion in the University of Limerick: Some Writings by Kate O'Brien, Lorna Reynolds, Michael O'Toole*. Limerick: Donough O'Brien, 2005
- Hildebidle, John. *Five Irish Writers: The Errand of Keeping Alive*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mas, 1989
- Hill, Myrtle. *Women in Ireland: A Century of Change*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2003
- Ingman, Heather. *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007
- Ireland: Government Publication Sale Office. *Bunreacht na hÉireann, Constitution of Ireland*, Dublin, 1942
- Luddy, Maria. *Women in Ireland 1800-1918*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1999
- Lynch, Patricia A., Joachim Fisher and Brian Coates eds. *Back to the Present: Forward to the Past, Irish Writing and History since 1798, Volume II*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006
- Kiberd, Declan. "Kate O'Brien: *The Ante-Room*." *Irish Classics*. London: Granta Publishers, 2000
- MacCurtain, Margaret and Mary O'Dowd, eds. *Women in Early Modern Ireland*. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1991
- "*The Magdalene Sisters: Women's Oppression and the Irish Clerical State*." *Women and Revolution*. No. 3, Spring/Summer 2003
- Ní Chuilleanáin, Eiléan, ed. *Irish Women: Image and Achievement*. Dublin: Arlen House, 1985
- O'Connor, Pat. *Emerging Voices: Women in Contemporary Irish Society*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administrations, 1998.
- O'Connor, Sarah. *No Man's Land: Irish Women and the Cultural Present*. Bern: Peter Land

AG, 2011

Palko, Abigail L. "The Post-Independence Dilemma Faced by Irish Women Writers."

*Frontiers* 2010, Vol. 31.No2.

Reynolds, Lorna. *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987.

St. Peter, Christine. *Changing Ireland: Strategies in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. New York : Palgrave, 2000

Thane, Pat. "What Difference did the Vote Make?" *Political Systems and Definitions of Gender Roles*. Ann Katherine Isaacs ed. Pisa: Università di Pisa – Edizioni Plus, 2001

Tucker, Amada. "A Space Between: Transitional Feminism in Kate O'Brien's Mary Lavelle."

*New Hibernia Review*. Vol 12. No1. Spring 2008. pp. 82-95

Walshe, Eibhear. *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006

Walshe, Eibhear ed. *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien..* Cork: Cork University Press, 1993

Walshe, Éibhear ed. *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1997

Weeks, Anne Owens. "A Trackless Road: Irish Nationalism and Lesbian Writing." *Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities*. Kathryn Kirkpatrick ed. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000

Kate O'Brien Papers from Special Collections Library at University of Limerick: P/12 155, P/12 162, P/12 177, P/12 248

"God-Given Roles for Men and Women." *Catholic Planet*. 20<sup>th</sup> March 2011.

<[www.catholicplanet.com/women/roles.htm](http://www.catholicplanet.com/women/roles.htm)>

McKenna, Fionnuala "Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 24<sup>th</sup> April 1916." *CAIN*. 14<sup>th</sup> Jan 2012. 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2012. <<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/pir24416.htm>>

## 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.

## Resumé

Kate O'Brien byla jednou z nejvýznamnějších irských autorek. Jako jedna z prvních psala ve svých dílech o irské katolické střední třídě, ne o idylickém životě na venkově jak to bylo v její době v módě. Ve svých románech se zaměřovala na roli žen v irské společnosti, především těch z irské buržoasie a jejich životních údělů na přelomu devatenáctého a dvacátého století. Její styl se vyvíjel v průběhu kariéry, a tak v jejích raných dílech najdeme ženy v jejich tradičních rolích, ale později byla O'Brien více kritická – začala sdílet feministické ideály společnosti a skrytě kritizovat politiku mířenou proti ženám v Irsku; její hrdinky se začaly proto stavět zaběhlému systému a snažily se získat nezávislost na mužích a žít svobodně.

Většina autorčiných děl se odehrává kolem rodinného krhu a mapuje vývoj svých hrdinů, které jsou až na dva případy vždy ženy. Její hrdinky se všechny pokouší se vymanit z tohoto světa a získat jistou nezávislost na mužích, ale zpočátku jim to společnost ani jejich vychování nedovolí. Jen v pozdějších dílech se O'Brien stává více kritickou a představuje ženy, které si vybojovaly nezávislost. Tato práce mapuje především vývoj autorčiných hrdinek a popisuje, jak se jejich životní úděly odrážejí v životech skutečných žen v Irsku v dobách, kdy Kate O'Brien tvořila.

Na začátku své tvorby byla Kate O'Brien ještě velmi tradiční. Popisovala ženy hlavně ve svých tradičních rolích milujících matek, dcer či manželek. Ačkoliv se její hrdinky z románu *Bez pláště* (*Without My Cloak*) a *Protější Pokoj* (*The Ante-Room*) snaží vymanit z života jimi předurčeným katolickou církví a společností jí ovlivněnou, v těchto raných dílech narážejí na nepochopení a na svůj strach, co by se s nimi stalo, kdyby se přeci jen pokusily z této společnosti vymanit. Samy si tedy jsou překážkou a nedokážou opustit zaseté tradice, proto zůstávají žít svůj život, ale jsou nešťastné a neuspokojené ve svých cílech.

Ve své další fázi psaní, kam bychom mohli zařadit díla *Mary Lavelle* a *The Land of Spices*, se hrdinky dokážou emancipovat, ale jejich boj za rovnocenný život a pochopení je složitý. Jejich osud je ale nejistý, jelikož obě knihy mají otevřený konec a je tedy otázkou kam budou osudy hrdinek směřovat poté, co opustily tradiční společnost. Druhý z románů je také prvním přímým autorčiným útokem na irskou společnost. *The Land of Spices* pracuje s nápadem, že klášter je jediným správně fungujícím místem, a to jen proto, že v něm jsou jen ženy, které rozhodují samy o sobě. Matka představená tohoto kláštera, Helen Archer, je navíc příkladem ženy, která dosáhla úplného osvobození z mužského světa a její pozice představené této organizace ji přineslo i pozici, ve které je rovnocenná mužům.

V posledních románech *Ta Dáma* a *As Music and Splendour* dosáhla autorčina tvorba vrcholu, proto jsou hrdinky těchto knih plně emancipované. Ačkoliv Ana de Mendoza, hlavní hrdinky románu *Ta Dáma*, na konci knihy zemře, zemře šťastná, jelikož dosáhla toho, po čem celý život skrytě toužila – stát se svatou a obdivovanou ženou. Ana byla jediná, kdo se dokázal postavit španělskému králi a stát si za svým, že člověk má právo zacházet si se svým životem, jak chce. Proto byla vězněna, ale král jí nedokázal zlomit. Clare Halvey a Rose Lennane, hrdinky románu *As Music and Splendour*, jdou ještě dále. Díky svému hlasu se stanou slavnými operními pěvkyněmi, čímž si zajistí příjem, který jim přinese svobodu a nezávislost, po které marně toužily všechny autorčiny hrdinky. Poslední autorčina kniha je i nejvíce kritická vůči poměrům v jejím domovském Irsku.

Kate O'Brien byla ve svých románech průkopnicí v boji za ženská práva v Irsku. Ačkoliv její dílo nelze označit jako feministické, jisté prvky a v jejích knihách feministické bezesporu jsou. Autorka proto byla průkopnicí za práva irských žen. V jejích dílech můžeme s postupem času vycítit jisté distancování se od Irska a jeho politiky mířené proti ženám, ale i návrh jisté alternativy proti životu v Irsku. Sama autorka svou rodnou zemi opustila a tvořila ve Velké

Británii. Možná proto se její poslední knihy odehrávají mimo Irsko a ženy se v nich konečně mohou sami realizovat a nacházejí tam svobodu.