

EDNA O'BRIEN: AN EXAMINATION OF THE TRILOGY

"GOING UP THE RIVER ON A BICYCLE"
AN EXAMINATION OF THE TRILOGY OF NOVELS BY
EDNA O'BRIEN

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ABSTRACT

Edna O'Brien's first novel, The Country Girls, was received with great public and critical praise. This novel was the winner of the Kingsley Amis Award for the best first novel of 1959 and has been translated into twelve languages. Despite the success of the first novel and subsequent endeavours - novels, short-stories, non-fiction studies, plays, movies, television appearances - there has been little formal critical attention given to O'Brien's work, particularly in North America. It seems to me that O'Brien is a writer of very considerable talent; she is a craftsman in prose, and a distinguished and distinctive one. The purpose of this study is to test this contention by considering the immediate, accessible qualities of O'Brien's work and subjecting the work to close, critical scrutiny. This critical introduction will consider the trilogy of novels, The Country Girls, Girl with Green Eyes and Girls in their Married Bliss. Although these novels do not have the power and impact of the fully developed later voice, they do lay the foundation for the mature work. Each work is complete in itself but a better understanding of O'Brien's vision comes by examining the works as part of the whole. The trilogy introduces and begins to develop themes that recur throughout the canon.

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This work is dedicated to my father, George Baird, with love.

A NOTE ON REFERENCES

In this study the following editions have been used:

The Country Girls. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1963.

Girl with Green Eyes. New York: Popular Library Editions, 1962.

Girls in their Married Bliss. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1967.

All references to these novels will be included in the body of the text and will be distinguished by the following abbreviations:

The Country Girls: CG

Girl with Green Eyes: GE

Girls in their Married Bliss: MB

These three novels, and all of Edna O'Brien's works, are fully documented in the bibliography.

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PROLOGUE

Edna O'Brien has not just produced a wide range and number of books, but a coherent oeuvre, in which each book is a refinement of and a reflection on certain aspects of its predecessors.¹ The books share common themes; isolation, failed love affairs, ghosts of childhood. Central to O'Brien's writing is a concern with patterning, with repetitive cycles of experience which become barer, more essential.² Many of the books are held together by a recurring interest in the Irish dilemma.

Although O'Brien uses many narrative modes and points of view in her first ten novels - stream of consciousness, first-person narrative, the dramatic mode - the effect is not that of a beginner learning her trade; rather, the modes add to the myth and the voice. The

¹ The non-fiction books about Ireland are included in this assessment, as well as Arabian Days, O'Brien's complex exploration of the East - the land of Abu Dhabi. In her attempt to understand this world, apparently so torn from its past and so looking to its future, O'Brien reveals her own concerns with cultural heritage and ties to tradition. Although the book is very compelling, written in a diary/travelogue form, O'Brien exudes frustration and often defeat. The Arabs in the end elude her inquiring mind, her search to find a way to communicate with a foreign notion of the feminine.

² By the time O'Brien writes Night both the plot and the experience itself have all but disappeared - the effect on the character is the central concern.

heroines hold our interest as individual characters but are more complex when considered as additions to the myth. The first three novels, The Country Girls, Girl with Green Eyes, and Girls in their Married Bliss, form a trilogy about two young Irish girls, Caithleen Brady and Bridget Brennan. These novels individually create the impression of a work on a small canvas, novellas. The author's intimate narrative style seems to direct all attention to the intricacies of the character's life. At times the specific characters in the novels seem so self-absorbed that they have little or no awareness of a larger world. Their personal tragedy or euphoria seems to be all-encompassing. But when these women are considered collectively or the novels are considered as a part of O'Brien's canon, the total effect is of something much larger. O'Brien has a distinct and passionate vision of women - women who are victims of their own inability to deal with life's circumstances - women who out of necessity frequently band together against the austerity of a man's world. The trilogy is the foundation of O'Brien's myth: the creation of a voice and a vision of the feminine life. In Cait and Baba she develops two distinct types that will be used again and again in ever-changing patterns and combinations.

Cait is the down-trodden martyr who is propelled by disaster, fear and guilt. These traits have made her into a day-dreaming romantic who loves illusion more than reality:

Cait is continually breathless with anticipation and her expectation always seems to be better than the real world, and without threat. Cait lacks confidence in any of her abilities and always relies on someone else to provide the order in her life. Initially this order is provided by her mother. Later, her dreams of being rescued by a man result in her exchanging the tyranny of her father for that of her husband, Eugene. But escape is always a fantasy - she is haunted by her past, her religion, her superstitions and a series of fractured relationships.

Cait seems to be the observer, the outsider, not a participant. But despite her innocence and her fears she has an amazing capacity for insight and introspection. She has a keen eye for natural beauty and detail and often sees other people's relationships with great clarity. The third novel ends with her literal sterilization - a gesture that seems to deny life and renewal!

If Cait is the epitome of submission, Baba is deceit, defiance and action. Her life is just as full of calamity but she approaches daily problems as adventure - a game to be fought and won. Baba is a brazen cynic with a sense of humour and few inhibitions. Despite her gruffness she too is insightful. Although her daily behaviour often appears selfish, in times of crisis she is helpful and supportive, unlike Cait who is judgmental and helpless. Baba is also haunted by her past and the stifling nature of

the Irish community. Frequently, Cait and Baba appear to be opposites but they also are aware of how much they need each other for support and even survival. Unlike Cait, whose failed marriage results in her only child being taken from her, Baba produces a child from a brief affair, remains in her marriage and retains her cynical zest for life.

O'Brien uses these two characters and the continual attraction and repulsion of their relationship to explore life's patterns of renewal and sterility. Just as the characters have a swift change from despair to exhilaration, the reader's eye is taken from the whole picture to an apparently meaningless detail - the continual juxtaposition of the macrocosm and microcosm. O'Brien has a remarkable eye for detail and the ability to infuse the seemingly mundane with meaning. Often, another method used to create such intensity of feeling is the slow build up of a scene that gets continually more ridiculous while being totally believable. Without being sentimental, O'Brien evokes a gamut of emotions - shock, sympathy, laughter.

The novels are about sudden moments of understanding of life and its dichotomies - about freedom and entrapment, failure and success, disgust and bliss; moments of lucid insight that transcend the individual and point to a more universal apprehension of the human condition. What gives the novels such complexity is the way O'Brien develops an intimacy with her characters through their daily routines-

the crises and the humdrum in their lives.

O'Brien's vision centers on female sensuality, male treachery and the guaranteed pain of relationships. But ultimately the novels are a celebration of the intermittent good times which her long-suffering and self-abusing heroines enjoy, and thrive on. The characters are distinguished by whether they choose to focus on the despair or the elation. What emerges is a lyrical voice, remarkable for its descriptive powers with a lack of inhibition which is profoundly moving and disturbing.

* * * * *

The Country Girls is a novel of education that introduces themes and styles that will be developed in later books. Chapter-One of this study will focus primarily on this novel, examining patterns that are developed and used again in the second and third novel. This chapter will consider how the novel of education contributes to the developing characters of Cait and Baba and how O'Brien alters the form.

The second novel, Girl with Green Eyes, is an echo of the first, but with a stronger sense of voice and less emphasis on the novel of education; this is more a novel of experience. Girls in their Married Bliss is quite a different novel altogether - it illustrates the power and brilliance of O'Brien's later works. Chapter-Two will explore this emerging voice - the glimpses of it in the

first novel, culminating in the refined narrative style of the third. This chapter will also examine how O'Brien uses the narrative voice to explore the Irish dilemma. The other distinctive element that will be considered in this chapter is O'Brien's sense of humour - the creation of chaotic and comic scenes.

The third chapter will consider the men - "the love objects". Ultimately, relationships are the foundation of energy from which O'Brien's writing draws its power.

You made me confess the fears that I have. But I will tell you also what I do not fear. I do not fear to be alone or to be spurned for another or to leave whatever I have to leave. And I am not afraid to make a mistake, even a great mistake, a lifelong mistake and perhaps as long as eternity too.

James Joyce
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

CHAPTER - ONE "WEEP AND YOU WEEP ALONE"

Edna O'Brien's trilogy belongs, in part, to the tradition of Bildungsroman; these are novels of education from a distinctly female point of view. Each novel is concerned with an innocent, inexperienced young woman who sets out with a frequently foolish and mistaken view of life. Through a series of false starts and help from each other, Cait and Baba finally reach maturity and some resolution. Symbolically, the novels explore patterns of growth, renewal and sterility, through the use of the cycle of the seasons and the contrast between the country and the city, the past and the future. The internal growth of the girls is reflected by their physical changes. The structure of the novel of education and maturity combined with underlying symbolism are used by O'Brien to explore the developing sensibilities of Cait and Baba. The novels are concerned with the contrast of human emotions and ability.

* * * * *

THE COUNTRY GIRLS - "My mother warned me." (CG,19)

In many ways The Country Girls is relatively conventional in form with a rudimentary plot. The novel explores the origins and characters of Cait and Baba: their family backgrounds, relationships with mother and father,

education, loves, religion, physical appearance - the past from which they will never be able to escape. The novel opens with a feeling of anxiety, the pervading atmosphere of Cait's homelife:

I wakened quickly and sat up in bed abruptly. It is only when I am anxious that I waken easily and for a minute I did not know why my heart was beating faster than usual. Then I remembered. The old reason. He had not come home.(CG,5)

The use of first person narrative and verbs that suggest quick, startled action jointly create a tense atmosphere, an atmosphere of apprehension. There is also a certain scorn or disdain in not deigning to refer to the father either by name or position. By contrast, the first mention of Cait's mother establishes a bond. She is mentioned in connection with bed, comfort and things that are shared:

Getting out I rested for a moment on the edge of the bed, smoothing the green satin bedspread with my hand. We had forgotten to fold it the previous night, Mama and me. Slowly I slid on to the floor and the linoleum was cold on the soles of my feet. My toes curled instinctively.(CG,5)

Here the verbs intimate ease and consolation, with gentle alliteration. As a child, Cait distinguishes between her mother and her father at a sensory, rather than an intellectual, level. The unobtrusive switch in verb tense from past to present anticipates Cait's position throughout the trilogy; wherever she is, a part of her will always be on this farm, the place where her fears and characteristics were established.

Cait's observations reflect a childlike way of labelling, ordering and explaining the world. Her parents have profoundly affected her early girlhood. From her mother, Cait has learned an amazing need both to preserve possessions and worry about the loss of property rather than using and enjoying things.³ Cait's slippers, like the rugs, are saved for special occasions. The fear of breakage indicates a fear of life which Cait associates with pain, mothers and the inflicting of guilt, no matter how gentle it may seem:

Then I went over to let up the blind. It shot up suddenly and the cord got twisted round it. It was lucky that Mama had gone downstairs, as she was always lecturing me on how to let up blinds properly, gently.(CG,5)

Cait will not allow the simple pleasures of life, like the smell of frying bacon, to cheer her. Cait accepts her mother's values.

The first exchange between Cait and her mother reveals the mother to be a long-suffering martyr complete with cough. Their relationship is complex, based on their sorrow and guilt, their need for love and their shared knowledge of the pain and suffering in the house. Cait dotes on her Mama, the "best in the world" and with innocent arrogance is convinced that the feeling is reciprocated: "I

³ In the short stories, "The Rug" and "An Outing", O'Brien focuses on the missed opportunities and unnecessary pain that result from being too "house proud" and concerned with possessions.

was everything in the world to her, everything." (CG,8) Cait is obsessed with her mother and thinks of her continually, remembering her words and morals; it is unusual for her to go a whole hour without thinking of her Mama. Cait is an echo of her mother's timid, suffering nature. Although the mother only appears in the novel for five pages her presence will permeate the entire trilogy.⁴

Cait fears her father who appears suddenly, drunk: "His face was red and fierce and angry. I knew he would have to strike someone." (CG,32) Like the rest of his family, he lives a lie; privately, he is brutal but he fosters the public reputation that he "wouldn't hurt a fly." Cait is obsessed with the fear of losing her mother and unable to face the terror that is her father:

In fear and trembling I set off for school. I might meet him on the way or else he might come home and kill Mama...I was always afraid that my mother would die while I was at school. (CG,12)

Part of Cait's growth in the novel will be the physical and emotional movement away from her mother and the ability to express her feelings about her father.

⁴ O'Brien frequently introduces an important character early in the novel only to kill him/her off almost immediately. In August is a Wicked Month Ellen's young boy begins to haunt her even before she learns of his death. The effect is that we see the character through the eyes of others. Here we see Cait's vision of her mother, and the mother's effect on the daughter rather than having the mother developed as an independent character. Her importance is in the way she has shaped Cait. In "My Mother's Mother" the life of this mother is explored as a character by herself. Smothering mothers recur frequently in O'Brien's works.

Cait is a character of extremes and great passions. Many of her obsessions, fears and loves are those of a child. Her Catholic faith has produced a fear of hell that is so strong that she gets "out of bed six or seven times every night as an act of penance".⁹ She recognizes her feelings for Hickey are a childish whim, but she is not yet ready to abandon this love. She is frequently clumsy and awkward, not at ease with her body. But there is also a part of Cait that has mature feelings and insights. She thinks Hickey should not be trying to kiss her; she is too old. She has given up eating salt in an attempt to be grown up. Cait is an adolescent caught between the world of a child with childish perceptions, and dreams of adulthood. Her rambling associations reflect this pull as her focus changes quickly from the largeness of the landscape that gives a "rush of freedom and pleasure" to the mother crying in the hen feed, slowly working herself to death. Thoughts quickly move from the ambition of being a nun to the reality of avoiding the stone where Hickey, the hired man, empties his can of urine each evening. The real fear of retribution from the drunken father is set beside superstitions and old

⁹ This is reminiscent of the religious fears of the young Stephen Dedalus that will result in his adolescent crisis of faith. Joyce attacks the narrowness and bigotry of Irish Catholicism at a heightened intellectual and moral level. O'Brien does not dwell on the religious aspect in the same way but rather makes it a part of the Irish emotional make-up and therefore gives the impression of being more insidious, more fraught with danger.

wives' tales: do not bring lilac into the house, it will bring bad luck! Cait's adult fears exist in the same world where her swing of childhood still sways in the wind.

Cait's inner lack of balance is reflected by setting the disturbing atmosphere of the inside of the house against the calm of the outside world. She sees the gentle beauty of the dawn, that magical time when it seems that everything is suspended. The land is covered by dew and mist, giving the impression of a dream, something not quite real:

The sun was not yet up, and the lawn was speckled with daisies that were fast asleep. There was dew everywhere. The grass below my window, the hedge around it, the rusty paling wire beyond that, and the big outer field were each touched with a delicate, wandering mist. And the leaves and the trees were bathed in the mist, and the trees looked unreal, like trees in a dream. Around the forget-me-nots that sprouted out of the side of the hedge were haloes of water. Water that glistened like silver. It was quiet, it was perfectly still. There was smoke rising from the blue mountain in the distance. It would be a hot day.(CG,5)

The heat does not seem to be one of oppression but sends out a warmth of dreaminess, of promise and potential. Cait is quickly recalled from this reverie by the dog. Even he knows the flow of the pain in the house and the threat of the father, not yet returned, and not eagerly awaited. This quick switch from the internal to the external, the personal to the general, gives a focus to Cait's situation; it creates a sense of distance and, sometimes, objectivity. Unlike some novels of childhood, O'Brien is not attempting to recreate the stream of consciousness of childhood; there

is a distance between Cait the narrator⁴ and the character of Cait in the story. This distance allows the narrator to comment on the childlike associations of the character and also adds to the feeling of growing awareness. Not only do all of Cait's faculties of sensation slowly become alert in the first chapter - touch, hearing, sight, smell and taste - her emotional perceptions and connection to the outer world are awakened. It would be an over-statement to suggest that O'Brien is symbolically presenting the birth process, but there is definitely a sense of coming to life, an awakening, which is reinforced by having Cait slowly shake off the effects of sleep. The first chapter ends with a phrase that will echo for Cait throughout the entire trilogy: "weep and you weep alone." Not only must she suffer, she must suffer alone, in silence (throughout the trilogy, Cait will demonstrate that her usual response to problems is shame, whether she is in error or not). The opposition and disharmony of her existence is clearly established as well as a foreboding of further tension.

Baba's introduction and development is slower and more distanced but with no less impact and definition. Baba is first mentioned as a cause of Cait's shame, an object of rivalry and a confidant of secrets: "and once we took off our knickers ... and tickled one another. The greatest

⁴ Narrative techniques will be discussed in more detail in Chapter - Two.

secret of all." (CG, 10-11) Baba's character will continue to be associated with sin and shame (from Cait's viewpoint). Cait is repelled and attracted to this girl that she sees alternately as a demon and a saviour, a bully and a friend. Baba's character is constructed as a contrast to Cait. Part of the novel of growth will be built on the distinct characters of these two girls - comparison and contrast. Cait fears Baba; Baba seems to fear no one. Cait is ashamed of her home and her father; Baba's home seems to be idyllic and a torment for Cait:

Passing Baba's house I walked faster. Her new pink witch bicycle was gleaming against the side wall of their house. Their house was like a doll's house on the outside, pebble-dashed, with two bow windows downstairs and circular flower beds in the front garden. Baba was the veterinary surgeon's daughter. Coy, pretty, malicious Baba was my friend and the person whom I feared most after my father. (CG, 17)

Cait is first seen inside her country home, sleepless with despair. Baba arrives "looking glorious" on a pink bicycle, announcing her arrival with an "impudent ring." Although both girls come from the same village, Cait's life on the farm clearly links her with the country while Baba is much more urban. The difference in the financial situations of the two families reinforces the country/city distinction. So far, there is no indication of Cait's appearance - all we know of her is fear, shame and drudgery. But for Baba the first associations are with physical beauty, vibrancy, colour and movement. Cait, the poor country girl, walks

while Baba rides a bicycle.⁷ Baba's personality is quickly shown to match her appearance. She is not meek, like Cait, but aggressive, maliciously playful - taking the lilacs and receiving the credit from their teacher. Of course much of the impression of Baba is influenced by the fact that she is being presented through the character of Cait: often the descriptions say as much about Cait as they reveal about Baba; Cait who fears God and His punishment is easily tricked by Baba who has the ability to steal and lie without apparent pangs of conscience.

Independently, both girls are likeable and irritating. We like Cait who waves at passing buses and writes soppy things in autograph books even though Baba would say she is a sentimental "eejit". Baba's rudeness and arrogance are softened by her enthusiasm, cleverness and energy. But when seen together their opposing traits seem more distinct. Baba is the leader, the participant while Cait is the follower, the observer: Baba eats the peas, Cait throws the shells in the fire; Baba sings, Cait mouths the words; Baba stays dry inside, Cait goes out in the rain to bring in the clothes. Baba, the arrogant paying pupil and "school dunce" is countered by Cait with her scholarship and lack of confidence. Their intimate knowledge of each other allows them to cut deeply:

⁷ Baba's association with city things is strengthened by the fact that her mother is the only person in their village who has ever seen Big Ben.

She stood in front of me, peering at my skin as if it were full of blackheads or spots. I could smell her soap. It was a wonderful smell, half perfume, half disinfectant.

'What soap is that you're using?' I asked.

'Mind your own bloody business and use carbolic. Anyhow, you're a country mope and you don't even wash in the bathroom, for God's sake. Bowls of water in the scullery and a face-cloth that your mother made out of an old rag. What do you use the bathroom for, anyhow?' she said.

'We have a guest-room.' I said, getting hysterical with temper.

'Jesus ye have, and there's oats in it. The place is like a bloody barn with chickens in a box in the window; did ye fix the lavatory chain yet?'

It was surprising that she could talk so fast and yet she wasn't able to write a composition, but bullied me to do it for her.(CG,22)

This is a school girl antagonism of the most heightened kind: the competition, the rivalry, the showing off are fierce. Their reactions are quick, based on temper, jealousy and the need to please. Both need to show off and display their knowledge (even if this knowledge is fabricated). But the forgiveness, the making-up, is just as swift. Both girls are ruled by emotional reactions, often uncontrolled emotions.

The relationship brings out not only the worst in the girls, but also sometimes some of the best. Baba angers Cait to the point where she is motivated to act and defend herself. For Baba, Cait is creative. "Grown-ups like Baba and [give] her a lot of attention" but Cait's helplessness, when confronted by her drunken father, gives Baba the opportunity to show her clear, cool thinking and her ability to stay calm. Baba lacks Cait's eye for her surroundings.

Baba's insight is in her knowledge of people which at this point she uses mostly for manipulation. Baba's wit and sarcasm are most effective on Cait; Cait is Baba's straight-man. But even at this early stage, Baba is supportive and generous as well: when Cait is told her mother has left, Baba simply states "Stay with us." Baba has the ability to make Cait focus on things other than her fears and anxieties. Cait covets this friendship as much as Baba covets Mama's jewelry. There is a magnetic draw between the girls, but because they are so young, it most often manifests itself awkwardly, painfully.

This early stage of development in contrast and complement is furthered by showing Baba with her family. The fear, shame and deception in Cait's home is a marked contrast to the arrogance of Baba's family. The emotional games of the Brady family all focus on the alcoholic father; all behaviour seems directly to relate to him. Baba's family also plays games which revolve around the father and drinking but here the deception has a different focus: Cait and her mother band together for comfort and protection; Baba, Martha and Declan are on the attack, not the defensive. Both houses revolve around the disturbance that accompanies the return of the father. In the Brady house, the rituals depend on fear. The Brennan house also is dominated by deceit and drinking but the tone is very different. Mr Brennan is "sarcastic"; the rest of the

family deliberately ignore him or patronize him. In the game of the Brennan household, Mr. Brennan is the dupe, but a knowing dupe. Both homes have the scars of sadness and failed communication.

Relationships with their mothers have shaped both girls. Mrs Brady physically shows the agony of her life:

Her right shoulder sloped more than her left from carrying buckets. She was dragged down from heavy work, working to keep the place going, and at night-time making lamp-shades and fire-screens to make the house prettier.(CG,10)

Martha is a sophisticated ballet dancer who says she gave up her career for marriage. She is beautiful if cold:

She had a pale madonna face with eyelids always lowered and behind them her eyes were big and dark so that you could not see their colour, but they reminded one of purple pansies.(CG,36)

Baba calls her mother by her first name and treats her casually, more like a peer than an adult: Martha is not motherly. Baba reflects the forwardness and defiance of her mother as well as her spirit. During the course of the novel (and particularly the trilogy) Cait and Baba will at times seem to function as one complete person, not as individuals or opposites. But Martha and Mama seem as opposite as two women can be: one is sad, oppressed, a drudge; the other "fast", "not ever sad", although sometimes bored. At times both girls assume the role of mother to each other and their own mothers.

The news of Mrs Brady's death, which closes the first section, is foreshadowed by Cait's rambling thoughts

before the concert (it would seem that like her mother she has a knowledge about things before she is told):

The sky above ... was a naked blue, and higher still, over our heads, great eiderdowns of clouds sailed serenely by. Heaven was up there. I knew no one in Heaven. Except old women in the village who had died, but no one belonging to me.(CG,43)

As she sits in the dowdy hall her thoughts again turn to her mother. The panic and hysteria that follow the news of her mother's accident come to an abrupt and deadening emptiness when she learns her mother is assumed drowned:

'She knows,' Martha said to him, between her sobs, but after that I heard nothing, because you hear nothing, nor no one, when your whole body cries and cries for the thing it has lost. Lost. Lost. And yet I could not believe that my mother was gone; and still I knew it was true because I had a feeling of doom and every bit of me was frozen stiff.(CG,49)

In her shock and pain she tries to deny the truth, but cannot. When the girls retire to bed for the evening two things happen which will echo through the rest of the novel. The first is Baba's statement "You're my best friend." The second is the image of the girls huddled in bed, convinced that the ghost of Mama is outside their door on the landing, waiting for them. Their young imaginations anticipate the spirits of this town which will haunt them both for years to come. The sentimental and dramatic Cait acknowledges the fact in characteristic fashion: "Somehow she was more dead than than anyone I had ever heard of;"(CG,53) "It was the last day of childhood." For Cait, maturity will have to include learning to accept the pain of the mother's early

death. The first section of The Country Girls is the foundation for this novel, and to a great extent, for the entire trilogy. As these two girls develop and mature, O'Brien begins to unfold a vision of female sensibilities.

* * * * *

"Jesus wept"(CG,80) - The convent years.

The novel continues with a hectic pace of disruption and separation. It begins with the drowned mother, followed by the news of the selling of the farm, the departure of the farmhand, Hickey, and finally the girls leaving the town altogether. When Cait and Baba leave for the convent they begin a period that will explore their individuality, initiate change and bring them closer. The world of the convent - the "deathly, unhappy silence" where the air reeks of cabbage - is full of more deceit and social games that will test the girls' ability to play and adapt; Cait will succeed, Baba will merely get by.

Their formal education strengthens the developing contrast of their characters. Baba, who reads film magazines and adventure stories, fails the examinations and becomes quiet; "She was stupid at lessons although she was so smart in her conversation otherwise."(CG,89) The adults in this world are not amused by her sharp tongue and sense of humour; they find her troublesome and punish her. Baba hates this inhibiting "jail". Cait is her usual obedient self, winning statues and coming first in the weekly tests

(characteristically this produces worry and guilt rather than satisfaction and pleasure). Baba is becoming more rebellious while Cait is more and more attracted to fantasy, escaping from the concerns of the outside world through schoolwork.² Baba curses under her breath; Cait daydreams during algebra.

A shift begins in their relationship when Cait's naivety and innocence attracts the older Cynthia who protects and mothers her. Privately, Baba has been nice to Cait since her mother's death but publicly she still needs to ridicule and bully her. The friendship between Cait and Cynthia, sparks Baba's jealousy and is far harder for her to endure than any bullying she could encounter. When Baba tries to end Cynthia's friendship with Cait she provides the first actual evidence that Baba needs their friendship as much as Cait does. Cait now feels a power that she has never had before and she claims no longer to fear Baba. O'Brien has captured the peculiar vulnerability of adolescent selfishness.

In the convent Cait also begins to change her attitude toward her mother. Timid Cait the observer, the caretaker, is still an imitation of her mother and remembers

² Sometimes these fantasies are inspired by literature. In her daydreams Cait compares her life to the heroine of Wuthering Heights; she sees herself as a gothic heroine (even her description of the arrival at the school with the dark lake and the "bleak wind" blowing through the window, echos the gothic tradition).

Mama with sadness.⁷ Scholarships remind Cait of her mother's concern for her education. Baba's feet remind Cait of the mother's painful corns. Cait has not advanced beyond the pain that accompanies the death of a loved one: "sometimes a sharp and sudden memory of her came to me, and to ease the pain I cried." Whenever mothers are mentioned she cries for her own. This stifling association is symbolized by Cait's memory of her mother's home:

I could even open drawers and see the things Mama had laid into them - old Christmas decorations, empty perfume bottles, silk underwear in case she ever had to go to hospital; spare sets of curtains, and everywhere white balls of camphor.(CG,90)

These time capsules reflect the fears and sterility of Mama's life. Cait is a mirror of this woman who judges the cleanliness of people by their religious beliefs. Cait is so judgmental she has even been keeping an inventory of her mother's sins: "I was trying to recall how many sins she had committed from the time she was at Confession to the time she died."(CG,92) Cait remembers every sin, every lie. Although part of her concern is whether or not Mama's soul is in Purgatory, Cait is beginning to recognize her mother as a sinner as well as a saint; the "first noiseless

⁷ As a child Cait did not even play with her toys. Mother and daughter both stand apart from the world: "I thought of Mama and I hoped that she was in out of it. There was very little shelter along the road from our village to the village of Tintrim, and Mama was very shy and wouldn't dare ask for a shelter in a house that she passed by."(CG,41)

sundering of their lives"¹⁰. For the first time Cait recognizes the dangers of following in her mother's steps:

'The evenings are getting shorter,' I said fatally. I said it the way Mama would have said it; and the resemblance frightened me, because I did not want to be as doleful as Mama was. (CG, 86)

Earlier Cait has mimicked her mother's attitude but she has never before made the connection to her own behaviour or had the concern.¹¹ Physically Cait's mother has been replaced in the Brady homestead by a Mother Superior (in this context a non-fertile mother figure). Cait thinks of Mama less often and usually when she is with her father. Cait herself takes on the mother's role as she tries to inflict guilt on her father for the loss of the farm. She is moving away from Mama's apron strings¹² just as she has had to give up her doll's tea service and her belief in Santa Claus.

Dada is still a source of fear and obligation. He is an irresponsible drunk who does not pay his bills, has no pride in his land and is associated with oppression and guilt. From the time of Mama's death he and Cait have been

¹⁰ James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, (Middlesex, Penguin), 1916. p. 164.

¹¹ When she goes off with Jack, who has been waiting for her at the gate, she sounds exactly like her mother; 'It's not wet, Jack, and for God's sake don't talk of rain; it's as fatal as opening umbrellas in the house.' (CG, 15)

¹² In Girls in their Married Bliss Baba looks back at this time in Cait's life; "It was the mercy of God her mother got drowned or she'd still be going around tacked onto her mother's navel." (MB, 41)

like awkward strangers, busy avoiding one another. Dada wants recognition and comfort that he is a fine man, "brave and strong and good" but Cait will not, cannot give him this; Cait's father is an embarrassment.¹³ When confronted about her expulsion from school Cait no longer runs; she lashes out and says that she hates him. Although almost blinded with hatred and rage for her own father and guilt for her own sin she is able to see Mr Brennan with an amazing clarity:

And the thought came to me that he would have liked Mama as his wife and me as his daughter. I felt that he was thinking so himself. (CG, 119)

Although Cait's family situation is not resolved she has developed some understanding of complex adult relationships.

As the girls themselves experience changes, the world they know is also slowly being transformed. There are no longer hens on the Brady farm and the dog, Bull's-Eye, has been poisoned.¹⁴ Electricity is installed in the Brennan's home. Their maid, Molly, gets a boyfriend, then announces her plans for marriage. Perhaps the most significant change is in Martha who is "going through the change of life." Cait notices that Martha is less defiant, more sad and aging. The beauty that had been her joy is

¹³ The relationship between Cait and her father is symbolic of her relationship with her Irish past. Both are in her blood.

¹⁴ These images also reflect the sterility of the farm and Cait's growing separation from her home.

slipping away. Mr and Mrs Brennan sleep in separate beds and Martha is now attending Mass. But on the girls' final visit the Brennans have become intimate and loving. Cait, who compares and judges everything by her own family, finds this embarrassing. Baba too is embarrassed by the change in her parents. When the girls leave for Dublin, Cait notes: "Martha cried. I suppose she felt that we were always going; and that life stood still for her. Life had passed her by, cheated her." (CG,130) Although Cait and Baba are changing, they have difficulty accepting change in others; they have little awareness of how they fit on the changeless wheel of change.

Cait, who has always seen everything with a deadly seriousness is beginning to reflect on the past and the future rather than just focussing on the present and herself.¹⁵ A visit to the nuns recalls happy times with Hickey. Tea with her father makes her want to foresee the future; "I was looking for romance, thinking that next week I would be in Dublin, free from it all." (CG,126) She does notice change: "there seemed to be fewer geraniums in the windows than there had been when I was a child." (CG,130) But what really points to a new level of awareness is the ability to see the same thing in a different way:

¹⁵ In the first section Cait does have a very limited hindsight (for example, she sees how her feelings for Hickey have changed as she has grown), but she sees with the eyes of a recorder - there is little contemplation or sense of the changing world around her.

I had been looking at primrose leaves for seventeen years, and I had never noticed before that their leaves were hairy and old and wrinkled. I kept looking at them. (CG, 116)

Such moments of sudden awareness and repeated patterns of experience will develop into an essential part of O'Brien's vision of female sensibility.

Up to this point Cait and Baba have still been very tied to home - all holidays and problems return them to the village.¹⁶ When Baba's plan gets them expelled¹⁷ and launches them into the next phase of their development, they must first of all go home. While Cait furiously travels around the countryside remembering the good old life that never was, Baba is applying mud packs and having a fling with a town boy, Norman Spalding, as her preparation for Dublin.¹⁸ Cait and Baba provide a balance for one another

¹⁶ O'Brien uses holidays as a child's way of measuring and remembering time. The gluttonous Halloween at the convent is followed by Christmas at home. In Dublin, the major outing revolves around the Easter holidays. In Girl with Green Eyes, Cait's father arrives to take her home on New Year's Eve. Holidays magnify the problems and joys of everyday life. O'Brien uses holidays to show the flow and continuity of life but also to create a sense of escape or release from routine. As Cait and Baba mature, holidays no longer have this childish fascination.

¹⁷ The convent escapade also shows how their character differences are becoming more pronounced: Baba is thrilled by her sin and her success; Cait, maintaining her adolescent passion for dramatics and exaggeration, thinks they are now "filthy and loathsome" and spends the night wondering how to kill herself.

¹⁸ The middle section of the novel is concerned with growing sexual awareness, the ability to develop relationships and the joys and agonies of puberty. These themes (and all the men) will be discussed in Chapter-Three.

that they do not have by themselves. There is a growing bond wrought by things they share; hatred of their fathers, sadness and sympathy for their mothers and an impatience to be getting older. They "need" each other and help each other. When they get on the train they will leave behind the town, their families and the convent but they will never escape the past - it binds them together.

I suppose it was then we began that phase of our lives as the giddy country girls brazening the big city.(CG,130)

* * * * *

"Wounded pride, fallen hope, baffled desire"¹⁷ - Dublin Life

If Baba was suffocated by convent life she will make up for it now. She arrives in Dublin arrogant, insolent and full of zest for this new life. Here she can freely express herself, be imaginative and cocky. Cait is still busy trying to apologize to everyone.²⁰ Baba becomes more self-confident and graceful while Cait remains clumsy and ill at ease: Baba dances like a "dream"; Cait is unsteady on her high heels and she steps on toes. Their attempts at sophistication focus on clothing, giddy earrings and bewitching stockings. Cait is still a "funny little girl" and Baba is still an extrovert mixer. Both are virgins,

¹⁷ Joyce, Portrait.

²⁰ The incident here when Baba burns the table with the cigarette could be compared to the convent expulsion. Cait's reaction has not changed; apologize.

full of anticipation for that "magic moment" when "weakness and timidity and inexperience would fall" from them.²¹

This section opens with a scene that revolves around eating and discovery.²² The city has a whole new set of rules and Joanna's house a new set of games. But here, as opposed to the convent, it is Baba who is the fastest to assess the games. Cait is busy trying to make sense of the world by relating it to her past, her system of ordering the world: Saturday nights are for going to confession; Joanna's dead chicken reminds her of dinners back home. As Baba primps and prepares to go dancing, Cait thinks about the farm and the pleasant times spent with Hickey. Although she is physically in Dublin, her thoughts are still at home. Cait insists she loves the "neon fairyland of Dublin" and tries desperately to fit in and to deny her country roots:

I knew now that this was the place I wanted to be.
For evermore I would be restless for crowds and
lights and noise. I had gone from the sad noises,

²¹ Joyce, Portrait, p. 65.

²² The novel begins with breakfast at the Brady home, then eating chicken at the Brennans', dinner with Mr Gentleman, the dining room at the convent and tea with Dada. All these occasions introduce the girls to new situations. For example, learning how to eat and get rid of the bad meat is the first step in surviving at the convent. By having so much of the learning and action propelled by appetite O'Brien underlines the girls' hunger and zest for life. This also recalls the whole tradition of fairy tales where the symbolic quest for maturity or identity is often presented literally as a search for food ("Hansel and Grethel", "The Three Little Pigs", "Rapunzel" and so on). As the girls mature the associations with eating change from these childish ones to associations with entertaining, being seduced, getting fat, family fights, anxiety.

the lonely rain pelting on the galvanized roof of the chicken-house; the moans of a cow in the night, when her calf was being born under a tree.(CG,141-2)

But without Baba this world is "cheerless and empty." The details she sees are those of the country; budding trees, the colour of the sky and even the defecating pigeons. Her ability to look back is developing into a system of escape, a way of avoiding the present.

Cait's responses to other people are becoming more obsessional and less in touch with reality. She escapes more frequently into her dream world:

Waltzing was forgetfulness and I wished that Mr Gentleman would suddenly appear out of nowhere and steer me through the strange, long, sweet night, and say things in my ear and keep his arms round me.(CG,145)

Baba's life is a continual reaching out while Cait's world seems to be continually closing in. Cait is a romantic who is never happy with reality - her dreams and fantasies fulfill her desire to be someone else, somewhere else. Cait is afraid of everything; not doing her job properly, displeasing Mrs Burns - she even fears the cat. She retreats more frequently to her dream world which starts to overlap with the real world: money is spent on hankies to impress and tantalize Mr Gentleman in her dreams; her musings about men at home cutting turf causes her to spill the sugar. In the city Cait's eye for detail is just as perceptive as in the country but her city descriptions reflect her panic, her inability to fit in. Her country

descriptions capture the peace and tranquility; city descriptions dwell on the absurd and disastrous. When she compares the city world to the natural concerns at home, Dublin seems very superficial.

Cait's willingness to let Baba leave when it is discovered that Baba has tuberculosis further indicates Cait's growing isolation:

I waved to the car and she waved back. Her thin white fingers behind the glass waved to the end of our friendship. She was gone. It would never be the same again, not even if we tried. (CG, 170)

Baba does not give up so easily. She is tough and brave; she goes on smiling.²³ Baba is still outgoing, outspoken and vivacious. She is the first of many of O'Brien's characters to display an alarming lack of inhibition and an amazing tenacity and resilience given the daily cruelties of life.²⁴ For Cait and Baba their childhood friendship is over. But, as Cait soon realizes, the bond is still strong and their need for each other in no way has been lessened.

Cait has developed a friendship with Joanna but it will not replace the honesty of Baba. Baba and Cait always link but Cait does not like it when Joanna links her.²⁵

²³ One of the problems with this novel is the forced ease with which Baba is packed off to the clinic and removed from the novel. She is not an easily disposable character!

²⁴ Sheer tenacity in the face of great odds becomes a major theme in O'Brien's work; fiction and non-fiction.

²⁵ O'Brien uses "link" as a verb which means to join arms while walking. There is also the added connotation of connecting, being a part of a unit.

Joanna is more of a mother substitute suitably equipped with "one solid wall of outstanding chest". Joanna and her home remind Cait of Mama and the farm: Joanna's "lollipop nymph" recalls Mama's foil covered corn; Joanna's cluttered house is reminiscent of the farm; Mama hoarded things and, like Joanna, stored them in camphor balls, ruining the touch by the smell. Joanna is asked for a nightdress because Mama's are not easily obtained. The conversation Cait has with Joanna about men and sex is a mother/daughter conversation. Cait no longer mourns Mama, but she is still close enough to childhood to hear Mama's voice from the grave reproaching her for her "fast" city life. And when she forgets the anniversary of her mother's death she has another sleepless night, fearing her mother's ghost. Joanna is only the illusion of motherhood.

At the end of the novel, Cait is alone and very innocent. She still wants to believe in "happily-ever-afters" and thinks that you must be married a long time before you can make a baby. Baba is not here to bring her crashing back to earth or to guide her ecstatic anticipation. Cait realizes that she misses Baba: "She kept me sane. She kept me from brooding about things." (CG, 182) Cait is planning a sexual encounter with a man who has "lemon juice, instead of blood, under his

skin."²⁶ She approaches this journey with ignorance and innocence because she lacks the ability to face the truth. She cannot deal with the truth of Mr Gentleman anymore than she can approach her father.

In many ways Cait has changed. She now mentions not going to Mass in the same breath with not having enough underwear. Cait recognizes some of her behaviour as juvenile and feels embarrassed - but she also has a certain sadness realizing that the end of her "girlhood" is near. Her attitude about herself has changed as well. Although she is still being pulled between childhood innocence and mature understanding (and it is unclear which side will win in the end) she is beginning to think of herself as a woman.

Cait is like an eye in the storm, not because she is an oasis of calm and tranquillity but because she isolates herself from her own insights and from the energy and activities around her:

Doing this, the thought came to me that I was foolish and disloyal, not only to Hickey, who had been my best friend, but to Jack Holland and Martha and Mr Brennan. To all the real people in my life. Mr Gentleman was but a shadow and yet it was this shadow I craved. I sent the telegram, instantly made myself forget about Hickey, and thought of our holiday in Vienna.(CG,183)

She ignores her own remarkable insights, building for the coming disaster, refusing to see the truth. As always, she

²⁶ Like many of the images and metaphors in the novel this one is a little too obvious, but more on that in Chapter-Two.

escapes into her fantasy world and imagines what being in Vienna will be like. Despite all the warnings, including the rain, Cait insists that things are working out beautifully. Her life is as made-up as her face, her happiness as fragile and vulnerable as the feathers in her hat. She leaves the house armed with symbols of help from her friends; an umbrella from Mr Burns, Joanna's dictionary and nightie and Mama's stained gloves, but it is the watch from Mr Gentleman that will be the most revealing - he will not come in time. She misses the messenger of doom just as she has missed the truth. As Cait waits, her eye for every detail makes the suspense heavy, each word laboured. Nothing escapes her attention; the boys' hair that needs cutting, the cut and colour of their trousers:

The street lights came on outside, the wet bulbs gave out a blurred yellow light, and the street took on that look of night mystery that I always love. The raindrops hung to the iron bars that held up the grey awning, they clung to it for a while and then they dripped on to a man's hat as he went by. I think it was then that I admitted to myself for the first time that he just might not be coming. But only for the shadow of a second did I allow myself to think of it. I bought a woman's magazine and looked for my horoscope. The magazine was a week old so my horoscope was of no help. (CG, 186)

The agony of each passing moment is intensified by the hanging raindrops. Just as in the opening scene of the novel, the outside reflects the inside, involving all the

senses in preparing for disaster.²⁷ A telegram confirms her fears: "Everything gone wrong. Threats from your father. My wife has another nervous breakdown. Regret enforced silence. Must not see you." (CG, 187) The past and the reality of the present that she has been denying for so long has caught up with her. Like her mother who fears water, the thing Cait most dreads has come to be. She removes the hat which is now "a wet, grey hen" and she cries.

But the crying seems to wash away something. Again expectation has proven to be better than the real thing, but her reaction is new. She does not despair and say this is the worst day of her life. She seems able to accept the disappointment. The ending is ambiguous, leaving many questions unanswered; who told Cait's father (Baba could not tell as she knew nothing about their planned trip). Cait offers tea to a stranger in an effort to be friendly:

When I had made the tea, I recollected that he must think it a very odd house, so I went down the hall and called in, 'Would you like a cup of tea?' I didn't want him to see my face again.

'No English speak,' he said.

'God,' I thought, 'as if it makes any difference to whether you'd like tea or not.'

I poured him a cup and brought it in. (CG, 187-8)

There is an underlying energy and vibrancy here. This is not the voice of someone who has given up. She sounds like Baba! By removing Baba from the novel and having Cait

²⁷ Throughout The Country Girls the sensory awareness and the way the senses are used to reflect growth recall A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

assume some of her attitudes, O'Brien is merging their two characters. The success of this is questionable, but she does end the novel on a note of grudging optimism. Perhaps in the end the rain was cleansing.

* * * * *

GIRL WITH GREEN EYES - "Country girls. Fresh from the bogs." (GE, 151)

In many ways Girl with Green Eyes is an echo of the world of the previous novel and its vision. Many of the themes being explored stem from the first novel²⁰ - the girls' tie to their past, importance of religion, patterns of renewal and sterility, reflections of the macrocosm in the microcosm. The three part structure is repeated; three beginnings and three escapes. But the novel is not merely a sequel. Cait is now studied as a victim - of others, of her past but particularly of herself. The focus has changed; new patterns of growth are being explored.

²⁰ Like most episodic fiction there are links that connect characters and information in the novels, but O'Brien does not seem particularly concerned with the 'facts'. For example, The Country Girls left Cait as a girl of almost eighteen; she has been at the shop for two years but is now only nineteen. Such minor discrepancies occur throughout the trilogy, and in A Pagan Place and Returning where she explores the same group of characters. A character who was an only child, now has a sister; a mother that died, lives. It seems that O'Brien is more interested in the interplay of relationships and the many possible permutations of these than keeping track of details. Although all her work has the ring of autobiographical fiction it is the many potentials that surface; O'Brien's vision has many truths, not just one.

Again, this novel begins with the contrast between Cait's inner world and the reality around her. She busily finishes her work in favour of reading a novel:

It was a beautiful book, but sad. It was called Tender Is the Night. I skipped half of the words in my anxiety to read it quickly, because I wanted to know if the man would leave the woman or not. All the nicest men were in books - the strange complex, romantic men, the ones I admired most.(GE,5)

Cait is still the impatient, incurable romantic who wants happy endings but takes no pleasure in getting there. She is the "literary fat girl" who reads Chekhov, Joyce and James Stephens and creates as many scenes in her dreams as she reads in books. Her actual world is hardly romantic; the shop is shabby, dusty and run down. Cait's choice of novel reflects her own sense of impending disaster.²⁹

Cait is self-conscious about everything - her appearance, her home, her past, her education, her lack of worldly knowledge and her way of speaking. She is afraid of sex and babies; Cait only wants the innocence of love, not its mature fulfillment. She uses dreams to create "beautiful" illusions and to avoid reality:

²⁹ In The Country Girls the tone is frequently set by the fiction Cait is reading or thinking about at the time, whether it is gothic romance or Joyce. Girl with Green Eyes acts as a chronicle of the mood and manners of the time that recalls the writings of Fitzgerald. Also, through the character of Eugene and his group there is the contrast between glamour and squalor that is a mark of Fitzgerald's novels. The father/daughter relationship between Eugene and Cait is similar to the clinging marriage of Nicole and Dick Diver in Tender is the Night. At this stage Cait, like the schizophrenic Nicole, wants to surrender herself to a man; be cared for and her life decided for her.

I thought of ... all the imaginary men I had ever talked to and into whose strong arms I had swooned in a moment of ecstatic reconciliation. But I could not decide; I had never made decisions in my life. My clothes had always been bought for me, my food decided on, even my outings were decided by Baba.(GE,55)

Her dreams are no longer those of a child even though they remain innocent and fanciful; Cait daydreams about being rich, drinking coffee and buying clothes to cure a hangover.

Baba enters this novel much earlier. She is the thin, lively girl from The Country Girls, with a passion for dancing, laughing and earthy humour. Cait is first seen with a pen and a book in her hand; Baba first appears with a bottle of gin. Cait's lack of understanding is countered by Baba's brazen "go-to-hell voice".

Although at times everything seems to be against them, Cait and Baba set out to have fun, be "fast" and catch a man with an enthusiasm that is enviable and laughable. Their relationship still has tension and vibrancy, and when they are together there is an invigorating energy that permeates the first section of the novel.

* * * * *

"This vale of tears."(GE,85) - Return to the village.

Cait's time in Dublin has not freed her from her family or village. Cait still goes home for holidays to a father who still frightens her. Her pattern of denial, refusal to accept the truth and obsessive guilt, all stem from her father's drinking and her mother's death. She is

still tied to her home as a child, not as an adult and she must return before she can proceed. When Dada arrives on New Year's Eve to take Cait home, she exhibits new behaviour, new reactions; she is furious and does not meekly accept his demands. She tries to assume the position of control by telling him how to behave and insisting; "I'm my own boss. I'll do what I like." (GE,68) Cait thinks of a plan to escape, executes it, knocks over a lame man and does not even stop to apologize. Cait is desperately struggling to separate herself from her past, but she cannot pity her father and take an action for her own good at the same time; she creates plans for escape in her mind but does not have the courage to put them into action. She is forced to return home but Cait does not abandon her wish to escape, to leave her childhood; "I was going away again, going away-forever." (GE,75)

Cait is alone, without Baba or any assistance from the community. This reduces her to the tears of a child. She no longer sees the countryside as peaceful; it now has a sense of desolation, complete with dead thistles and a dead cow. But Cait does not give up. Although she takes the course of least resistance she still looks for every opportunity to escape (including the possible death of her father!). Her father uses every means available to him, to make her feel guilty and stay but she will not succumb:

Always when I escaped from the house I felt a rush of vitality and hope, as if there was still a chance

that I might escape and live my life the way I wanted to.(GE,87)

Cait sees freedom as something that happens externally, not internally, a reflection of her innocence, but the fact remains that she takes responsibility for her life, develops a plan and succeeds. Unlike the escape from the convent, Baba is not here to help (Cait asks, but Baba's help is intercepted). She uses her experience to solicit help from Jack Holland, thereby setting herself very much apart from the Cait of The Country Girls. Unfortunately, this assertion of independence proves to be temporary.

* * * * *

"Something - everything had struck the whole laughing pleasure of my life." - Return to Eugene.

The return to Eugene is a return to being treated like a child. Cait regresses to feelings of guilt, dreams of escape and the desire to avoid the truth. She hides under the bed to escape Dada and his gang; she listens to the men ridicule and demean her, but does not speak to defend herself. She wishes that Baba were there to help her; Cait is not able to help herself. She cannot cook, has no domestic skills and is unable to help Eugene when he is injured; she has become totally ineffectual. She is only able to say "I'm sorry." Cait is sure Eugene will not want her, so she plans to run back to Baba: "They've ruined, and ruined, and ruined me." Cait refuses to take any of the

responsibility for herself. Although the plot movement is linear this is not a novel of steady growth and learning; Cait has regressed to a childlike state and again remembers her mother's words; "weep and you weep alone."

Cait has left her father and her past for a life that is much more restrictive. She will never grow up or be able to share her life until she faces the facts, not the fiction, of her childhood, her home and her parents. But she is still keeping secrets about Dada's drinking. She is too immature to become a part of Eugene's household or to belong in his bed. A part of Cait wants to "stay young, always" and longs for Baba and their life of fun together but another part has been seduced by Eugene and has "passed - inescapably - into womanhood." Physically Cait may be a mistress but mentally and emotionally she is a child. Cait's nervous gesture of putting on make-up reflects her desire to hide, to pretend to be someone she is not. She trembles when she tries to say something important and hides from things that are strange. Cait finds herself standing outside the house, looking in the window and feeling jealous of the confident Mary; she is not a participant in this house only an awkward guest - she has no rights here.

Except for the first section and the final fifteen pages, Baba is largely absent from Girl with Green Eyes. She appears sporadically, to underline themes that are being explored; Baba reassures Cait about her decision to return

to Eugene but does not make the decision for her. She appears again to demonstrate Cait's restlessness and finally, to enlarge on the repercussions of sexual intimacy; she has lost her virginity and fears that she is pregnant. Every time Cait has needed support, Baba has been there for her, but now that Baba needs Cait, Baba is made to feel judged and condemned. When Eugene offers help, Cait tries to share the credit for his kindness. Without Baba, Cait becomes absorbed in self-pity; her credulous innocence becomes almost unbearable. There is no balance or harmony of their characters as there is in Girls in their Married Bliss. Despite Eugene's appalling behaviour Cait does not evoke much sympathy.

Cait's final childish tantrum, a method to manipulate and get her own way, results in her leaving Eugene. She leaves Eugene just as Mama left Dada - to teach him a lesson and make him behave the way she wants. Although Dada is delighted and gives her a reward Cait is left with a desperate need to be wanted and loved and is absolutely lacking in self-esteem. Although she plans to leave for England with Baba, Cait does not want to go forward. She wants to go back, to Eugene. She even leaves a trail for him to follow. It is Baba who supports her and forces her to look to the future; "I knew that if anyone was to save me from going mad, it would be Baba with her maddening, chattering voice." (GE, 190) In the end Cait

leaves for England, exiled from her lover and her home. The girls have left Ireland, but like the ship Hibernia that they are travelling on, Ireland goes with them.

Girl with Green Eyes ends with an amazing expression of defiance and hope. It looks to the future of a new Cait, going to university and searching for knowledge, a new way of seeing the world:

I'm changing...What Baba doesn't know is that I'm finding my feet, and when I'm able to talk, I imagine that I won't be so alone, or so very far away from the world [Eugene] tried to draw me into, too soon.(GE,192)

Cait had thought that when she turned seventeen she "would grow up quite suddenly." She has made many great mistakes (and will make many more) but she is not defeated. This may seem a sudden and unconvincing transformation but when this final statement is considered in the light of the defiant Cait who tried so desperately to escape her home and the stifling guilt imposed by her father, her gesture of hope makes more sense.

* * * * *

THE SEASONS - "Spring was moving in the air above and in the earth below and around him, penetrating even his dark and lowly little house with its spirit of divine discontent and longing."³⁰

In all three novels, hope and the perpetual renewal of life are seen reflected in the cycle of the seasons. The

³⁰ Kenneth Grahame, The Wind in the Willows (Cleveland: Collins, 1966), p. 17.

Country Girls opens in late Spring; the flooding and rains that bring life to the land contribute to the death of Mama. When Cait and Baba arrive at the convent, the desolate world surroundings reflect their internal unhappiness: everything inside the convent is cold, angular and grey, covered in cobwebs; the outside autumn world is turning brown. All the years in the convent are associated with a lack of productivity, a lifelessness and the drab, sterile winter landscape. Their expulsion from the convent comes in the spring with the crocuses and a chance for a new beginning. The novel ends where it began, in May. Cait has come full circle. There have been many springs, many false and true beginnings.

Girl with Green Eyes begins on a wet afternoon in the fall and in the city. In the first novel, the courtship of Mr Gentleman begins in the winter and is always associated with coldness and snow. In the second novel, Cait has her first dinner with Eugene on a November night. She spends the winter with him amid growing tension and unhappiness: winters are unproductive and desolate; neither relationship will be fruitful. The sadness is relieved briefly by a few weeks of happiness in the spring; another false start. Cait leaves Eugene and Ireland once again in May. The final movement is a hopeful look to the future that takes place in the hot summer.

Girls in their Married Bliss begins and ends in the coldness and cruelty of winter; the world is dormant, waiting for spring. The spring of this novel marks a new type of beginning and a new pain. Just like the flowers that are struggling against the "dykes of grey snow" Kate now finds herself alone in the world without Eugene, without Cash and without a home. Baba's failed abortion and Kate's breakdown are also signs of this "lousy" spring and a chance for new beginnings. May takes the new Kate to a party and a brief, cold love affair. Kate's ultimate gesture of desolation takes place after Christmas when she has herself sterilized. The seasonal pattern shows their joys and sorrows, their growth, but ultimately their commitment to continue even when faced with great pain.

* * * * *

GIRLS IN THEIR MARRIED BLISS - Baba speaks.

The trilogy's last novel does not keep Baba in the background. She narrates in a strong, shameless voice:

Not long ago Kate Brady and I were having a few gloomy gin fizzes up London, bemoaning the fact that nothing would ever improve, that we'd die the way we were - enough to eat, married, dissatisfied.(MB,7)

Cait and Baba are together from the first page. The three part structure is abandoned; this novel will focus more on the internal life of Cait and Baba than external evidence of change. The language shows evidence of the rhythmic assurance, the compression and the directness of O'Brien's

later work. O'Brien is finding her voice.³¹

Tough Baba from the two earlier novels has become a rich snob. She is abrasive and forward but at heart is a generous 'softy'. She exudes defiance and energy:

'When I was in the convent', said I - when tight I get reminiscent - 'we had to till a patch of garden - life is a garden, old chap - and I used to steal flowers from other girls' plots and stick them in my own. I didn't even plant them properly!' (MB,47)

Timid, innocent Cait is now the servile, down-trodden and mentally abused Kate.³² She is "too sedate and good", is not a good housekeeper and is a hesitant but loving mother who carries a bottle of whiskey in her purse.

The relationship between these women (despite amazing innocence in them both, the mature atmosphere of the novel dictates that they are now women, no longer girls), shows an intimate knowledge of one another. Despite frequent antagonism, both accept each other, complete with flaws. Family relationships are now merely echoes from the past; they have matured enough to distance themselves from their youth and to have developed some sympathy for their own parents:

'Parents' I thought, the whole ridiculous mess beginning all over again. Hers and mine and all the

³¹ O'Brien's emerging voice will be discussed in the next chapter. The remainder of this chapter will be concerned with the unity of the trilogy; how a sense of completion is achieved while at the same time an entirely different type of novel is being produced.

³² The name change is Eugene's doing but also indicates a distinct change from the previous character.

blame we heaped on them, and we no better ourselves.
Parents not fit to be kids.' (MB, 56)

Baba now sees the pattern and recognizes she is repeating it but this time in a different role with gained wisdom. Kate and Baba help each other to deal with the pain of sexual relationships. Their problems are those of the adult world and involve adultery, unwanted pregnancies, motherhood and deceit. Both girls have difficulty expressing their needs as adults, parents and spouses.

Baba and Kate both have marriages that are full of fighting, dissatisfaction and lack of communication. Baba is married to a man she dislikes in bed and Kate is having a platonic extra-marital love affair. Their dreams of married bliss have translated into the discovery that they are both thought of by their husbands as property. In the beginning Baba supports and shelters Kate when she leaves Eugene; she lies to Eugene and to Frank, finds Kate a place to stay and keeps Kate from excessive self-pity.

Kate becomes isolated, alienated from personal relationships and the continuity of life. Again she is the outsider, looking through a window to see herself replaced by Maura. She feels ashamed about everything, is unable to look people in the eye and contemplates suicide; but she even runs from the relief of death. The fact that she has moments of extreme lucidity about the world that surrounds her and the relationships of other people makes this period of alienation more distressing: "She knew everything that

was happening but could not help herself." She admires a small child's ability to say 'no', to not be coerced; Kate cannot say 'no'. The internal focus of this crisis makes it more sympathetic than the despair in the previous two novels. The agony of separation comes to a pitch, alone in a cavernous railway station. She looks back to the convent and to Dada, but walks around a bookstall rather than face "the certainty of the future":³³

Possibly twenty seconds went by. Then something broke loose inside her and she started to scream and bang the glass that covered the numbered face [of the weighing machine]. She hurled insults at it and poured into it all the thoughts that had been in her brain for months.(MB,100)

When Kate comes "back to reality" she does not attempt to use this episode to solicit sympathy from Eugene. Instead, she immediately reaches out to Baba who provides the focus Kate lacks; "Cut out the opera-star stuff and get over here."(MB,101) Kate feels this has been a "narrow escape." She does not regret her inability to kill herself or yearn for the illusion of order that might have been found in her mad world.

Baba's brief affair with Harvey has brought her to a crisis situation at the same moment. This time, for the first time, Kate will not run from Baba's problem; they will

³³ This moment - which is the result of disillusioned infatuation, separation and despair to the point of suicide, will be explored again in "Paradise". The pain of separation is the primary theme of most of the short stories.

fight their problems together. Initially Baba takes charge, not allowing Kate to retreat either into sentimental motherhood or hypocritical prayer. But as the steam and castor oil take their effect on Baba, Kate begins to take control. Kate's years of playing the martyr help her to instruct Baba how to appear contrite and humble; they take a bus, Baba wears no make-up. Ironically, it is Kate who forces Baba to face reality, her husband and insists that Baba not apologize. These are things which Kate herself has always tried to avoid. This time it is the usually fearless Baba who wants to run. Kate's ordeal has brought a clear insight: "But the point is that you don't know beforehand what damage you do to yourself by your actions. You only know afterwards."(MB,109) They both have found the courage and strength to go on by facing reality. Although both have tried in different ways to murder a part of themselves, in the end they choose life; "salvage" begins. Now for the first time Baba moves in with Kate: "We laughed. A thing we hadn't done for ages."(MB,115)

The lives of Kate and Baba are now propelled by problems, no longer by appetite. Their adult diseases are treated with adult remedies: Kate goes to the psychiatrist, Baba to the gynecologist. Although Kate cheats at the psychiatrist her treatment does allow her to review her childhood (even though she still seeks comfort) and finally confront the truth about her mother:

Hills brought a sudden thought of her mother and she felt the first flash of dislike she had ever experienced for that dead, over-worked woman. Her mother's kindness and her mother's accidental drowning had always given her a mantle of perfection. Kate's love had been unchanged and everlasting like the wax flowers under domes which would have been on her grave if she'd had one. Now suddenly she saw that woman in a different light. A self-appointed martyr. A black-mailer. Stitching the cord back on. Smothering her one child in loathsome, sponge-soft, pamper love.(MB,123)³⁴

Having come to the realization that some patterns never change and cannot be changed, Kate stops treatment. She must now learn to change what she can.

O'Brien again uses a rainy, fearful night to reflect Kate's state of mind. Although this is not in itself a particularly original idea it works extraordinarily well, perhaps because it strengthens the insistent use of water in the trilogy which begins with Mama's drowning; "The sky was green and watery. Kate said it would rain. Not just rain, Baba said, but thunder and lightning and deluge and floods."(MB,129) Kate finds herself "locked in" her dilapidated house, convinced that "some awful thing waited outside the door for her."(MB,133) But this time she is not content to sit and wait - she climbs out the window. Kate's movements reflect her internal refusal to be trapped any longer - she confronts the "monster". Kate's next door neighbor arrives with information about how to fit in this new neighborhood as well as the belief that women are

³⁴ See Appendix-One for a discussion of the imagery of artificial flowers in the trilogy.

happier without men.³⁹ Kate is able to talk with this woman, even feigns an interest in ballroom dancing. What is most important is Kate's ability to reflect on her own behaviour "At least it is true she was trying to smile, and she had not mentioned the child, not once." (MB,134) Not only has Kate escaped the trap of her house, she will emerge from this dark night.

Kate does not shrink from an unexpected party invitation. She dresses up, vows not to cling to anyone and tries to flirt. Although she still escapes the present by remembering the past, this is now a less frequent occurrence. This is a different Kate who is less self-absorbed; "Possibly everyone in the room had had a catastrophe, so why should hers be condolable?" (MB,138) Kate is becoming aware of her own responsibility for her life - aware of the real deception, not just the ones of her own creation:

It was the first heartless admission she'd ever made to herself. The first time she realized that her interest in people was generated solely by her needs, and bitterly she thought of the little girl, herself, who had once cried when a workman stuck a pitchfork through his foot. It was as if her finding the pleasures in the world had made her ravenous. (MB,149)

She no longer wants to be saved or to be rescued.

Kate tries to develop a more realistic view of the future, dreaming of Michael and Cash playing together and

³⁹ This information is given over whiskey, not tea, as in the earlier novels.

Baba and herself "temporarily happy." But even these are dreams of escape and when Eugene leaves with Cash he forces Kate to face the reality of the present: "It was a big moment, the one when reality caught up with nightmare, the crest and the end." (MB.155) Kate tries through legal means to retrieve her son, considers blackmail, kidnapping and other manipulative behaviour but in the end she decides to withdraw, to let go. Her letters to Eugene and Cash are her first communications with them that do not reek of guilt and manipulation. Kate will not inflict on Cash the blackmail, the smothering love that she was burdened with by her own mother. Kate decides to change the pattern - she will not become an imitation of her mother.

Kate's method is drastic but guaranteed; she has herself sterilized. The final movement is painful but ultimately one that is healthy. Like the women in the cave experiment who astonish the doctors with their "physical resilience and lively spirits" Kate and Baba face their present together. These novels of maturity end with a sense of acceptance, not wisdom:

It was odd for Baba to see Kate like that, all the expected responses were missing, the guilt and doubt and sadnesses, she was looking at someone of whom too much had been cut away, some important region that they both knew nothing about. (MB,160)

* * * * *

THE PHYSICAL ASPECT - 'You're lovely looking,' I said.
 'You're gorgeous,' she said, in return.
 'You're a picture,' I said.
 'You're like Rita Hayworth,' she said. (CG,131)

The attention given to the physical appearance of Baba and Cait reflects the growing complexity of O'Brien's work - the change in focus from the external to the internal. In The Country Girls their growth is charted by physical change. In the beginning, physical differences reveal their personalities and petty jealousies. In the middle section Baba's thirst for change is illustrated when she steals creams for udder infusion to use to make the girls' own breasts bigger. As Cait gets taller, plump and develops a pot-belly her physical changes bring delight and pain; the wonderful shoes that give Cait such secret pleasure turn out to be a gift from her father. In the final section, O'Brien relies heavily on physical description to show growth. Baba adjusts her hair in a new "rakish" way to reflect her new life. Both girls start to smoke in an attempt to appear grown up. Cait's isolation is revealed by her appearance; "I was tall and gawky, with a bewildered look, and a mass of bewildered auburn hair." (CG,130) Cait is awkward with her body and her growing sexuality - she starts to indulge in food and gets fat.

The use of physical manifestations to indicate internal change adds to the straightforward approach of most of this novel. But it is not always convincing and often seems to reflect a need to state what is not shown:

Her face was pale now, and the boyish bloom was going off it. She looked older and wiser in the last few weeks.(CG,169)

Though I was tall and well developed around the bust, I had the innocent look of a very young girl.

In these examples O'Brien is relying on physical description to indicate what the novel itself does not explore.

Girl with Green Eyes³⁶ develops a more complex relationship between the internal and the external. At the beginning of this novel Cait's blossoming body and growing sexuality are in conflict with her internal self which denies and is horrified by sex. Much of Eugene's early courtship focuses on Cait's appearance:

I always forget how pretty you are, until I see you again - ah, the bloom of youth; I love your North-Circular-Road-Bicycle-Riding-Cheeks;(GE,24)

You're such a nice plump girl;(GE,52)

We parted bad friends and don't think I didn't notice the resentment in your fat bottom...You are a nice, kind, dear, sweet, round-faced pollup, and now that I'm all mixed up in you and your mad hair, don't set fire to yourself until I come back to you.(GE,65-6)

Eugene's condescending attitude toward Cait is first indicated by his insults; "Your old bottom's getting fat." He talks about her as if she were a dessert, not a person; a child rather than an adult. The pull between innocence and maturity is also shown by Cait's body. When she is with

³⁶ Unlike the other two novels, the title here involves only one girl, and so will the novel; Baba is very much in the background. There are exceedingly few physical descriptions of Baba in the novel, reflecting her lack of presence in the work.

Eugene her face is "round and childlike." Failure to satisfy Eugene in bed makes her face "red, blotchy, swollen". Her coat makes her look fatter than she is and she is ashamed to think that people are watching her. But when Cait is out with Baba, being fast, physically she is more free and expressive: "My hair was loose around my face and I tossed it out of one eye at regular intervals."(GE,64)

In the second section of Girl with Green Eyes Cait's regression into childhood is shown by her amazing trust in her physical ability to look pathetic, to look like she needs protection. Her face becomes "gray and pulpy", her eyelids "warm and itchy" as she rejects sexual intimacy, mentally and physically. Once Eugene finally seduces her he thinks she looks "prettier". The immaturity and unhealthy nature of their relationship expresses itself in increasingly cruel physical insults from Eugene: "Miss Potbelly"; "You're like a red, swollen washerwoman."

In Girls in their Married Bliss O'Brien no longer depends on physical description to explore inner awareness. As before, early in the novel, physical description reveals the characters but this time the style is more subtle, has more levels of complexity and usually is expressed by Baba:

I could tell them all to go to hell because I had a brazen, good-looking face and was afraid of none of them, not even afraid whether people liked me or not;(MB,11)

She's sly, the sort that would look like a child even if she kept her mother in a wardrobe [Baba about Kate];(MB,8)

I sat on the chair thinking of the eighteen months in London, and all the men I'd met, and the exhaustion of keeping my heels mended and my skin fresh for the Mr Right that was supposed to come along.(MB,11)

All of these examples reveal more about Baba's internal self - her relationships with others, her opinion about herself, and her outlook - than they do about physical appearance. O'Brien is underlining the internal complexities, no longer just telling. The best single example is Kate's breakdown. She tries to talk to a weighing machine - she seems to be trying to find and define herself by physical weight, and is not successful - this method does not work in this novel. The physical is now something that can be manipulated to create an impression, not merely a mirror: Kate teaches Baba how to look wretched, pale, suffering. Kate's face is now "startled", indicating an expression of emotion not just a physical characteristic. Other characters also are aware that the internal is more important than the external: "Darling, you look different. What happened?"(MB,138)

At the end of The Country Girls Cait plucks her eyebrows in preparation for Mr Gentleman. She tries to be grown up by changing her physical appearance. Girl with Green Eyes ends with Cait's plan to change the internal by educating the intellectual - by going to university. Girls in their Married Bliss ends by pointing to the internal, the emotional: "What does it feel like?...What was she thinking? What words were going on in her head?"(MB,160)

Internal development will remain the central theme of O'Brien's mature voice.

The simplest epical form is seen emerging out of lyrical literature when the artist prolongs and broods upon himself as the centre of an epical event and this form progresses till the centre of emotional gravity is equidistant from the artist himself and from others. The narrative is no longer purely personal. The personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea.

James Joyce
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

CHAPTER-TWO The Emerging Voice

O'Brien's mature style is distinguished by economy, concision and a flair for understatement. The Country Girls and Girl with Green Eyes have a strong emphasis on incident that later books do not show, but both books also display a number of virtues; qualities that will be refined in later books. The novels are a searching exploration of the Irish dilemma. There is an overwhelming sense of time and place that is intrinsic to the maturing process of Cait and Baba, and to the growing sense in them of the Irish homeland. When Cait talks about her home the language is more mature and has a poetic impetuosity. O'Brien captures what it is like to grow up in an alcoholic, Irish, Catholic home. Another essential element of the mature voice is the extraordinary ability to create scenes that are bizarre and slapstick - at their best, comic masterpieces, carefully choreographed. This comic voice is expressed tentatively in the first two novels but truly begins to mature in Girls in their Married Bliss. In part, this is because of Baba. The third element, the narrative voice, seems to mature as Baba is given a voice. This allows the narrative form of the third novel to begin to merge the two personalities and to communicate at a deeper level than just the story of maturity. It is through the simplicity and intensity of the

prose and her amazing eye for detail that O'Brien evokes the pity, compassion, humour and celebration that mark her work.

* * * * *

Narrative approach - "It took days to write, though the difficulty was not what to say, but how to say it." (MB, 158)

In the early part of The Country Girls the language of the narrator, Cait, is simple and perfectly suited to her character. The narrative flow is unforced, without apparent artifice; relationships are easily explained and understood, everyday details are mentioned casually. As Cait grows, her struggle between innocence and maturity is reflected in the quality of the prose. She begins to have endless monologues that reflect her rambling logic and fear of reality. A good example of the tension between fear and eagerness, innocence and growing awareness, can be seen in the nude scene with Mr Gentleman:

I looked down slyly at his body and laughed a little. It was so ridiculous.

'What's so funny?' He was piqued that I should laugh.

'It's the colour of the pale part of my orchid,' I said and I looked over at my orchid that was still pinned to my cardigan. I touched it. Not my orchid. His. It was soft and incredibly tender, like the inside of a flower, and it stirred. It reminded me when it stirred of a little black man on top of a collecting box that shook his head every time you put a coin in the box. I told him this and he kissed me fiercely and for a long time. (CG, 175)

In Girl with Green Eyes, O'Brien continues Cait's first-person narrative and keeps Baba in the background. This novel has a slightly different colloquial style, the style

of an older Cait. The tone is matter-of-fact and reflects the drudgery of Cait's job and life:

It was a wet afternoon in October as I copied out the September accounts from the big gray ledger. I worked in a grocery shop in the North of Dublin and had been there for two years.(GE,5)

There is a stronger sense of despair and confusion in keeping with the story of the novel and Cait's language becomes even more marked by hyperbole than in The Country Girls, but otherwise there is no drastic change between the narrative technique of the first two novels.

Cait, like many first-person narrators, tells the truth as she sees it, or would like to believe she sees it, at that particular moment. But often these 'truths' are evident lies.³⁷ For example, the scene above with Mr Gentleman indicates a longing to be with a man, but she is equally terrified by any thoughts of sexual intimacy. Cait is very adept at ignoring sexuality in favour of an idyllic, platonic love, spiced only with kisses. The reader cannot accept what Cait says is true, as truth. The point of view of her character, an understanding of her personality and the viewpoints of other characters, are all necessary to gain a whole perspective. Cait lacks self-confidence in her appearance and ability but Mr Brennan thinks she is "clever and gentle." This information must be considered in the context of the rantings of Dada's gang who say that Cait is

³⁷ Holden Caulfield comes to mind as the epitome of first-person-narrator-liars.

a "snotty-nose", was never "right", reads too much, talks to trees, and was "spoilt" by her mother. After Dada demeans her in this scene in Girl with Green Eyes, Cait says "for two pins I'd come out and tell him a thing or two about his only child." (GE,114) But we know that she will not, cannot come out. Cait's need to please others, to tell them what she thinks they want to hear, adds to her sense of confusion about what she really feels. Sometimes she has to point out the fact that she is actually telling the truth, not just telling lies. Cait says she is sorry so often, usually to Eugene, that she has to indicate when this is an emotional response, not just her standard answer: "'I'm sorry,' I said. I was actually sorry." (GE,45)³⁰ For the most part the use of first person narrative adds to O'Brien's great talent as a story-teller and to the intimacy of the telling. But at times the technique is not entirely under control:

And for no reason that I could understand, I remembered back to the time when I was four or five and I got a clean handkerchief on Saturday nights. (CG,160)

This statement occurs while Cait is hiding from her date with Harry. She is afraid of being stained and longs for clean hankies and the innocence of her childhood. Cait's wish to remain pure is clear without O'Brien having to

³⁰ This particular admission has several meanings. At one level Cait is sorry for Eugene that Laura has left him and caused him such pain. At another level she is sorry that Eugene and Laura are no longer together because she is now the one who carries the pain of being in love with this married man and being afraid that she too will lose him.

suggest that Cait is unaware of why the thought came to mind. With the economy that begins to develop in Girls in their Married Bliss, such awkward and obvious "stage directions" will disappear.

Girls in their Married Bliss introduces a new narrative technique to the trilogy which greatly alters the tone of this novel. In eight of the chapters the narrative voice is omnipotent and tells the story of Kate. For four of the chapters Baba narrates. The serious, gloomy Kate is now balanced by the self-effacing, energetic Baba. The result is a style that has more bite and tension. The pace of the final novel is faster, sharper, more concentrated. Fewer secondary characters means closer attention can be paid to the internal lives of Kate and Baba.

Some techniques are common to all three novels. In The Country Girls, Cait becomes very intimate while explaining her crime: "I was ashamed of it then, and I am ashamed of it now. I think it's something you'd rather not hear." (CG, 113) She addresses the reader personally, directly; this is a confession. Such confidential remarks are infrequent in The Country Girls and Girl with Green Eyes. Cait's narrative style in these two novels is rather distanced. In Girls in their Married Bliss Baba continually talks directly to the reader: "Between you and me I really did"; "I'll repeat one joke so as you'll have an idea how hard up I was." (MB, 67, 9) Baba's style is chatty, more

colloquial and more intimate. The effect of this is to draw the reader into the story at a more private level.

Another technique that is common to all three novels but is used to create a more personal atmosphere in the final novel, is the use of foreshadowing. In The Country Girls, Cait frequently alludes to events in the future, usually with a sense of impending disaster: "But she hardly overheard us, or we would have been expelled then." (CG, 82) This also creates a distance between the character in the novel and the narrator. This distance could be used for introspection by the narrator, but it is not developed. The distance is used to add to the childlike quality of the character of Cait.³⁹ Girl with Green Eyes no sooner establishes a mood of drudgery and sameness, than O'Brien promises to change it: "Little did I know that I would be gone by then to a different life." (GE, 5) This line indicates that the novel will be an exploration of change, not uniformity and also gives the narrative voice a sense of distance - Cait is recalling these events, not relating them as they happen. The distance here is used to allow Cait the narrator, to look back on Cait the character, and see her innocence. The distance is reinforced by having the verb tense change from past to present:

³⁹ An example of the way the style is used to enhance the reader's sense of Cait's childish nature is examined in this study in Chapter-One, p. 14.

I cannot describe the sweetness of those nights, because I was happy and did not notice many things. There always seemed to be a moon and that fresh smell that comes after rain. I'm told now that some men are strangers with woman after they have loved her, but he was not like that.(GE,139)

"Eugene!" Baba said, embracing him. That helped a bit because he likes Baba.(GE,140)

Cait the narrator in part has changed and in part is still like Cait the character. The sense of confusion that Cait experiences is heightened by combining this sense of distance with other techniques - by using a change in verb tense with the sense of foreboding/foreshadowing:

"Cheese," Baba said as he took the picture, and I still have that picture and look at it in a puzzled way because I had no idea, when he took it, that my life would take such a sudden twist.(GE,165)

The 'when' of the present tense is ambiguous until the final brief chapter which is in its entirety in the present tense. The transformation at the end of Girl with Green Eyes is made more believable when considered by the narrative position and the verb tense.

The multiple narrative perspective in Girls in their Married Bliss also makes use of distance and foreshadowing, but again through the voice of Baba it is more direct, more informal:

But boy did she destine our future.(MB,46)

I used to wonder when [Cait's affair] would end, but apart from that I didn't put much consequence on it. Which goes to show how wrong I can be.(MB,15)

Baba uses the distance to see the faults in her character, to gain objectivity: "Jokes - looking back on him he had

the least sense of humour of anyone I ever met, and boy, I know some dull people." (MB,62) In Girls in their Married Bliss the distance created by Baba's narrative voice becomes part of the more complex vision of cycles, of continuity and the movement of life. Baba can look back to see many repeated patterns, to see many pasts:

At least this time we had money and we had drink, and...castor oil. (MB,103)

Kids, I thought. God help them, they don't know the bastards they're born from. (MB,120)

The idea of children adds a new complexity as well. Cash's voice at times is allowed to intrude through the omnipotent narrator:

Cash didn't care. She was gloomy and squeezed him too tight and asked who he loved the most. Not like Maura. Maura played fox and goose and smelt like a mother and had hair between her legs just like a mother too. He saw her through the keyhole. She nearly split her sides laughing. Maura laughed a lot and his mother cried a lot. He'd have another loose tooth soon and get another sixpence. He tried to shift one with his finger but it would not wobble. He loved that wobble feel until it got looser and was held on by one thread of gum. (MB,91)

The voice of Cash looks to the future of a new generation, a new cycle with new innocence and knowledge, new pain and pleasures. In this final novel of the trilogy, O'Brien creates a more unified vision of continuity and renewal by using many narrative voices, rather than just the voice of Kate.

It also seems that by giving voice to Baba, O'Brien develops a more economical way of exploring and contrasting

Kate and Baba. The narrative form of this novel begins to merge the two voices, the two personalities - previous attempts were not completely satisfactory. Part of the technique in this novel is that some events are revealed twice, once by Baba and a second time by Kate, through the narrator. Kate and Baba both give explanations for the cause of the break up between Eugene and Kate at different points in the novel. Baba's description of Kate's relationship with Mama is distinct from Kate's recollection of her mother. Baba knows that there is often a difference between what Kate says and the truth. Baba also has an aptitude for dramatics and overstatement but now both extremes are balanced - both Kate and Baba have a voice.

The awareness and use of language in this novel is much more perceptive:

'... ..., carp, bleak, bream.'

They did not sound like the names of fish at all but like a litany of moods that any woman might feel any Monday morning after she'd hung out her washing and caught a glimpse of a ravishing man going somewhere alone in a motor-car. (MB, 17)

O'Brien uses this acute sense of language to underline Kate's breakdown. As Kate begins to lose control over her mind she also begins to lose control over her mouth: she says "shit" to a bus driver and "fuck" to no one in particular at the railway station. The narrative style reflects her state of mind, jumping quickly from garbage and toffee papers, to her mother, then on to orange peel. O'Brien has stopped explaining her images:

She put the hot water bottles in and lit the paraffin heater. It was brand new; its wick white and unblemished.(MB,130)

The complexity of this image requires comparison to Kate, her life, the state of her mind, the atmosphere in the house, the relationship between Kate and Cash. But O'Brien lets the image stand on its own concise strength - there are no explanatory appendages. The dilapidated house that Kate rents and begins to refurbish and make into a home, with the help of Baba, is like Kate: both need care, attention and complete restoration. Again, O'Brien leaves the image to stand on its own merits.

The lives of Baba and Kate are woven together in this novel. Neither one is absent for long from the storyline or the thoughts and actions of the other's life. But what makes the integration of their characters successful is the narrative technique, the confrontation and expression of both personalities, both perspectives. Periodically, in the short stories, O'Brien will again consider one of these types in detail as an individual. But from this point each developed character in the novels will be a mixture of the two - part Cait/Kate, part Baba. As the trilogy demonstrates, neither functions well alone.

* * * * *

"A priestridden Godforsaken race!"⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Joyce, Portrait, p. 37.

One quality of O'Brien's mature voice that is evident from the very first novel is her ability to quickly and thoroughly create a sense of place and character.⁴¹ O'Brien has a keen ear and eye for sensory detail; she is particularly alert to the nuances of language and dialect—the revealing quality of overheard conversations. Like Joyce in Dubliners,⁴² O'Brien creates a sense of Ireland by examining the daily movement and lives of people. She is interested in the community — gossip, the way people think about each other, their inter-relationships, community beliefs and activities — and the way this affects the individual.⁴³ Her voice does not give an accurate, detailed description — her eye is not photographic. Landscape is important because of the atmosphere, the way the place would

⁴¹ See Appendix-Two for a discussion of O'Brien's ability for rapid character study.

⁴² In The Country Girls O'Brien pays homage to Joyce in a typical scene between Cait and Baba:

'Will you for Chrisake stop asking fellas if they read James Joyce's Dubliners? They're not interested. They're out for a night. Eat and drink all you can and leave James Joyce to blow his own trumpet.'

'He's dead,'

'Well for God's sake then what are you worrying about?'

'I'm not worrying. I just like him.' (CG,159)

⁴³ O'Brien returns to this theme many times in her fiction and will also explore it in her non-fiction works—Mother Ireland and Vanishing Ireland.

make you feel if you lived there.⁴⁴ The descriptions of landscape, scenery and interiors focus on the emotional atmosphere that is created rather than relating the exact physical appearance of the place – the way a room makes a character feel, rather than what the room looks like. In the books about Ireland, the eye and voice are not those of a newcomer. O'Brien explores the Irish dilemma with the eye of someone who has seen it all, has lived it but who still has a child-like wonder at the beauty of the land and a fascination with its people.

Much of The Country Girls and Girl with Green Eyes is concerned with the village where Cait and Baba were born. The beauty of the landscape is described by Cait with a simple awe:

The wild bees from a nest in the stone wall made a sleepy, murmuring sound and the fruit trees outside the barber's house were shedding the last of their petals.(CG,27)

It was crowded with briars and young ferns and stalks of ragwort, and needle-sharp thistles. Under these the ground was speckled with millions of little wild-flowers. Little drizzles of blue and white and violet – little white songs spilling out of the earth. How secret and beautiful and precious they were, hidden in there under the thorns and the young ferns.(CG,13)

The language is rich, complex and conveys a deep love and commitment to the land. Cait is constantly aware of the

⁴⁴ Eugene does have a cold, inhuman eye. When he describes America to Cait, it is the land that is the focus, not the people. Cait, who is extremely sensory, finds this odd.

details that colour her life, and her eye quickly and convincingly describes the people and events of the community. Little seems to escape her notice. The town's characters - Billy Tuohey, Mrs O'Brien, Miss Moriary, The O'Connor girls - and their lives which revolve around fairs, markets and hotels ("occupied chiefly by greyhounds"), are intrinsic to Cait's early life.⁴⁰ O'Brien captures the private side of community activities. On the night of Mama's death, Cait reveals the air of expectation and excitement at the hall, now transformed into a theatre. The description of Jack Holland's bar, with the tinker woman and the atmosphere of decay, shows the innermost life that revolves around bars, drinking and fairs. Cait's final walk around the town before leaving for Dublin shows its energy, its patterns, its life. In one paragraph O'Brien can convey the whole movement of generations of families on the small island of Tintrim. This is a small town where everyone knows everyone else, knows their affairs and talks about them; the postmistress listens to telephone conversations.

O'Brien's keen and perceptive eye documents the accepted trials of daily life; it is this awareness of

⁴⁰ O'Brien explores this homeland, this village, many times. A Pagan Place is another detailed look at growing up in rural Ireland, that considers self-imposed exile from the Irish homeland. Here the extremely intimate narrative voice leaves us with a howl echoing in our ears. Returning also revisits the characters of The Country Girls and considers them in short-story form.

detail that creates the personal, private landscapes. When Cait goes to visit the dressmaker she is aware of the small things that are special to this woman and make her distinct. Cait notices the pins in her mouth and the threads on her dress. Her only description of the room centres on the flowers:

The three geraniums on the window-sill were just beginning to flower. Two were vivid red and the other was white. The leaves gave the kitchen a nice greenhouse smell.(CG,121-2)

The dressmaker's intense interest in caring for these geraniums captures her loneliness. At the beginning of The Country Girls, Cait describes her first visit to the home of Mr Gentleman in terms of her feelings about him and the emotional circumstances of the visit. The atmosphere of the house is captured by small details, not by describing the physical appearance of the house:

There was a trout in a glass case that rested on the hall table and it had a printed sign which read: Caught by J. W. Gentleman at Lough Derg. Summer 1953. Weight 20lb.(CG,16)

This plaque points to the position of Mr Gentleman in the community and Cait's awe of him and his position.

Through the characters of Cait and Baba, O'Brien shows the stifling climate of this community with its poverty, drunken fathers and smothering martyr mothers. Various methods of escape⁴⁶ are explored throughout the

⁴⁶ "Escape" is used in this discussion to mean the avoidance of reality. Dada may not consciously drink to escape the reality of his life; he is an alcoholic and the

trilogy to underline the overwhelming need for flight that has developed in the two girls.

Through the character of Dada, O'Brien shows how some of the people in Cait's village escape the pain of living through a drunken illusion of happiness. Cait has learned guilt, depression and denial of truth from watching the results of her Dada's sprees. Like Cait, Dada needs to confess, be contrite and be comforted like a child. Dada tries to encircle Cait in his failure. He wants Cait to replace Mama as his emotional crutch against the embarrassment of his life.⁴⁷ The community seems to accept such drunken behaviour as normal, part of the trial of daily life. Even Father Hagerty condones Dada's drinking; "It's the climate." When this same priest chastises Cait for her involvement with a married man who is not a Catholic, he is in essence saying that drunken Catholics are better than sober heathens. But Cait herself recognizes the destructiveness of her father's drinking and refuses his lifestyle as well as his morals. Dada's drinking has contributed to her unhappy home and her own need to escape.

motivations for his drinking are not so simply explained. But as far as the symbolic development of the novels, and the theme of escape, Dada's drinking is seen by Cait to be a way to deny and forget the present.

⁴⁷ The disparity of Dada is shown with a horrible irony when he lectures her while still contrite from his last binge - he tells her what is right and what is wrong!

Another method of relief from life's suffering is found by some characters through religion.⁴⁰ Both Martha and Mr. Gentleman turn to it. But the convent provides no remedy for Cait and Baba. For them the convent life is as boring and sterile as the nuns, the food and the convent buildings. Throughout the trilogy the girls return to their faith in times of trouble; the seed of the Catholic faith is deeply planted in them. Long after Cait has given up going to mass she still believes in "hell, eternal torment by fire." When both have stopped the practices of the faith they still retain the superstitions; they believe that three wishes will come true when a church is entered for the first time. But the morality of the church does not correspond to their lives' experiences. Cait cannot accept that divorce is worse than murder. She begins to feel like a hypocrite when she says words that she no longer means. Ultimately Catholicism offers them no solace or escape.

Many of the characters survive by immersing themselves in the community and all it represents. Some of the women accomplish this by becoming martyrs, like Mama and Cait's aunt. Cait is lectured by her aunt about Eugene, but the aunt patiently alters her entire life to care for Dada and accommodate his drinking habits. When Cait returns to her home in Girl with Green Eyes she sees the judgmental and

⁴⁰ The nameless heroine of A Pagan Place becomes a missionary in order to leave a restrictive Irish home and the pain of a brief sexual relationship with a priest.

smug nature of the village: "All these unhappily married people wanted to be sure that I came home and had it happen to me." (GE, 80) She now sees how this community thrives on disaster and believing the worst about people. For Cait it has become a sterile environment: "Death was so important in that place" - not birth, but pain, upset. (GE, 85) The only escape for Cait and Baba is to leave.

In Dublin, Cait's eye for detail will be used to capture the activity in the rooming house, Dublin pub-life and the life of the city. But the country is always there in the background as a familiar touchstone and basis for comparison. Although Cait and Baba have physically left their home they still feel the pull of the country and their roots. The conflict between their past and the present, with all the city's allure and bright lights, is paralleled by the girls' inner struggle of fractured relationships, alienation and desire to grow up.⁴⁹ The activities of Joanna's house recall Cait's life on the farm but the associations are ludicrous. Hickey dumps his urine can outside but Herman actually has no bladder control and wets the bed. The scene with Hickey and Cait trimming the hedge is recalled when the trees in front of Joanna's house are

⁴⁹ Chapter-One considered the trilogy as a principle of progression - novels of education. The Irish dilemma allows the novels to be seen more as a movement away from something than a movement toward maturity. Chapter-Three will explore how the Irish past of Cait and Baba and the maturing process influence relationships with men.

cut. Hickey knew what he was doing; it was done with care and concern for growth, literally and figuratively. Just as Cait's eye for detail in the city seems rather odd, it is the wrong time of year to trim trees. The tree cutting scene precedes Cait's preparation for her trip with Mr Gentleman: like the trees it will not prosper or yield fruit. Emotionally, Cait and Baba have not escaped their past. They will make a final attempt at deliverance from the past by fleeing from the homeland⁵⁰ - they leave for London.

In Girls in their Married Bliss a new perception of the external world is added by the narrator, Baba. Baba has a different eye for detail than Cait but it is equally perceptive. Baba describes the life of the city with as much detail and insight about Irish life as was furnished in the earlier novels (although she is usually more concise than Cait). Baba's insights are about people and their internal worlds. Her description of the dinner party at her home captures the grovelling antics of the newly rich and their obsession with appearances and possessions. Baba's eye focuses on the absurd society life of fashion magazines

⁵⁰ Escape from the homeland becomes a recurring theme in O'Brien's work. That is why relatives who now live in America are often mentioned by the characters with a sense of envy. These relatives send gifts back to Ireland (frequently rugs) which are received as a type of consolation for those who still live in the old country.

and the sterility and impersonal life of the city.²¹ The physical descriptions of the city, however, still are given through the eyes of Kate, and together the two portray the atmosphere of life in London.

In Girls in their Married Bliss and most later novels the external, the location, is less important than the internal life. Although Cait and Baba have exiled themselves physically from Ireland, they cannot escape their past. Ireland is now part of their internal make-up; their connection with Ireland is now emotional, no longer physical. At one level, Baba shows how she has incorporated her past into her present through her sharp-edged cynicism; "An Irishman; good at battles, sieges and massacres. Bad in Bed."(MB,11) But the depth to which these girls have been touched by Ireland is made most evident during Kate's breakdown. During Kate's reveries, O'Brien relates with crisp economy the pain of Kate, the child, which haunts Kate, the adult. In O'Brien's vision the problems of life do not originate in the adult world - they reach far back:

Where had she come from?
 'Ireland,' she said. 'The west of Ireland.'
 But did not give any echo of the swamp fields, the
 dun treeless bogs, the dead deserted miles of
 country with a grey ruin on the horizon: the places
 from which she derived her sense of doom.(MB,143)

²¹ My favorite example of the lack of human contact and sympathy in the city is the cold announcement from the doctor who Baba goes to see to confirm that she is pregnant; "God has fructified your womb."(MB,119)

The importance of the internal life is seen in the lack of pressure that external events have on O'Brien's world. Politics and war have little place here: the Black and Tans are annoyances, who bring personal grief to individuals, but are not considered as a political force; war means nothing to Cait "except that the cigarette people stopped putting coupons in the packets." Politics and social problems are discussed as background small talk at a dinner party - something that is rather unreal and does not really touch the individual. O'Brien's later works will retain this intimate, personal focus.⁹²

* * * * *

The comic eye - "Strictly for the ducks." (MB, 77)

Perhaps one of the most distinctive features of O'Brien's mature style is her eye for understated comic detail and the ability to create incidents that are bizarre, sometimes macabre but always very comic. Frequently these scenes are used to undercut the tension of sexual relationships.⁹³ O'Brien's wit softens the often somber

⁹² Even James and Nora does not really concern itself with the famous Joyce, the public Joyce. The focus is the personal life of Joyce's marriage.

⁹³ In August is a Wicked Month there is a marvelous scene between Ellen and a musician. When Ellen's nervousness ruins the seduction, the musician asks her to tell him English "bedroom" language so that he can improve his vocabulary for future conquests. During this hysterical conversation, and note-taking by the musician, Ellen puts her clothes on. The musician is clearly more interested in his success rate than he is interested in Ellen.

lives of her heroines and adds to the sense of optimism in her work.

Although the riddles and jokes in the novels are not particularly clever or funny, O'Brien uses them to establish a contrast between Cait and Baba. Throughout the entire trilogy Cait never understands the punch lines of any of the jokes. Baba's adolescent humour eludes her, at home, at the convent and in Dublin. Cait does not understand the jokes of Eugene and his friends either. Even the childish riddles of Cash make no sense to Kate. In this respect, Cait is dull; it is Baba who is the "funny girl." This contrast in the girls' characters is used in the comic scenes for emphasis.

Another element of O'Brien's comic sense is found in her humorous observations and details. Because Cait is the narrator of The Country Girls and Girl with Green Eyes these details usually are seen through her eyes. Her comic observations are droll: she compares cheese to the smell of Hickey's socks. Much of the humour in these two novels is provided by Cait's innocence and the incongruity of the situations she is involved in: after sex with Eugene, Cait thinks of Mama and "how she used to blow on hot soup." Cait's life is like an emotional roller-coaster but she is so naive that she does not even know the meaning of the word "traumatic". Comments are funny because Cait is so serious, about herself and about life.

Unlike the deadly serious Kate, practically every time Baba speaks her comment has a comic or cynical edge. Girls in their Married Bliss is full of pointed, comic observations from Baba. To a pretentious lady gynecologist Baba says "I hope your vowels move tomorrow"(MB,105). In response to the "actor's account of how he lived on kippers for three years when he toured the provinces" Baba thinks "if it was true of even five per cent of the people who tell [the story] there wouldn't be one kipper left in the world."(MB,50) Her observations about people are always expressed with that same comical cynicism. Baba knows that "the American girl was wasting her bosoms raving away to the poet about iambic pentameter."(MB,48) About Cait's attitude toward men and sex, Baba comments "boy was she straight out of some chastity unit". Cait's seriousness makes Baba seem even funnier, and Baba's humour makes Cait even more boring.

O'Brien's ability to capture the outlandish side of life is fully developed in the comic scenes which are visual, full of movement and vibrancy. Often all the senses are involved. Characteristically, the scene begins innocently enough. Then something goes wrong, or seems out of place - then something else, and so on. O'Brien creates a momentum into which the characters are trapped.

The very first scene that hints at the hysterical scenes to come is in The Country Girls when the Brennan family hide in Martha's room, eating chicken. The scene (as

discussed in Chapter-One) points to problems within the family with a humour that is sad and sardonic. Even with the visual humour and the incongruity of Cait's presence at this intimate gathering, the scene does not have the comic impact of later works. Cait's first love scene with Mr Gentleman creates a stronger image of incongruity: after a "perfect" moment and a kiss, Cait's toes go numb and she feels a "drip on the end of [her] nose." But this is a short moment, only a brief paragraph that is not really developed into a scene. The atmosphere of the moment does suggest the scenes that come later. The two longer scenes of this type in The Country Girl are Jack's smoldering mother and Cait's error which results in the nuns being locked out of their washroom. In the latter episode the error is complicated by Baba's note which immediately follows. The scene has comic elements but again it is not sustained throughout the entire length of the scene. It is only when Jack Holland proposes marriage to Cait in a room that still smells of his recently smoldering mother that we see the potential for disastrous comedy that O'Brien explores in her next novel.

The first section of Girls with Green Eyes is rich with comic scenes of sustained length and impact. Only a few pages into the novel, Cait describes the events that result in the two girls going to a wine-tasting. Like previous episodes in The Country Girls (the Christmas when

Dada gives her shoes), the focal point of this excursion is Cait's footwear. Her high heels are new and white: "The toes were so long that I had to walk sideways going upstairs."⁵⁴ (GE,8) The pleasure of these shoes is enhanced by having Willie sneak a sugar bag into the store to carry the shoes to the party so she can wear her Wellingtons and keep the shoes dry. The triviality of this concern is contrasted by Cait's absorption in an article about priests that recalls her life at the convent. She is immersed in another world as her stop goes by and she forgets the bag on the bus. Baba's hair gets flattened in search of the shoes, further twisting the focus of their joy. When they finally get inside, Cait is doomed to spend the evening sloshing around in her boots. The sumptuous high heels are set off by the rubber boots.

These comic scenes are used to sustain the life and energy of the first section of Girl with Green Eyes. The scene at the wine-tasting leads directly into the disastrous dinner dance. Baba concocts the scheme as a way to see Eugene again but he does not dance and will not come. This is the first of many failures. Having eliminated prostitution and stealing, Baba's energy propels them to borrow money to rent some horrible dresses. The evening turns into a riot of misunderstanding - The Body gets drunk

⁵⁴ All O'Brien's novels are full of this type of wonderful, and distinctly female detail. This is one of my personal favorites.

and Eamonn, the abstainer, flees, never to return. The whole episode is brought to a pitch the next morning when Joanna sprays The Body with the fire extinguisher while he curses at the top of his lungs. The momentum of the scene increases as each sensory detail becomes involved.

The final comic scene of this early section of Girl with Green Eyes involves a misunderstanding of language and social graces. The length and energy of the enema tea party scene show O'Brien's acute sense of timing, and mistiming. Eugene has come to Joanna's house to have tea. He remains aloof while Joanna accumulates social blunders. She suggests that Eugene take his teeth out. She asks if he is constipated or would like an enema. She pats Eugene's bald head. Joanna even tells Eugene not to marry Cait. Once again O'Brien jars all the senses: the ear is distorted by Joanna's poor understanding of English; their noses are offended by the cigarette which burns Joanna's arm and ends up in Cait's bosom, followed by milk; the roly-poly pudding does not stimulate their taste buds - it reminds Cait of a corpse. These scenes almost defy paraphrasing. They are constructed carefully, building a disastrous momentum.

One reason that the middle section of Girl with Green Eyes seems so dour is that this type of comic scene is largely absent. Cait hides under the bed to avoid her father's gang and is mistaken for the ghost of her mother as a gunshot echoes in the room. But here the emphasis is on

the problems, on the pain - this is black comedy: it has a different focus. Funny moments are absent, as is Baba, and it is only with her return that The Body drinks cow's urine and the comic eye again becomes evident. The best scenes are those in which Cait and Baba are together. Without Baba the comedy is more disturbing.

The disturbing nature of the comic voice is not dependant on the topic of the scene. In Girls in their Married Bliss, Baba plays "Careless love" while trying to abort her baby; the subject matter is hardly funny. But here the scene is made more poignant by Baba's voice; this scene with Baba steaming in the bathtub is funny while the scene mentioned above with Cait hiding under the bed in fear of her father is not. Through the character of Baba, O'Brien celebrates life's disasters - the things beyond the control of the individual. Practically everything that Baba describes becomes a comedy: a visit to her gynecologist; a poorly timed dinner party, punctuated by thoughts of the drummer; life. The novel is paced by the comic voice of Baba - her voice balances Kate's gloom. In subsequent novels the comic voice becomes more refined but it never loses Baba's ability to cut to the quick without malice.

That was the first time it occurred to me that all my life I had feared imprisonment, the nun's cell, the hospital bed, the places where one faced the self without distraction, without the crutches of other people.

Edna O'Brien
The Love Object

CHAPTER-THREE - "The Love Object."

In the trilogy, O'Brien explores many of the manifestations of love. Chapter-One of this study considered the love relationships that are a result of obligations and external circumstances; fathers, mothers, the community. This chapter will consider, the men, the love relationships that are a matter of choice.⁸⁵ O'Brien uses the love affairs of Cait and Baba - both the ones that endure and those that are brief - as a means of expression of their internal selves. The novels portray the disillusionment of love, the sadness and pain, the separation and the loneliness, the despair and the needlessness of so much of it. Frequently the women band together against the pain of male relationships. The trilogy examines the way love changes to fear, to hate, to anger. O'Brien shows failed relationships⁸⁶ and the subsequent pain with a wonder at the energy of it all.

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⁸⁵ Cash will be considered here as a product of love that is chosen.

⁸⁶ O'Brien continually returns to the theme of failed relationships. Both The Love Object and A Scandalous Woman are collections of short stories about ended or ending love affairs. In August is a Wicked Month, Ellen is another woman caught up in the "cycle of longing and loving and pain and regret."

The need for love and affection - "If you say potato famine she'll say love."(MB,103)

Throughout The Country Girls there is a girlish concern with dating. Declan seems to have a crush on Cait but his attentions are not reciprocated. Baba has a fling with Norman Spalding before leaving for Dublin. But neither girl is touched by these boys who Baba thinks are "little squirts" and who bore Cait:

Sometimes during the holidays I made dates with some of [the local boys] but when I was out with them I was bored, and when they held my hand I felt disgusted.(CG,129)

The first real love relationship of any magnitude is Cait's love for Hickey. Hickey provides a type of stability for Cait in her otherwise chaotic home. She is natural and comfortable with Hickey and he treats her like a favoured child. Cait sees his concern as a type of childish courtship and says she loves him. Hickey continually winks at her, calls her pet names and even shares his intimate thoughts about life and women with her. Hickey is always there, even when Mama is not, with comfort - non-threatening physical comfort. Cait has no illusions about Hickey: she knows all his disgusting personal habits and that he takes advantage of her family's trust and property by treating his friends when Mama is away. But this information does not prevent Cait from having a true and deep feeling for Hickey.

He cares about Cait but will not surrender his own independence to pamper her; he will not stay, not miss seeing Maisie in order to look after her. Hickey is the one who first wants to tell Cait the truth about her mother's death. And until she hears from Hickey that her mother is dead, she refuses to believe. Like Cait, Hickey is a sentimentalist who, once he finds out that he is leaving, goes around the farm carving his name, leaving his mark. There is a gentle teasing between the two; they share the knowledge of the father's drunkenness and the mother's pain. Together they clip the hedge as a final futile gesture on the non fertile, non productive farm. They care for one another without coercion or deceit and without the threat of physical intimacy.

The Country Girls begins a long series of "loves" for Cait - her attempt to find a saviour to guide and protect her. The first vision will be Mr Gentleman. Through Cait's infatuation with Mr Gentleman, O'Brien captures the brooding, in-turning intensity of adolescent passion. Prior to their excursion to Limerick, Mr Gentleman has held a certain fascination for Cait, and for the rest of the community. Baba and Martha fight as to who will sit next to him at the concert; the local gossip speculates about his supposed affair with a Dublin chorus girl. Cait describes him as the "beautiful man who lived in the white house on the hill." (CG,15) She thinks of him as a

stranger, an outsider who is distinguished, lofty, remote and sometimes condescending. Like Hickey, his very presence has a soothing or comforting effect on Cait: "I was glad to know that he was there." (CG,45) Mr Gentleman also has the ability to arouse Cait; his smile touches her in a way that Hickey's does not. This relationship has clear sexual overtones. It is Mr Gentleman who is the first to tell Cait her mother has had an accident; and once she learns that the result has been death Mr Gentleman is the "only one that could keep [her] calm." (CG,49) When Mr Gentleman stops his car and offers Cait a ride to Limerick he provides her with the opportunity to unleash her passions:

So I sat on the black leather seat beside him and my heart fluttered. The moment I heard him speak and the moment I looked at his eyes my heart always fluttered. His eyes were tired or sad or something. He smoked little cigars and threw the butts out the window. (CG,61)

Cait begins this infatuation as an underweight, naive schoolgirl: she daydreams about everything - watches in windows, wishes in church.

Mr Gentleman assumes the role of guide, instructing her in his preferences; she must not wear lipstick and he will tell her what to eat. His smile, like Hickey's, is teasing. But his behaviour encourages her innocence, not her growth and it relies on dependence not individuality; one of their games is to pretend that Mr Gentleman is Cait's father. Mr Gentleman leaves her with a fantasy that she will fuel, late at night in the convent:

My soul was alive; enchantment; something I had never known before. It was the happiest day of my whole life.

"Good-bye, Mr. Gentleman," I said through the window. There was an odd expression in his smile which seemed to be saying, "Don't go." But he did go, my new god, with a face carved out of pale marble and eyes that made me sad for every woman who hadn't known him. (CG,65)

For him she breaks her confirmation pledge. Hickey's concern for Cait is sincere, based on knowledge of her and her life. Cait's relationship with Mr Gentleman begins as indulgence on both sides. Like Eugene later, Mr Gentleman will be displeased by change or growth in Cait.

Cait's Christmas encounter with Mr Gentleman seems to be the epitome of adolescent infatuation: "When he walked into the room I knew that I loved him more than life itself." (CG,96). Although at school she cannot think of him as her boyfriend when she sees him on a fairy tale winter day and he tells her that he loves her, her response is typical:

He cupped my face between his cold hands and very solemnly and very sadly he said what I had expected him to say. And that moment was wholly and totally perfect for me; and everything that I had suffered up to then was comforted in the softness of his soft, lisping voice; whispering, whispering, like the snow-flakes. (CG,99)

Cait is so serious, and the situation so comic with running noses and flying snow, that we are torn between pity and laughter. But we are also touched by the intensity of the moment; Cait believes that such moments make all the pain of the rest of her life bearable. The scene is quickly

tempered by the completely realistic and conniving Baba who has given away Mrs. Brady's ring to Cynthia. Cait is so captivated by the idea of being in love that she is unable to see the reality of the situation, or of Mr Gentleman; for this "perfect" moment she is truly happy.

The stifling quality of Cait's relationship with Mr Gentleman is reinforced by the novel's structure which constantly contrasts her relationship with Mr Gentleman to other men - Jack, Hickey and, later, Harry. When Mr Gentleman is mentioned for the first time, Cait is with Jack, another old man who lusts after her. Cait's love scene with Mr Gentleman alluded to above, is further contrasted by her mad encounter with Jack Holland. Jack, like Hickey, knows the secrets of the Brady house; the drinking and the resulting problems with money. He has a crush on Mrs Brady, (and was once caught flirting under the table with her), which he has extended to Cait. Unlike Hickey and Mr Gentleman, Jack's words and presence do not comfort Cait; he is associated with disaster, dust, stale porter and things that are worn, faded, broken and frayed. In fact, Cait thinks Jack is jealous of Hickey's position of trust with Mrs Brady. Jack is tied emotionally and financially to his old, sick mother and does not have the sexual appeal of Mr Gentleman so that his attempts to get young girls to kiss him are more of an annoyance than a threat. After Mama's death, he attempts to maintain his

position by paying to have masses said for Mrs. Brady, by buying the farm and giving Cait presents. His letter to Cait at school suggests that he sees in Cait a young Mama who will fulfill his need for a long-suffering housekeeper. This situation is brought to a pitch when Cait visits him at Christmas. Jack proposes and tries to kiss Cait. The proposal is made more ridiculous by having it immediately follow a scene where Jack's mother catches on fire. The air has not even cleared! Cait runs, tripping on the dog, unable to tell Jack the truth. In the first section of The Country Girls, Cait also runs from Jack's kisses and trips over a mouse-trap. This time she runs straight into the arms of Mr Gentleman.

Cait's relationship with Mr Gentleman is futile and founded on make-believe; he is an older, married man. Mr Gentleman fulfills Cait's daydreams by presenting her with a watch⁵⁷ but adds to her guilt. Like the watch, their love must remain hidden. Cait is repulsed by the attentions of one old man and enamoured by the other. Jack sees Cait as a child, he pulls her toward innocence. Mr Gentleman longs for a future with an older Cait whom he can seduce. Cait sees the distortion of Jack's attentions but sees nothing wrong with Mr Gentleman's flirtation. By having these love scenes follow each other in quick succession the sterility

⁵⁷ On their first outing in Limerick, Cait looked longingly at watches in a shop window.

of the affair with Mr Gentleman is made more apparent.

The more Cait tries to be worldly and sophisticated the more she appears immature, innocent and incurably romantic. She dreams of "young men. Romance. Love and things"(CG,154) that are innocent. On the date with Harry and Reginald, Cait gets drunk to avoid the truth. She does not want to pay the price of a good dinner. Cait hates Harry because she fears sexual advances. She is still as incapable of expressing her desires as she was with Jack Holland. She cannot slap Reggie's face. Cait's system of perceiving reality is extremely artificial and restrictive:

The lawn and the moonlight had dignity. Life was beautiful if one only met the beautiful people. Life was beautiful and full of promise. The promise one felt when one looked at a summer garden of hazy blue flowers at the foot of an incredibly beautiful fountain.(CG,165)

Cait wants a man who will let her live in illusion, with only perfect moments. Once again O'Brien places this scene with Reginald beside one with Mr Gentleman. Mr Gentleman is an old man - older than Harry, but Cait does not see his approaches as abnormal or disgusting. She reproaches Baba for dating a married man but does not apply this to herself. Cait is a hypocrite. For the first time Cait sees that Mr Gentleman is old, but as always she refuses to acknowledge this fact. She cannot accept that his body is aging and corrupting so she fades into a daydream:

And though it was nice to sit there facing the sea, I thought of us as being somewhere else. In the woods, close together, beside a little stream. A

secret place. A green place with ferns all about.(CG,167)
 Even when things make her happy she fantasizes to make them even better. She criticizes Mr Gentleman for slipping away from her "just when things were perfect" but this is precisely what she herself is doing. Cait misses her first Mass because of Mr Gentleman. They are shy when together, he reminds her of a melon "cool and cold and bloodless and refreshing." She is not at ease with him, as she was with Hickey. The sexual advances of Harry serve to emphasis the disparity of Cait's relationship with Mr Gentleman.

The careful Mr Gentleman plans an excursion to Vienna to seduce his virgin nymph. Cait is suitably frightened and impressed:

He said that I looked appalled. I wasn't appalled really. Just nervous, and sad in some way, because the end of my girlhood was near.(CG,173)

Cait seems to have created a string of events that is becoming more bizarre. In preparation for this trip they undress and show each other their bodies; the tension is almost unbearable. Without his clothes, Mr Gentleman is not so distinguished, he is ridiculous. Cait, who usually has no sense of humour, ends the strain by laughing. Everything points to the incongruity of this love affair; the borrowed, thirty year old nightdress, Cait telling the woman in the shop that she is waiting for her father. Although Cait is able to see the flaws of Mr Gentleman and their relationship, just as she did with Hickey, she prefers to

fantasize and ignore the truth. Even though their moments together are no longer perfect she wants to believe her dreams are reality: "I loved him more than I would ever love a man again." (CG,173)⁸⁸

Their intercepted liaison ends the first novel. The relationship remains artificial, based on illusion by both parties involved. It never reaches the depth of love of Hickey or the honesty and concern of Jack, nor is it as blatantly sexual as the relationship with Harry. Mr Gentleman shows himself to be a dreamer and an innocent, just like Cait. His age has not ensured his wisdom. But their affair has also given Cait some moments of extreme pleasure and a type of release from the sadness of her daily life. Cait will submit herself to another man with "loveless eyes" who will prove to be the mirror image of Mr Gentleman.

* * * * *

Sexual fulfillment - "My mother is right. All men are pigs." (Baba,GE,178)

In The Country Girls the men are fathers, pseudo lovers, not developed in terms of sexual relationships and mature love but those of other emotions; guilt, shame,

⁸⁸ This statement reflects Cait's dramatic sense and her tendency to exaggerate. It is also extremely sad because what she says is so true; no passion will ever exceed her obsession as a very young girl in love, no matter how displaced that passion may be.

worthlessness, innocence. Girl with Green Eyes will show how the two girls are thrilled and tortured by the results of their awakening sexuality.⁵⁷

In the first section of Girl with Green Eyes the main attention of Cait and Baba is men, and the lack of them. The first date described, Baba's failed liaison with a cosmetic salesman, shows the level of their commitment, their desire and their amazing innocence:

'Feck any samples? I could do with a bit of suntan stuff for my legs.'

'How could I take samples with him sitting there in the car?'

'Distract him. Get him interested in your bust or the sunset, or something.'

Baba is unreasonable. She thinks people are more stupid than they are. Those flashy fellows who sell things and own shops, they can probably count and add up.(GE,7)

Cait and Baba are more concerned with the way a man looks than the way he feels, with what he can give them materially, not emotionally. They feel their lives are plagued by the absence of men and "no luck" with those few they do encounter. Their pursuit of men and love is immature but it is also intense and obsessive:

Some mornings I used to get up convinced that I would meet a new, wonderful man. I used to make my

⁵⁷ Baba's love life in both The Country Girls and Girl with Green Eyes is used predominantly for contrast. There is no elaboration of her relationship with Reggie or Tom Mead. Both are married men, which allows for comparison to Cait's affairs. Baba's desire to be fast, contrasts with Cait's fear of sex. Baba's internal life and the effect that men have on her is not developed until Girls in their Married Bliss.

face up specially and take short breaths to prepare myself for the excitement of it.(GE,7)

Eugene Gaillard provides Cait with an outlet for her obsessive passion. Eugene is a "classy" and "strange man with a sallow face" who has an "odd expression of contempt." He is tall and reminds Cait of her father.⁶⁰ Their introduction does not bode well. Cait is embarrassed and is dressed in "rubber boots and a feather hat," exactly as she was when abandoned by Mr Gentleman. Physically, Eugene has "compassionate" eyes, a "thin, religious look" and a hard face that also recalls Mr Gentleman. Twice she must acknowledge her ignorance: she has never heard of Eugene's film or his anecdote about girls in plastic macs. Cait is ashamed at "knowing so little." Lack of understanding will be the enduring mark of their relationship. Even at this initial stage, Cait is able to both see Eugene's faults and fantasize about him. She puts him in an exalted position:

He wasn't like anyone I knew; his face was long and had a gray color. It reminded me of a saint's face carved out of gray stone which I saw in the church every Sunday.(GE,11)

Cait is about to be smitten: "I had that paralyzing sensation in my legs which I hadn't felt since I'd parted from Mr Gentleman."(GE,12) What one old gray man has begun,

⁶⁰ Here is another of those interesting details that do not seem to connect or be 'correct' in the context of the other novels - I did not know that Dada was tall! In The Country Girls it was of no importance. Here it provides (is created to provide?) a link between the past oppression of the father and the future oppression from Eugene. Cait will allow Eugene to become a domineering father to her.

another will finish.

The early courtship of Eugene and Cait in almost every way reproduces Cait's relationship with Mr Gentleman. Her first afternoon tea with Eugene recalls her afternoon in Limerick with Mr Gentleman. Both courtships begin in the winter. Just as Cait and Mr Gentleman made a journey to watch the sea, Cait will go with Eugene to watch waves. Although Cait is no longer a child, as she was with Mr Gentleman, Eugene holds her hand "very naturally, the way you'd hold a child's hand or your mother's." (GE, 25) Eugene and Mr Gentleman are both outcasts in the communities where they live. Cait has "grown out of" the dream of Mr Gentleman but she is really only replacing him with Eugene; Eugene will become Cait's "dark-faced God" and she will worship him with the same obsessive idolatry as she did Mr Gentleman. Like Mr Gentleman, Eugene will be a secret that Cait does not share with Baba.

Part of the courtship with Mr Gentleman involved playing games - Mr Gentleman in the role of father and Cait as the daughter. The role playing with Eugene is more complex.⁶¹ At first Cait and Eugene play cat and mouse with Cait spending endless hours waiting outside bookshops in the

⁶¹ Throughout Cait's relationship with Eugene there are numerous literary references that characterize the behaviour the two lovers are exhibiting at the time. Eugene says Cait is like Anna Karenina. Simon refers to Eugene as Heathcliff. Baba calls Eugene, Chekhov. These allusions add to the lack of reality of their relationship - it is play and make-believe.

hope of seeing Eugene, while he insists that he does not want to get involved. But the game that shapes most of their relationship is that of Pygmalion, with Cait in the role of Galatea/Liza, believing everything Eugene says; and Eugene starring as Pygmalion/Henry Higgins, the teacher. Eugene teaches Cait how to make tea, how to speak properly, how to brush her teeth, how to dress and has her change her make-up, her shoes and even her name. He jokes that she has no sense of humour, he will "give" her one. He generally treats her like a child. In the beginning Eugene often gives Cait the guidance that she never had from her own parents. He gives her good advice, listens to her fears and encourages her to talk and not to apologize. Cait is an zealous student who mimics everything he does in her eagerness to be what he wants her to be. But Eugene is not Cait's surrogate father any more than Mr Gentleman. Eugene wants her to be his lover. Both old men allow Cait to remain a child, to spoil her and to prevent her from growing up.

Cait has "never done more than kiss Mr Gentleman" and she wants this same innocent relationship with Eugene. Cait is afraid of sex⁶² and particularly the potential

⁶² Cait's feelings about sex stem from her parents. She is ashamed of any thoughts she has about her parents' sexuality and is certain that sexual favours were a burden to her mother. She had "been brought up to think of [sex] as something unmentionable which a woman had to pretend to like to please a husband." (GE, 49-50) Baba tries to talk to Cait about sex but Cait cannot even talk about it with her

results, babies. Their first unsuccessful attempt at sexual intercourse is marked by shame and misunderstanding. Eugene's seduction of Cait parallels his treatment of her out of bed; he teases her, makes her feel childish and silly, and makes her cry. Sex becomes a weapon of manipulation which Eugene uses as an excuse to not make love to her: "You want to involve me, that's all. You know that once I've made love to you, I shall feel responsible for you." (GE,107) When Cait finally does have her first sexual experience, her reactions are characteristic of her entire relationship with Eugene:

The first thrust pained, but the pain inspired me, and I lay there astonished with myself as I kissed his bare shoulder... I felt no pleasure, just some strange satisfaction that I had done what I was born to do. (GE,134)

Physically, Cait takes a long time to unite with Eugene; emotionally this will never happen. Cait refuses to see that Eugene does not want a companion. He wants a lover to satisfy him in bed, a baby machine to replace the little girl he has lost, and a student, an innocent, that he can shape to fit his needs.

A tie with Eugene returns Cait to her old dilemma--face the truth or develop a delusion. On their first brief evening together Cait is unable to enjoy herself because she is already anxious about his going and is suspicious about another woman. She ignores the "bald patch on the very top

best friend.

of his head" and his commitments⁴³ in favour of a vision that will fit her romantic ideal: "I suppose lots of women have died for him." (GE,14) Her discovery that Eugene is married and warnings from Mrs Burns, Joanna⁴⁴ and her father⁴⁵ about his integrity do not stop her from going to Eugene's home to visit. She recognizes Eugene's despair—his belief in "failure, struggle, and achievement and failure..." and his obsession with planting trees in an attempt at some permanence; he reminds her of a turtle "laying her eggs on the sand and then laboring her way back to the sea, crying with exhaustion as she went." (GE,44) His face becomes "hard, unforgiving," and "unyielding" but she continues to idolize him and is obsessed with thoughts of losing him.⁴⁶ Even his cold, condescending love letter is

⁴³ Eugene leaves the dinner abruptly in order to take someone to the airport. Later, we must also wonder if it was Laura that he escorted that first night when Cait was so jealous.

⁴⁴ O'Brien uses Joanna's poor use of English to make a clear comment about Eugene. Joanna says Eugene might be a "spy or a meaniac." (GE,39) He turns out to be even meaner than Joanna might have imagined.

⁴⁵ At the end of The Country Girls, a letter of warning is received by Cait. It is anonymous and there is never any indication as to the source. The same ambiguity occurs in Girl with Green Eyes and the letter from Dada about Eugene — we never know where the information comes from.

⁴⁶ Cait's obsession with Eugene (and earlier with Mr Gentleman) compares to Cait's story of the woman with long hair who washed it every night and measured it every week. "But it gave her no pleasure because she worried about it too much." (GE,22) Cait's relationship with Eugene always concerns anxiety: "I couldn't balance the pleasure of

greeted with joy. Cait desperately tries to please Eugene, to understand his friends, his music and his poetry.

Cait's desire to be everything to Eugene, as she once thought she was to her mother, makes her suspicious and jealous. Several times Baba flirts with Eugene causing Cait to be afraid and angry.⁴⁷ Cait is even jealous of Eugene's love for his daughter. But it is Laura, Eugene's estranged wife, who haunts all of Cait's happiness: "Always when I was with him I thought of Laura, just as I always thought of my mother when I was with Dada." (GE,110) Laura seems to be everything that Cait is not - she paints, she creates, she thinks and, unlike Cait, she believes that happiness is her right. Cait's jealousy and fears prevent her from seeing how cruel and rude and condescending Eugene is to her.

Although Cait wants a man who is "like a Christ" (GE,123) whom she can worship and who will protect her, Eugene is actually pompous and treats her like a pouting child, with no degree of seriousness. His house has barred windows and will become Cait's new prison, replacing her home and the convent.⁴⁸ Cait's treatment of Eugene

seeing him and talking at the same moment." (GE,13) "Even in sleep I worried about losing him." (GE,36)

⁴⁷ See Appendix-Four for a note on love triangles.

⁴⁸ Cait's experiences when she returns to the village where she grew up, require a comparison between Eugene and relationships of the past. Cait sees Mr Gentleman again and is hurt by what she sees as falseness on his part. She wants to hurt him. Jack Holland confirms his depth of love for Cait by helping her to return to Eugene. Jack still

compares to that of Dada. Cait spends as much time worrying about not upsetting Eugene as she once worried about and feared her father. She tries to make Eugene feel guilty, a pattern she has learned from her parents: "I wanted to look awful so that Eugene would realize how wretched I felt." (GE,145) Cait and Eugene do not have a relationship based on truth and mutual respect. Like Dada and Mama, Cait and Eugene spend a lot of time talking but very little time communicating with each other about their internal feelings. Cait wants Eugene to share things with her, but she is not capable of this level of honesty and he does not want to try; Eugene always flees from a row, is proud and does not "wish to share his trouble with anyone." (GE,112) Cait is deceitful with Eugene, just as she was when she went through her father's pockets. Cait wants melodrama; she wants Eugene to confess, to confide, to be contrite, as Dada used to be with Mama. And she begins to use her mother's criteria to manipulate Eugene. Cait finally reaches the exact same position of frustration, despair and anger that she expressed to Dada after leaving the convent - hatred: "for that hour I hated [Eugene]." (GE,152)⁶⁷

sees Cait as a child, fifteen years before, but Cait now has developed a gentle understanding of Jack and his love for her and Mama. Cait needs hindsight to recognize the truth.

⁶⁷ Baba's actions confirm this comparison between Eugene and fathers. In The Country Girls Baba, angry at her own father, aims at his picture with an imaginary gun and shoots. In Girl with Green Eyes, Baba repeats this same scene but with Eugene: "She shot at the portrait of Eugene

The relationship with Mr Gentleman seemed like a wonderful dream from the very beginning; their planned liaison might have made that dream come true. Cait's mock marriage with Eugene has the reality of sexual union and the possibility of a future life and home with children, at least in the developing stages of their affair. But Cait's instincts will not allow her to totally immerse herself in delusion. As wonderful as her dreams seem to be, things are changing and she knows it:

From afar I scented trouble and difficulties, but I could not arm myself against him, as I loved him too much...I could feel my attitude to him changing, like the colors of the changing sky.(GE,147)

Although Cait still wants to believe in the "warm hum of love" she is aware of many problems with Eugene and their relationship. When she is not distressed, she is still able to ignore Eugene's real personality, but there is something missing. Cait looks longingly at some young hitch-hikers, the same age as she is, exploring the world with no worries and no obligations. Although she insists that she loves being with Eugene and being in his bed, she is equally aware that she misses "going to the pictures with Baba."(GE,139) This dissatisfaction eventually colours her attitude to Eugene. His stories now seem cold and inhuman and his treatment of her demeaning. He does nothing to encourage Cait's personal growth. She sees the problem as her mother

over the fire."(GE,143)

would have seen it, persecution by a man: "For a while I welcomed the fact that one day I would be old and dried, and no man would torment my heart." (GE, 153)

Eugene mourns the loss of the simple Cait. All he sees now is a girl who cries at every little thing. Eugene still takes Cait to his bed; the last night that they make love is close and tender, followed in the morning by Eugene washing her hair, outside. But, these joyous moments are brief. Eugene refuses to say that he loves Cait,⁷⁰ and it seems that he does not. Eugene believes that he now sees "the difference between fantasy and reality" (GE, 156) in regard to Cait; the difference between the way she seems to be (or the way he thought she was) and the way she is.

Cait's increasing sense of distance and lack of involvement in this relationship makes her feel hurt and makes her want to hurt back; she plots revenge. Just like a child, she plans to run away and force Eugene to find her in a feeble attempt to inflict guilt. Cait is appalled by her sudden insights:

⁷⁰ When questioned about his love for Cait, Eugene responds; "Ask me that in ten years' time, when I know you better." (GE, 137) This is the same response that Molly gave to Cait concerning Molly's impending wedding. With Molly the statement emphasized her mature and caring attitude, her belief in commitment and the realization that daily life and love can be difficult. When Eugene says the same words it strengthens the idea that Cait is a clinging vine, demanding rather than giving. But it also points to the coldness of Eugene and his dedication to be aloof and untouchable.

I felt that I had never known him. He was a stranger, a mad martyr nailed to his chair, thinking and sighing and smoking...It was such a shock to know that he could love me at night and yet seem to become a stranger in daytime.(GE,167,171)

She still is trying desperately to convince Eugene to love her, to rescue her and to dote on her. Cait ignores the fact that his behaviour to her is increasingly rude, arrogant and humiliating:

I try to educate you, teach you how to speak, how to deal with people, build up your confidence, but that is not enough. You want to own me...You are incapable of thinking.(GE,173,174)

Eugene tells Cait that she is like a stone, incapable of feeling, but it is actually Eugene who is gray and granite-like. His effect on Cait has been to ruin any self-confidence she may have had.

Girl with Green Eyes ends with Cait planning to go to London to prove her independence. To the bitter end she gives Eugene every opportunity to come and rescue her, to plead his love and devotion. She still believes that "once he saw [her], he would love [her] and want to protect [her] again." (GE,182) She leaves a trail for him to follow but he refuses to acknowledge the bait.⁷¹ O'Brien portrays Cait's hysterical despair, her inability to accept any comfort, and her amazing strength to hold to her false hope against every

⁷¹ When Cait arrives at Joanna's, Baba shows her consistent support of her friend by immediately going out in search of Eugene. This contrasts to Cait's selfish behaviour earlier when Baba thought she was pregnant and Cait only provided guilt and lectures.

conceivable proof that she will not see Eugene again, that he does not want her. There is also an expression of Cait's resentment for her condition: "I was so gentle and now I am a wild, debased person because of some damn man." (GE, 181) In London she looks back and wonders: "I ask myself why I ever left him, why I didn't cling on tight, the way the barnacles cling to the rocks." (GE, 191) Cait has tried to do this emotionally by attaching herself to a man who does not promote her growth. Like all the men who came before, Jack, Hickey, Mr Gentleman, it is the little girl that they like. It is the little girl that they have a relationship with, not the young woman. Although it is painful and against her will Cait must leave Eugene to save herself, to discover herself, to grow.

The long period in the novel where we see only Cait and Eugene, becomes as monotonous for the reader, as it was for Cait. But O'Brien does capture the extreme bliss of such a mindless enchantment on those days when it is good. Even an affair like the one that Cait has with Eugene brings joys that cannot be dismissed by separation. The guaranteed pain of the separation that seems to always follow, can be healed with time. Perhaps this is why O'Brien gives the final words about love to Eugene:

We all leave one another. We die, we change - it's mostly change - we outgrow our best friends; but even if I do leave you, I will have passed on to you something of myself; you will be a different person because of knowing me; it's inescapable. (GE, 192)

Girl with Green Eyes chronicles the birth and pain of a relationship. O'Brien pinpoints the weaknesses that will result in hatred, pain and a sense of vulnerability and loss. She also captures the amazing exuberance of the initial stages of falling in love. The final novel in the trilogy will examine the death of this relationship.

* * * * *

The joys and agonies of adult relationships - "What did you marry a man like that for?" (MB, 157)

In the last novel of the trilogy, Girls in their Married Bliss, as O'Brien begins to change her focus from the external to the internal, more attention is given to the effect that a relationship has on the character rather than the movement of the relationship itself. In the first two novels there was little overlap in relationships; certainly ones from the past influenced the present relationship, but primarily the focus was on the singular obsession of the moment. Beginning in Girls in their Married Bliss, the concentration on the internal, on the self, and production of much more complex patterns and permutations is accomplished by having the character involved in several relationships simultaneously. The character that is the object of the love is less prominent; the love relationship is important because of the penetrating effect it has on the internal life of the character that loves. In Girl with Green Eyes, Cait defines herself and is defined by her

relationship with Eugene. In Girls in their Married Bliss Kate has more complexity, more roles than just that of Eugene's wife. Relationships are one means of expression rather than a symbolic statement of the self.⁷²

Kate and Baba, at the beginning of the novel, have marriages that are less than ideal. The details of both courtships and both marriage ceremonies are given by Baba (throughout this novel the relationship of Baba and Frank will be contrasted to the relationship of Kate and Eugene). The pregnant Kate has married Eugene in a ceremony that is marked by bickering and insults. Baba says that Kate's life is "like a chapter of the inquisition. [Eugene] wanted her to stay indoors all the time and nurse his haemorrhoids." (MB,14) Married life for Kate is associated with winter and silence. Their relationship is insipid and colorless just like the meals they eat; fish and cauliflower. Kate is still trying to "change, reform" and be the way Eugene wants her to be. His insults are becoming more hurtful; he deliberately does not give her a Christmas present and suggests that he would like to have children by other women. Baba's marriage has fulfilled the fortune teller's prediction in Girl with Green Eyes, that she will

⁷² In the very first novel published after the trilogy, August is a Wicked Month, the character of Ellen has difficulty balancing the roles of sexy woman and lover, mother, employee, ex-wife and independent person. Sexual relationships bring pain and joy, but are used primarily to explore her multi-faceted personality and her needs.

marry a rich man. Frank Durack is an uneducated but very financially successful builder who is a show-off. He is obsessed with material possessions and appearances and by what other people think of him. From their first meeting Baba knows she will marry him:

Anybody that vulnerable is nice, at least that's how I feel...I knew that I'd end up with him; he being rich and a slob and the sort of man who would buy you seasick tablets before you travelled.(MB,10,11)

During their courtship Baba feels sorry for him and treats him with kindness. The over-generous and flamboyant wedding of Baba and Frank is a contrast to the cheapness of Eugene at his wedding. The wedding and honeymoon of Frank and Baba is loud, noisy, and ostentatious, complete with a voice-trainer for Frank and a Balenciaga gown for Baba. Although Baba likes Frank's money and "his slob ways" she does not want to go to bed with him. Both women find their marriages limiting rather than fulfilling and look to other men to fill the void in their lives.

Baba seeks sexual satisfaction through an intrigue with a bohemian drummer, Harvey. Harvey is as pretentious in his studied simplicity as Frank is in his attempt to appear cultured. The sexually deprived Baba is enamoured by Harvey's "low conniving voice" and his forward manner. Baba's afternoon of promiscuity is a comic scene of heightened sensual awareness. Baba, the sexual hurricane, is disturbed by Cooney's presence, by the possibility of the bruises that will be left by Harvey drumming on her body,

and by the length of time he is taking in seducing her. She is brought to a pitch of desperation at all levels; Cooney quits, Harvey gorges himself on the food and still they are not near her bedroom. When Harvey finally does accompany Baba to the bedroom, the encounter is fraught with misunderstanding, lack of humour and lack of communication. Harvey is an egomaniac, trying to make an impression. Baba remains sexually frustrated. Baba insults him, he "gets virile" and finishes the sex act in four minutes flat, then asks her to promise that she will not get pregnant! The final catastrophe comes when he leaves and does not even have enough money to pay for the cab.⁷³ Baba has had absolutely nothing go right for her:

I felt awful, I can't tell you how awful I felt. One thing I knew, I was going to be saddled with all this guilt and I not having a bit of enjoyment out of it, only exertion. (MB,68)

Harvey disappears and Baba is left with her guilt, her frustration and an unwanted pregnancy.

Kate and Duncan are "attracted to each other the way hundreds of people are, out of hunger." (MB,20) Kate feels deprived of love and understanding and unlike Baba, does not want a sexual relationship. She wants someone to cherish her, to listen to her and to love her. Duncan is a

⁷³ This scene is clearly comic and should be considered in light of the discussion in Chapter-Two on the developing comic voice. It also anticipates the comic seduction scene in August is a Wicked Month referred to in Footnote 53.

politician with a wife and five children who is flamboyant in his gestures, his language and his praise: "'I love you' he said, even before he said hello." (MB, 25) Baba finds going to bed with Harvey dissatisfying because it is purely physical, there is no talk. Kate and Duncan wear out their infatuation with talk. Both are married and feel guilty about their relationship, even though it remains platonic, and this guilt is quickly diminishing the joy of their times together. Both Kate and Duncan are aware of the risks that they are taking and mutually decide to end their meetings. Kate is left with the sadness of another failed relationship and the pain that she has given a prized gift from Eugene, a gilt skeleton leaf,⁷⁴ to Duncan and that it cannot be recovered. The fragility of the leaf matches the state of Kate's life. Later, when Kate seeks Duncan's help, his real lack of commitment to her is revealed by the cold, sterile and formal nature of his language. Just as Harvey's touch left Baba cold, Duncan's words are empty for Kate.

The coldness and distance of both relationships is underlined by the relative anonymity of Harvey and Duncan. The novel has to be read very carefully to even detect their names. Only after Duncan has left the novel and Kate confesses to Eugene, is Duncan actually named. Harvey is referred to as the drummer, by his occupation, rather than

⁷⁴ The word play of "guilt" and "gilt" is used to draw attention to Kate's relationship to both Eugene and Duncan.

by his relationship to Baba. Ultimately there is no relationship between the women and these men. Physically Kate and Baba have gone through the motions of having an affair, but internally they remain untouched except by the pain of disappointment.

Kate's marriage to Eugene has become unnerving and cold. There is no longer any ability for compassion or communication from either side; "at this point neither of them was capable of listening." (MB,36) Kate is appalled that no matter how hard she tries to make a fresh start or to recreate what they once had, that she cannot change the pattern. Despite plans for a new self and a new outlook to purge her of guilt, Kate remains rude and quarrelsome. Kate and Eugene still share the same bed, but they are never in it together; their union is only a pretense. After "the last look of pity" passes between them, Eugene "detaches" himself from her:

He reminded her then of a lightning conductor, tuned only to the elements, indifferent to people...The [final fight] was her scene, not theirs. He was apart from it; as he said in jest, he did not attach himself to living people. (MB,31,37)

The final fight in their married lives together is reminiscent of an earlier scene with Dada, in The Country Girls - there is a great unleashing of emotion, too long pent up, but no resolution. Eugene has dismissed Kate from his life and she cannot touch him, cannot make him change his mind about her fitness as a wife and mother. He has

dismissed her with a well written, properly dated and punctuated "obituary".⁷⁹ Kate's idolized husband, "her buoy, her teacher, the good god from whose emanations she gained all"(MB,41) has crashed from his pedestal. She is upset that he is "as small and mean and obsessional as herself."(MB,38) Her sudden insight informs on her own self and is not merely an observation about Eugene:

For the first time she felt some intimation of the enormity of his buried hatred for her, for women, for human follies.(MB,39)

The novel concentrates more on the internal effect on Kate than the literal fact that the marriage is over.

Baba does not share Kate's delusion about her marriage. Baba does not think that her feeling for Frank is true unadulterated love; watching Eugene and Kate fight, Baba comments "if this is how true love ends I'm glad I've never had the experience."(MB,53) Kate's marriage to Eugene is represented by the contents of Kate's suitcase when she leaves home: "curtain rings, empty perfume bottles, old envelopes, broken hats."(MB,41) The marriage of Baba and Frank is better characterized by the incident of Baba's navel:

Millions of women getting hit every day, and I myself forced to strip once on the imprimatur of my husband because three of his pals bet I had no

⁷⁹ It is fitting to the tone of their relationship that Eugene should find the evidence of Kate's guilt in an old purse that has been wrapped in the nightgown in which she conceived Cash. In the end, the only thing that connects them in any way is Cash.

navel. How could I have functioned without a navel.(MB,40)

Frank is a ruthless business man, possessed by the desire to look elegant and sophisticated. He tries to buy his respectability the same way he tries to buy friends. Baba likes to spend Frank's money but otherwise does not find married life "pleasing". Other than his money, her attitude toward Frank is one of annoyance or indifference:

'Did you marry him for money?' [Kate] said. I said I didn't know.
'Do you hate him?' she said. I didn't know that either.
'I don't hate him, I don't love him, I put up with him and he puts up with me'...(MB,105-6)

Like Kate, Baba reaches the point where she stares across Frank's office desk and sees her husband as a stranger:

I could not believe that he was my husband and that I sometimes slept near him and had seen him sick and drunk and in all sorts of conditions.(MB,111-12)

What touches both Kate and Baba is not the momentary concern with the threat of physical separation. They are horrified by the emotional separation that has already occurred.

The pain and suffering that physical separation causes are reflected by the crisis of the internal self. This is made most apparent by the nervous breakdown of Kate. Her initial response to separation is to pity Eugene, return Cash to his care and feel that she is responsible. She is consumed with shame and plans to make a final appeal to Eugene, "to his conscience", to take her back and return to the country where they will start a new home, "their last

home, their stronghold, their coffin."(MB,93) But she cannot reach Eugene:

He was free of her. Marked of course, but free in a way that she was not. She was still joined by fear, by sexual necessity, by what she knew as love.(MB,97)

Both are absorbed by self-interest, they do not communicate. In Girl with Green Eyes, Cait's pain is the result of physical separation from Eugene. In Girls in their Married Bliss the distance of separation between them is made more painful because they are looking right into each other's eyes. The knowledge that their separation is permanent, beyond repair, leaves Kate with the same feeling of doom and being frozen that she experienced just before she learned of her mother's death. Just as her mother once absorbed all Cait's thoughts, Eugene now sucks "every thought and breath of [Kate's] waking moments."(MB,100) The loss of Eugene forces her to consider her internal self:

She knew danger as she had never known it; the danger of being out in the world alone, having lost the girlish appeal that might entice some other man to father her. It wasn't just age; she was branded in a way that other men would spot a mile away, and though still young, she had not the energy to coax, and woo, and feed, and love, and stroke and cosset another man, beginning from the very beginning again.(MB,98)

The loss of Eugene is not as horrifying as the thought of spending the rest of her life with only herself.

Baba must also search inside herself when confronted with a violent Frank who has just learned that his wife is pregnant by another man. She does not shrink from Frank,

but does her best to explain her frustrations, both sexual and emotional. And Frank responds. Although they are still not communicating well - it is difficult for both to express their pain - they are both trying and both talking. Baba could easily devastate Frank, by explaining the circumstances and the location of her seduction, but she does not. Frank could hit her to relieve his anger, but he does not. Baba must confront the problem of lack of sexual understanding in her marriage; she has to consider that her desire to have a man make her "half faint" during sexual intercourse may be a "daft notion". Her insight, her moment of sudden awareness is the recognition of the need for companionship:

When it came down to fundamentals, he had no one. All by himself and that brothel he went to. There was just us, him and me. Allies, conspirers, liars together...I blessed myself. The visible sign of the cross. Salvage began.(MB,117)

Baba reaches a resolution by relieving herself of the oppression of Frank, and accepting him as a husband. There is no fairy-tale suggestion that the rest of the marriage will be without problems, but there is the hope that they can make it work.

Baba must surrender her sexual fantasies to reach resolution; Kate has to be sexually indulgent for her healing to begin. She has "forgotten the pleasure of watching a man become attracted to her"(MB,144) and must establish a sense of sexuality in order to alleviate her

self-doubt. Kate's encounter with the boy from the laundry is her first attempt. She sees his advances as sheer sex, bestial, and as she has always done in the past, she runs. She meets the playful, good-looking Roger⁷⁶ at a party and willingly accompanies him to his prison-like loft. During their sexual play she abandons any notion of falling madly in love with him, giving him "false proportions" and freezes her heart in order to remain aloof. Kate has finally been able to separate physical sexual union from emotional love. She accepts that she will never see him again and that she will survive.

But Kate's real victory comes through the unconditional love that she has for her son, Cash. Cash is a precocious child, innocent, intelligent and charming to everyone. Eugene would "go mad to lose him" and Baba is moved to tears by him. Kate has felt guilty because of the child, has tried to manipulate him and has had nightmares about the responsibility of his care. Kate tries very hard to make a home for him away from Eugene; she imagines a snug comfortable home full of the things that she would like him to have. When Cash is timid, shy and fearful, Kate tries to "give him shelter and to revive the solidity that had gone out of their lives." (MB, 132) Eugene thinks that he has won the game, that he has taken Cash from a woman who

⁷⁶ Again, Roger's name is not mentioned often, as a way of stressing the lack of intimacy of their union.

would have ruined the son just as surely as Eugene is convinced that she ruined the father. Eugene insists that his life and the life of Cash are more important than Kate's needs and desires. But Cash has touched Kate:

He had reminded her more than she'd ever known of the terror of being young, of that fearful state when one knows that the strange, creepy things in the hallway are waiting to get one.(MB,132)

Kate does not want Cash to remain this way. She wants him to grow, to not be burdened by his mother's past, to have a life of his own. The charm of this child makes the separation even worse, but Kate, in the end, lets him go. Kate's greatest moments of joy in this novel have been with Cash. Not fighting with Eugene to have him returned to her is an unselfish act, not one of weakness.

Women at times in the earlier novels supported each other. In The Country Girls, Martha, Baba and Cait "huddled in over the fire, and talked the way women who like each other can talk, once the men are out of sight."(CG,97) Cait is friendly with Molly, Maura, Joanna and Anna. At the end of the first two novels Cait and Baba are together, usually holding hands, and looking to their futures. But at the end of Girls in their Married Bliss they come together with a new need and a new bond. They are not just holding hands and looking to the future, they are supporting each other against the terrible pain and suffering that they have had to endure. Together they share a new kind of knowledge and acceptance and forgiveness. They hold onto each other

because "nothing is a dreadful thing to hold on to ."77

77 The Love Object , p.41.

EPILOGUE

The trilogy of The Country Girls is the starting point of O'Brien's myth. The work of some novelists seems to develop in a linear fashion - each subsequent work building on what has gone before. O'Brien's work certainly has this same motion, returning to themes of previous works and considering them again, from a different viewpoint. But a better image for her complete work is a wheel, with the trilogy as the hub, holding things together. Most of her work seems to be intensely autobiographical, always reaching back to the Irish homeland, to the roots.

O'Brien's work becomes more urgent, passionate and compassionate as the voice develops more clarity, compression, precision and sharpness of thought. Plots become less complicated (at times it seems that O'Brien abandons plot altogether) and fewer characters are involved as the voice becomes more concentrated on the feminine internal life. Even the non-fiction works show an economy of words. This seems to be a reflection of O'Brien's growing refusal to make any statement before she has distilled her ideas to their simplest, their essential form. The continual reworking of a few themes and images, most of them introduced in the trilogy, combines with the need to recreate and recapture the past, not out of any feeling of

nostalgia but to validate and define the present, and to make possible a connected future.

APPENDIX-ONE - Flower imagery in the trilogy - "We were in our rented-flower era." (MB,47)

Throughout the trilogy artificial flowers are used to emphasize a situation that is sterile or in some way incomplete, unnatural. In Girl with Green Eyes, when Cait finds herself back in her home village, against her will and trying to escape, she seeks out Baba's mother for help. But Martha will not help; their conversation turns to "plastic roses that had been sprayed with some sort of perfume." (GE,79) Later in this same novel, Cait occupies herself "dusting a rubber plant on a summer's day when nice flowers bloomed in the garden outside." (GE,178) She is waiting for Eugene to come and rescue her, and, of course, he does not come. Girls in their Married Bliss uses plastic flowers to symbolize the sterility of the girls' marriages and to capture the pretentiousness of the newly-rich. The atmosphere of this novel is frequently characterized by plastic tulips, like those one finds at funerals and the rented flowers that adorn Baba's luxurious home. All of these images stem from the first novel, from the sense of incompleteness that Cait feels because she cannot put flowers on the grave of Mama; there is no grave. The quotation in the text (Chapter-One, 49) brings this imagery to completion. Symbolically, Kate is beginning to confront

her unresolved feelings about her mother's death.

APPENDIX-TWO - Development of minor characters - "I'm not a bad match," [Tom Duggan] said. "I've a pump in the yard, a bull, and a brother a priest. What more could a woman want?"(GE,102)

In the later works of O'Brien there are fewer characters than in the trilogy, which abounds with minor characters. Particularly in The Country Girls, these secondary characters add greatly to the atmosphere of the novel, specifically the nature of the Irish community. Although the primary focus of this study has been on Cait and Baba, it should be noted that some of these minor characters are remarkable studies in themselves. O'Brien can rapidly capture the aura of a character's life.

Molly, for example, seems to play a very small role but she is developed with the care and precision of a good storyteller and a good short-story writer. Woven into the texture of the novel is the information about her past and her present. In part, her character is used to parallel Cait's situation, since Molly, like Cait, has grown up on a small farm and has lost her mother at an early age. When Cait's mother dies, Molly mothers her. She also adds to the character of Martha, who treats Molly with disdain and beats her. Like Hickey, Molly knows all the secrets of the family, including Cait's outings with Mr Gentleman. Like

Cait and Baba, we see Molly change; she goes from being a young innocent farm girl who wears Wellingtons because she does not have anything else, to a young woman, about to be married, and wise beyond her years. In her conversation with Cait about marriage, Molly shows amazing insight:

"Will you marry your boy, Molly?" I asked.
She seemed a little strange. Not like herself,
Wise instead of cheerful.

"I suppose so."

"Do you love him?"

"I'll tell you that when I'm married ten
years."(CG,127)

This exact response will be used again in Girl with Green Eyes by Eugene but from another viewpoint (see FN#70, p.103). Molly is not just a flat, stereotypical country maid. Her character has depth and is used with complexity to tie to the themes and characters of the novels.

APPENDIX-THREE - Wind imagery:

Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by.⁷⁸

One technique used in the trilogy to examine patterns of renewal and continuity is the imagery of the wind. The wind is associated with storms, the imagery of water and the possibility of harm, either physical or emotional, but there is also the suggestion of human storms.

The life giving, regenerative capability of the wind is established by gentle winds, spring winds. This type of wind brings life and energy:

It was one of those clear, windy days which we get around that part of the country, with a fine strong wind blowing and clouds sailing happily by. It was clear and windy and airy and I was happy to be alive. (CG,122)

Sheep are born in the same wind that propels the apple blossoms, flowers and cornstalks. Gentle winds carry the smell of hawthorns, the leaves of birch trees and "the smell that prevails at every country fair." (CG,129) But the wind also penetrates everywhere and carries with it the marks of time. Bleak winds bend hedges. Such winds of time are used as premonitions of threat and desolation:

⁷⁸ Christina Rossetti quoted by W. O. Mitchell in Who Has Seen the Wind (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart-Bantam, 1947), titlepage.

The sky was very dark outside. A wind began to rise, and an old bucket rattled along the gravel path. The rain came quite suddenly.[the storm that contributes to Mama's death](CG,41)

She stole his shoes and hid them, so that he could not go out next day and raise the wind for more drink...A wind blew down the chimney, causing the candle flame to blow this way and that.[Cait, trying to escape her father's house](GE,75,86)

At teatime a wind began to rise and rattled the shutters.[just before Dada arrives with his gang](GE,111)

[The candlelight] was fitful and it threatened to go out when the wind blew down the chimney...The letterbox flapping as if someone or something from the outside world was coming through. But it was wind.[Cait, trapped inside her house by fear and the wind](MB,132,133)

In the first two novels, the "windy years" are associated with Cait's childhood. Her fear of the wind indicates a fear of life. Cait remembers her mother as someone who comforts her against her fear of Dada and the wind. As an adult, Cait's relationship with Eugene brings her to the point where she is "swayed or frightened by every wind."

But the wind becomes the ultimate force of continuity. Not only does it show the marks of the past-Cait's childhood swing swaying in the wind, Tom Duggan's voice "bred in wind and hardship"(GE,101) - it carries with it the changes that point to the future:

The Tube rushed like wind into the empty station.(MB,151)

Electric wires marched across the fields, and the wires hummed a constant note of windy music.(GE,87)

Winds blow away the pain of separation, making way for new

windy days (Cait met Duncan on a "windy far-off day.")(MB,26) The celebration of all of life's energy is captured by the recurring cliché "It's an ill wind that doesn't blow good for someone."(GE,164;MB,115)

APPENDIX-FOUR - Love triangles:

"[Gustav] nodded his head. "[Eugene] here with Baba. They were dining out, I am told." I [Cait] could feel my stomach grow hollow with a new fear." (GE, 104)

The flirting of Baba with Eugene suggests a love triangle, as does the constant reminder of Laura. O'Brien will return to the idea of a love triangle many times. In Casualties of Peace the lives of two women and one man are explored, and how their lives are irrevocably affected by their coming together. Willa, the virgin with the tortured past, lives vicariously through Patsy, who exudes sexuality. Patsy's husband, Tom, in the end inherits the madness. This is a tale of halcyon days gone bad; the sadness of potential for great love that never gets a chance. And again the juxtaposition of the two female characters, Willa and Patsy. Zee & Co. has a love triangle that ends in a stifling ménage à trois. Both the character of Zee and her husband are very self destructive, in different ways. The third woman seems helplessly caught in the net of these two powerful personalities.

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Note about Bibliography:

There is a scarcity of secondary critical work on Edna O'Brien; there are extensive book reviews and brief articles but no work that considers all of the novels to date in depth. For this reason, I have elected to focus on the novels themselves and have not consulted any critical secondary sources.