

“What a beautiful tragic country to be born into”:

Postcolonial Irish Identities  
in Edna O’Brien’s 1990s Trilogy

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Pro Gradu -tutkielmani tavoitteena on selvittää, kuinka Irlannin jälkikolonialistinen asema tulee esiin Edna O'Brienin romaaneissa *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), *Down by the River* (1996) ja *Wild Decembers* (1999). Romaanitrilogia kuvaa elämää ja ihmisiä Irlannissa 1900-luvun loppupuolella. Tutkielmani keskittyy jälkikolonialististen piirteiden ilmenemiseen romaanien nais- ja miespäähenkilöiden elämässä sekä heitä ympäröivissä yhteisöissä. Pohdin ennen kaikkea, miten Irlannin historia Englannin siirtomaana on edistänyt vahvojen sukupuoliroolien muodostumista irlantilaisessa yhteiskunnassa.

Lähestymistapani pohjautuu jälkikolonialistiseen teoriaan ja pyrin työssäni sijoittamaan Irlannin laajempaan jälkikolonialistisen tutkimuksen kenttään. Siirtomaavallan aikana englantilaisessa yhteiskunnassa esiintyi rasistisia käsityksiä irlantilaisista. Nämä käsitykset nousevat aihepiiriä taustoittaessa tärkeään osaan: ne luovat yhteyttä Irlannin ja muiden Englannin siirtomaiden välille ja oikeuttavat Irlannin sijoittamisen jälkikolonialistisen tutkimuksen piiriin. Irlannin siirtomaa-ajan alisteisella asemalla oli selkeä vaikutus maassa vahvana nousseen kulttuurisen nationalismin syntyyn. Kulttuurisen nationalismin luomat käsitykset irlantilaisuudesta, naiseudesta ja mieheydestä vaikuttivat suuresti siihen, millaiseksi irlantilainen yhteiskunta lopulta muodostui. Näin ollen irlantilainen kulttuurinen nationalismi ja ennen kaikkea sen kahtiajako gaelilaiseen ja angloirlantilaiseen ilmenemismuotoon on tärkeä tekijä analyysini taustalla.

Tutkielman analyysiosio jakautuu kahteen osaan. Näistä ensimmäisessä käsittelen irlantilaisen kulttuurisen nationalismin edistämän sankaripalvonnan ja symbolismin vaikutuksia O'Brienin romaanien henkilöahmojen identiteetteihin ja ajatusmaailmoihin. Mieshahmoja tarkastelen ennen kaikkea irlantilaisen sankarikäsityksen ja aidon irlantilaisuuden ihannoinnin näkökulmasta. Pohdin, missä kulkevat rajat sankarin ja terroristin sekä irlantilaisuuden ja ulkopuolisuuden välillä. Naishenkilöitä käsittelen heihin liitetyn kulttuurisnationalistisen ja uskonnollisen symboliikan kautta. Kulttuurinen nationalismi vahvisti Irlannissa kautta maailman suosittua mielikuvaa kotimaasta naishahmona. Irlanti kuvattiin usein Hibernia-neitona, Cathleen Ni Houlihanina, tai Róisín Dubhina. Nämä symbolit sekä katolisen kirkon edistämä Neitsyt Marian palvonta näkyvät romaanien naishahmojen elämässä monella tavalla.

O'Brienin romaanien mieshahmot ovat ylimaskuliinisia ja naiset poikkeuksetta alisteisessa asemassa. Toisessa analyysiosiossa tuon esille Irlannissa vallitsevan sukupuolierojen korostuksen taustalla vaikuttavia kulttuurisia ja poliittisia tekijöitä. Romaanien henkilöt toimivat usein ympäröivän yhteisön paineessa. Tärkeäksi nouseekin kysymys siitä, mikä saa irlantilaisen yhteisön tukemaan ja vahvistamaan näitä usein kieroutuneita ajatusmalleja ja toimintatapoja. Lopuksi pohdin jälkikolonialistisen tutkimuksen ja O'Brienin trilogian oleellisuutta tämän päivän irlantilaisessa yhteiskunnassa.

Avainsanat: Irlanti, jälkikolonialismi, kulttuurinen nationalismi, sukupuoliroolit

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Colonial Ireland and cultural nationalism.....	17
2.1 “The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads” – Ireland and postcolonial theory.....	18
2.2 “A terrible beauty is born” – Irish cultural nationalism.....	33
3. Éire, a land of heroic men and symbolic women.....	46
3.1 Irish heroes and outsiders – McGreevy, Joseph Brennan and Michael Bugler.....	47
3.2 Suffocated symbols of the nation – Josie O’Meara, Breege Brennan and Mary MacNamara	61
4. Éire, a land of macho men and silent women.....	74
4.1 Made-up masculinity – Men and the legacy of Tomás Ó Criomhthain.....	75
4.2 Forced femininity – Women in the claws of patriarchy.....	86
5. Conclusion.....	99
Bibliography.....	107

## 1. Introduction

English colonisation over Ireland spanned a period of nearly eight hundred years, starting from the twelfth century, and ending in 1922, when the Irish Free State came to existence. Whereas the Viking invasions of the ninth and tenth centuries resulted in the creation of Viking settlements, that is, Dublin, Waterford, Wexford, Cork and Limerick, their power as an invasive force was soon weakened, and finally overcome by Irish high king Brian Ború in 1014. After this, the Vikings were merged into Irish society both politically and religiously, thus becoming a part of the Irish population and way of life. The Norman invasion of the following century, however, resulted in the fact that Ireland came to be ruled by another foreign power up until the twentieth century.

The invasion was launched by Irish king MacMurrough, who turned to Henry II of England for help in regaining his kingdom.<sup>1</sup> The invasion begun in 1169, and by 1171, Welsh baron Strongbow ruled Dublin, Waterford, and Wexford. After the arrival of Henry II himself in Ireland in the same year, several more Irish kings were submitted to his power, he was sworn fealty, and the Irish church was made to conform to the practices of the English church. Thus, MacMurrough's original plan of having the Normans help him, and return to the neighbouring island after that, did not quite work out as he had imagined. (See, for instance, Edwards 1973, 45-47.)

Although Ireland's time as a colony was extraordinarily long, the importance of the country's colonial status has often been downplayed by Irish historians. This kind of attitude may seem strange, but it becomes understandable when considering the complexity of the Irish situation. Ireland, as a neighbouring country of England, was not as clearly an "overseas possession" of England, as, for instance, India, or areas in Africa, which is why it is often

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<sup>1</sup> At that time, Ireland was divided into several small kingdoms that all had their kings, in addition to which there was the high king, who had claimed lordship over the whole of Ireland. The high king occupied the hill of Tara, and, to some extent, ruled the "lesser" kings. When the Norman invasion took place, the seat of the high king was held by Rory O'Connor, who eventually, after a period of resistance, submitted to Henry II. See, for instance, Edwards 1973, 45-48.

seen as an integral part of United Kingdom, rather than a colony. According to Edward Said, the Irish liberation, instead of being regarded as an imperial matter, “is comprehended [by many] as an aberration within the British dominions” (1993, 236).

There are issues that support Ireland’s “special” status, making it different from other English colonies, one of which is the fact that the Irish enjoyed certain privileges granted to no other colony of England. The Irish had, for instance, their own members of parliament in Westminster, in addition to which they were able to profit from the British colonial enterprise; they could take part in the colonial bureaucracies of the settler societies, and the labour forces were open to them in a manner unthinkable to non-European peoples. Thus, as Joe Cleary points out, “[f]or many, the contention that the Irish historical experience resembles that of other colonized countries is simply a species of auto-exoticism with little conceptual merit” (2003, 22).

This can be seen in the fact that Ireland has had an exceptionally hard time in finding its place in the postcolonial discussion sweeping over the academic world during the past few decades. Although Said (1993, 198), for one, has no problem in including Ireland in his list of colonies side by side with, for instance, areas in Asia and Africa, it has not been so clear for everyone to accept the fact that Ireland was no less a colony than any other country absorbed by the British Empire. As Declan Kiberd (1995, 4-5) points out, this becomes evident, for example, in the fact that one of the basic, most comprehensive introductions to postcolonial theory and practice, *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft, et al. (1989), barely takes the Irish case into consideration.

Nevertheless, despite the ambivalence, academic interest in applying postcolonial theory to Ireland has existed since the early times of postcolonial discussion. Some of the major works having contributed to Irish postcolonial studies since the early 1990s include, for instance, Declan Kiberd’s *Inventing Ireland* (1995), and Seamus Deane’s *Strange Country*

(1997). Despite the attempts of several critics to bring Ireland into the discussion, two relatively recent essay collections, *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* (ed. Carroll and King, 2003), and *Ireland and the British Empire* (ed. Kenny, 2004), still devote a great many pages to justifying the use of postcolonial theory in the case of Ireland. Thus, Irish postcolonial criticism continues to be a field under dispute, which is why I see it as important in this thesis to thoroughly examine the country's colonial background and its consequences before proceeding to literary analysis.

The reasons for neglecting Ireland in the discussions are varied. Kiberd suggests that one of them might be the fact that postcolonial critics simply "find these white Europeans too strange an instance to justify their sustained attention" (1995, 5). In my opinion, Kiberd is on the right track, since postcolonial discourse often polarises the colonising Western and the colonised non-Western countries. Ireland, situated on the westernmost edge of Europe, would seem quite far from the non-Western colonies. Nevertheless, when considering issues that support Ireland's postcolonial status, the aspect of geography is hardly enough to overrule them.

It is true that rather than seeing Ireland as similar to other English colonies, it is easier to take the country as just one of the many examples of small European countries absorbed by their bigger neighbours during the course of European history, similarly, for instance, to Finland. However, as I will uncover in the course of this thesis, there is much more to discover under the surface, which makes the above interpretation of the Irish condition insufficient. Through the historical and cultural issues discussed in Section 2, I will show that, even if the relationship between Ireland and England varied through time, it continued to be a colonial one up until the birth of the Irish Free State. There are a great many factors to support the idea that Ireland was a colony rather than an integral part of the United Kingdom, and even if English colonisation of Ireland shared features with other cases of small

European countries, it should not be forgotten how much it also had in common with English overseas colonialism.

In this thesis, the complex relationship between Ireland and colonialism, and the idea of Irish postcolonialism will be discussed in the context of three novels by Irish writer Edna O'Brien (1930-). These novels, *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994; I will refer to it as *HSI* when not using the full title), *Down by the River* (1996; I will refer to it as *DR* when not using the full title), and *Wild Decembers* (1999; I will refer to it as *WD* when not using the full title), form a trilogy in which O'Brien gives her interpretation of Irish society in the late twentieth century. Although I will take all three novels into account, my focus will be on the first and the last ones; whereas I find *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Wild Decembers* to a great extent as counterparts to one another, *Down by the River* seems more of a shocking means of emphasising and underlining certain themes that are presented more delicately in the other two novels. I will shortly explain this in more detail.

*House of Splendid Isolation* is the story of an ageing Irish woman, Josie O'Meara, and an IRA gunman, McGreevy, who meet when McGreevy chooses to use Josie's house as his hiding place. In the course of the novel, their relationship moves from fear and repulsion to mutual understanding and friendship, and, in the process, much is revealed of the society around them. The main storyline, the encounter between Josie and McGreevy, takes place somewhere in the late 1980s, early 1990s, but side by side with it goes the story of Josie's life from her youth in the newly independent Ireland to the present. Similarly to *House of Splendid Isolation*, *Wild Decembers* is set in the Irish countryside of the 1980s-1990s. The main character is a young woman called Breege Brennan, who lives with her older brother, Joseph, and falls in love with her brother's worst enemy, their neighbour Michael Bugler. Alongside the love story of Breege and Bugler, the novel is the story of Joseph and Bugler's feud over the ownership of old family lands.

As for the middle book of the trilogy, *Down by the River* (1996), it differs from the other two in that it overtly has its roots in true events, and it revolves around a single question. To quote Hillan's (2006, 151) description of the novel, "[a]t the novel's heart is what was known as 'the X case' of the young girl who, having fled Ireland in 1992 to England for an abortion after being raped by a family friend, was brought back amid a tumult of outraged Irish morality." O'Brien has altered the events so that it is not a family friend, but the main character Mary MacNamara's father, who is the rapist, thus making it a story of incest. The fact that the novel asks the single, appalling question of whether or not a 14-year-old girl abused by her own father is allowed to have an abortion, makes it different from the other two novels. It is a powerful example of how human rights can be trampled upon by Irish society and Catholic morality, and it will be treated as such in this thesis. However, as for a more refined analysis of postcolonial Irish male and female identities, I will focus on *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Wild Decembers*.

The primary reason for choosing these novels is the fact that they deal with many problematic features in Irish postcolonial society, showing how these issues continued to affect people throughout the twentieth century. The most important themes that come across in each novel, and that shall be evident in this thesis, are the oppressiveness and xenophobia in the society, the emphasised gender roles in Ireland, unwanted pregnancy and abortion, and the way that Catholic faith is mixed with legislation and used as a means to control people's lives. Each of the novels also have their own point of focus in postcolonial Ireland. *House of Splendid Isolation* presents one of the most visible legacies of colonialism, the Northern Irish conflict, which was a major issue up to the late 1990s, and is currently, after more than a decade of peace, showing disturbing signs of recovery. In *Wild Decembers* the focus is on landownership, and in *Down by the River*, the primary question is an Irish woman's, or girl's, right for the ownership of her own body.



Another reason for choosing these particular novels is the fact that, when familiarising myself with O'Brien's work, I noticed that the trilogy marked a certain turning point in her writing. As I later found out while going through previous studies on O'Brien, a similar observation had been made by several critics in relation to the trilogy. Before *House of Splendid Isolation*, O'Brien's earlier work, starting from the 1960s, was known for focusing almost exclusively on the inner lives of women, always depicting a personal, female experience. As Colletta and O'Connor (2006, 5) point out, throughout most of her literary career, O'Brien's trademark heroine has been "[t]he wild runaway, the dreamy Irish colleen with porcelain skin and masses of auburn hair, the passive domestic slave with her harlequin-romance fantasies, the sexually voracious but emotionally unfulfilled fallen woman". This has made many deem her work as fluffy popular fiction not worthy of any academic interest.

Nevertheless, a new leaf was turned with *House of Splendid Isolation*, where O'Brien took a more political approach, and made a critical statement on Irish society and culture. Although some of the above-listed features continue to be present especially in the heroines of *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Wild Decembers*, they are still very much different from O'Brien's earlier protagonists. Josie O'Meara, the main female character in *House of Splendid Isolation*, is older than any of the women in O'Brien's previous stories; when considering the time line of the novel, she must be about eighty years old at the time when the main storyline takes place. Breege Brennan in *Wild Decembers* is a pretty, young country girl, but, unlike many of O'Brien's earlier heroines, for instance, Kate and Baba in her first novel, *The Country Girls* (1960), she is not longing to break free from the chains of country life; Breege is happy to live a modest life in the village of Cloontha, Western Ireland. Mary MacNamara in *Down by the River*, on the other hand, is a child struggling with problems much bigger than any of the above-mentioned characters.

Even if the personal, female experience continues to be present, the trilogy extends the issues to a universal level, more overtly discussing them in the context of Irish culture and politics. In addition to this, for the first time in her literary career, O'Brien gives a voice to his male characters, as noted, for instance, by Heather Ingman (2002). Whereas the men in her earlier work were mostly just shadows, moving in and out of the female characters' lives, causing, in most cases, nothing but distress, *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Wild Decembers* present several independent, multilayered male characters. In *House of Splendid Isolation*, the complex figures of IRA gunman McGreevy, the monstrous, yet pathetic James O'Meara, and the several policemen that are presented throughout the story show that O'Brien now wanted to bring forth the experience of Irish men as well. This is also true of *Wild Decembers*, where Joseph Brennan and Michael Bugler reflect the many sides of Irish manhood, turning out not to be good or bad, but human. The fact that O'Brien's trilogy is out to "challenge masculinist Irish nationalism in a more sustained way" is brought up by Ingman (2002, 259) who, nevertheless, passes the issue relatively briefly, thus leaving it open for further analysis.

As for James MacNamara, Mary's father in *Down by the River*, I find it problematic to analyse him on similar terms with the other male characters. What is revealed of him is that he is a paedophile abusing his own daughter, and a drunkard violent towards his wife (who dies of cancer early on in the novel). He seems more of a traditional O'Brien male character; not exactly a real person but a menacing presence in the life of the main female character. This supports my view of the fact that the novel cannot be read quite similarly to the other two. It is not a story of "normal" life in Ireland – it is the story of a single event, where the rights of an individual are lost in the shady areas of law and morality. Consequently, I will not analyse James MacNamara as an example of an Irish man; since he is, in my opinion, deprived of humanity, and presented simply as a sick, oppressive power over Mary, similarly

to the State, the Church, and the anti-abortion -movement, I will regard him as such, and not as a character equal to Mary, or those in the other novels.

As I mentioned before, O'Brien's early work did not attract much academic interest in its time, since it was often considered to be mere "Harlequin Romance" literature. However, it would be misleading to suggest that O'Brien alone was neglected; Irish women's writing in general has been left out of academic discussion until quite recently. Perhaps the most evident example of this is the fact that the first volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, published in 1991, included no women writers. As Fogarty (2003, 1) points out, "[t]he first three volumes quickly became defined by their multiple omissions. The most glaring exclusions [...] were those of female voices and of writing in Irish." These omissions were acknowledged and widely criticised after the anthology's release.

Irish journalist and novelist Nuala O'Faolain (1940-2008) recounts in her autobiography, *Are You Somebody?* (1996), how she interviewed her old friend and editor of the first volumes of *The Field Day Anthology*, Seamus Deane, after their publication, and mentions that

something had happened between women and men in the interval between Seamus' and my youth, and the publication of the anthology. The women's movement had happened. [...] The anthology was *a history, of course, not a mere collection of literary texts*: that's why I expected the momentous change in the condition of women in twentieth-century Ireland to be there. [...] I brought up the missing women. He said words to the effect that he really hadn't noticed what he was doing. (O'Faolain 1996, 115; my italics.)

Thus, O'Faolain, who had lived through the women's movement that had shook the world, and felt that the position of women in Ireland had altered a great deal during her lifetime, now found that Irish academic research at the beginning of the 1990s did not seem to acknowledge that there had been any change worth mentioning. She did not receive an answer to why her history as an Irish woman had been omitted from the anthology, and as a consequence, from Irish history. Seamus Deane seemed genuinely surprised, and unable to

present any kind of argumentation when she pointed out the omission – “He just hadn’t noticed” (O’Faolain 1996, 115).

O’Faolain’s awe at facing this neglect is understandable; since its beginnings in the 1960s, feminist criticism had worked in introducing women writers into the Western literary canon, and making women visible in literary history of the Western world. *The Field Day Anthology* gave shocking proof of the fact that Ireland had not followed at a similar pace. At the beginning of the 1990s, when feminist criticism had already started to develop into complex theories, presenting, for instance, the ideas of Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva, it was as if the Irish literary world had never been introduced to the ground works of feminist criticism, such as studies by de Beauvoir and Showalter. This was a wake-up call for scholars in Ireland and overseas that it was time for an active re-evaluation of Irish women’s writing. In 2002 Seamus Deane co-edited with Angela Bourke, Maria Luddy, and Siobhan Kilfeather, among others, volumes IV and V of the *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, subtitled *Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions*. As for literary criticism, notable works in the field are, for instance, Christine St. Peter’s *Changing Ireland: Strategies in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (2000), and Rebecca Pelan’s *Two Irelands: Literary Feminisms North and South* (2005).

Irish poet and critic Eavan Boland (1944-) addressed the voicelessness of Irish women in her book *Object Lessons* (1995), where she describes her problem with finding a poetic voice within a tradition that did not seem to acknowledge the fact that there could exist such a thing as a woman poet. Boland argues that

Irish poetry was predominantly male. Here or there you found a small eloquence, like “After Aughrim” by Emily Lawless. Now and again, in discussion you heard a woman’s name. But the lived vocation, the craft witnessed by a human life – that was missing. And I missed it. Not in the beginning, perhaps. But later, when perceptions of womanhood began to redirect my own work, what I regretted was the absence of an expressed poetic life which would have dignified and revealed mine. (1995, 134.)

In her youth, Boland had tried to identify with Irish male poets, wanting to be part of a tradition, and wondering why it was such an uneasy task. Later on she realised that she had chosen to become a poet in a society “where the word *woman* and the word *poet* were almost magnetically opposed. One word was used to invoke collective nurture, the other to sketch out self-reflective individualism”. (Boland 1995, xi.) Consequently, Boland has devoted most of her life and career to overcoming the gap between these two concepts. As Irish feminist criticism has developed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Boland’s poetry has started to receive a great deal of critical attention, and she is now regarded as one of the most important Irish poets of the day.

Whereas Boland brought up the clash between *woman* and *poet*, I want to consider whether, despite the developments since 1991 that were introduced above, the clash can be extended to *woman* and *writer*, or at least *woman* and *serious writer* in Ireland up to this day. This is a question essential especially in the case of O’Brien, since, as I pointed out earlier, she has been struggling with these concepts throughout her literary career. The fact that the Irish society and people had a hard time accepting her writing was evident since the publication of her first novel, *The Country Girls* (1960). According to Colletta and O’Connor (2006, 4), the novel was banned in Ireland in the 1960s, because it was “considered by Irish censors to be pornographic and obscene”. O’Brien herself has recounted that copies of the novel were “burned in the chapel grounds” of her home village (Carlson 1990, 72).

It infuriated the public to have a young Catholic Irish woman with the appearance of a true “Irish Colleen” from the heart of Western Ireland suggesting that Irish women had sexual desires, and that alcoholism and violence prevailed in many families in the countryside. It was felt that O’Brien was committing a form of treason, not acting up to the role of a true Irish woman – a role the formation of which will be discussed later on in this thesis. O’Brien had already left Ireland for London when the novel was published, and was thus able to stay

at a reasonable distance from the greatest turmoil; she has not lived in Ireland since then.

This was in the 1960s, but the problems have followed the writer thereafter. As Greenwood points out, O'Brien herself has not made it any easier for her critics to define where she is coming from. According to Greenwood (2003, 2),

[i]t is difficult to gauge the extent to which O'Brien undermines her own position as a 'serious' writer, and how much it is undermined for her. She advertised shampoo and appeared on television chat shows [...] When she was asked to unveil a commemorative plaque to James Joyce at a house in Kensington where he briefly lived, she reflected that 'she'd better get her hair done or something for the occasion'.

The fact that O'Brien's public persona is far from serious has affected the way her work is read. She has been, and remains, a controversial character for feminist critics, and the fact that some of her protagonists seem to resemble the writer has resulted in her books often being read as autobiographical, thus producing great simplifications. (Greenwood 2003, 5.)

In the light of these contradictions, *House of Splendid Isolation* left O'Brien's critics even more puzzled. The fact that the novel seemed to have some kind of a political agenda was hard to accept, since O'Brien had, seemingly, never written about anything but women and romance. Thus, an effort was made by several critics to read *House of Splendid Isolation* not as a political novel, but as yet another story that O'Brien had written about herself. As Greenwood writes, even if O'Brien had done a great deal of research for the novel, for instance, interviewing former IRA activists in prison, the "so-called literary criticism persisted in focusing on O'Brien as an ageing *femme fatale*, assuming her interest in republicanism arose not so much from concern with Irish politics and history, but rather from an attraction to the 'flawed' and 'emotionally unavailable' hero" (2003, 4).

The harshest criticism toward O'Brien's writing has always come from Ireland. Whatever the true reasons for the critical belittling of her work especially in the native land, the writer herself sees her gender as the major cause. In a relatively recent interview for *The Observer: The New Review*, O'Brien reflects upon the treatment of her novels since *House of Splendid*

*Isolation*, and considers reasons for the fact that, whereas the reception was excellent in Britain and the US, the novels “turned her critics in Ireland apoplectic”. She goes on to say that

[o]f course, it would have been all right if it had been a man who’d written [the novels], if it had been Sebastian Barry, or Roddy Doyle, or John Banville. There are still certain no-go areas for women writers. I’m always surprised to incur such wrath. [...] I suppose that a certain kind of writing gets under the skin. (Cooke 2011, 12.)

Thus, O’Brien sees the bad reception of her work in Ireland as a direct result of the fact that she is a woman, addressing issues that are not acceptable for women to address.

Stating this, however, she seems to simplify things, and neglects another kind of criticism that her work has received; the fact that, for many, her writing seems outdated. According to this view, O’Brien is writing about an Ireland that might have been reality in her youth in the 1940s-1950s, but no longer exists. Whereas O’Brien sees herself as bringing up problems in the Ireland of today, she has been accused of dealing with themes that seem to belong to the past, and have no place in current Irish society. This criticism suggests that, in some regard, she does not acknowledge that any changes have taken place in Ireland since she first left the country. The question of whether or not O’Brien’s work has anything to offer to current Irish society, or whether she is living in the past, is an issue that I will address in the course of this thesis.

Even if O’Brien’s work is not valued without controversy, it has started to receive more academic interest in the twenty-first century. However, despite the fact that the body of criticism is growing, it continues to be relatively narrow. It is only in the last ten to fifteen years that any notable scholarly work has been done on O’Brien, and as Colletta and O’Connor (2006, 3) mention, this work consists mostly of single entries in journals and essay collections. After a biography by Grace Eckley in 1974, the first monograph on O’Brien was Amanda Greenwood’s *Edna O’Brien* (2003), which was followed by two essay collections – *The Wild Colonial Girl* (2006), edited by Lisa Colletta and Maureen O’Connor, and *Edna*

*O'Brien: New Critical Perspectives* (2006), edited by Kathryn Laing, Sinéad Mooney, and Maureen O'Connor. Counting out a couple of articles, not much has been written about O'Brien in the academic world since 2006. Considering the wealth of literature that she has produced during her career, and the fact that the eighty-year-old writer continues to publish new material almost on a yearly basis, it is difficult to tell whether five years of silence are a sign of a waning academic interest, or whether critics are simply having a hard time keeping up with her. Whatever the reason, I find that there is still much to discover in her work, which is why I have taken up the task.

As for *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Wild Decembers*, the first has been the object of several studies since its publication. Most of the articles dealing with the novel, similarly to most of the work done on O'Brien's other pieces, are from the field of feminist criticism, produced since the re-evaluation of Irish women's writing started to take place in the 1990s. Some critics, for instance Farquharson and Schrank (2006), have taken the research towards postcolonial studies, and discussed O'Brien's novels in a wider historical and political context. This is the path I intend to follow, going further into the makings of Irish culture and politics, and revealing how they are echoed in O'Brien's novels.

Whereas *House of Splendid Isolation* has received a good deal of critical attention since its publication, *Wild Decembers* has remained, counting out a couple of exceptions, absent from the discussion. This is, perhaps, because of the fact that it is not as overtly political as *House of Splendid Isolation*, and thus not as easily analysed. The novels can, nevertheless, be seen as counterparts for one another; *Wild Decembers* develops and gives closure to several themes opened in the first part of the trilogy. Even if it is possible to read the story as a simple romance, it can also be read as a political statement just as much as *House of Splendid Isolation*, which I intend to show in more detail in Sections 3 and 4. *Down by the River* has perhaps received a little more attention than *Wild Decembers*, but it is clearly *House of*



*Splendid Isolation* that has been studied the most out of the three novels.

Previous studies on O'Brien's work, especially studies on her work before the trilogy, have focused almost exclusively on the female characters. This is, perhaps, due to a fact that I brought up earlier; O'Brien's male characters prior to *House of Splendid Isolation* have, without exception, been less complex and important than the women. Nevertheless, even if things changed in the 1990s trilogy, it is mostly the women who have been the target of attention in these novels as well. In my opinion, excluding the experience of Irish men from the discussion leaves us with a one-sided picture, and inhibits us from seeing many of the reasons that eventually led to the emphasised gender roles that persevere in Irish society. Because of this, and following the route that O'Brien took in *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Wild Decembers*, I want to include the experience of Irish men in my analysis, side by side with that of Irish women. Thus, it is my intention to bring up both sides of the story, and shed light on the issues that have, throughout Irish history, affected the formation of the identities of Irish people, women and men alike.

One of these issues is, of course, English colonisation of Ireland, which was briefly introduced on the first pages of this introduction. In many aspects, Irish cultural nationalism – a series of movements starting from the late nineteenth century, which has contributed greatly to the development of Irish culture, identity, and literature ever since – was a direct response to the colonial oppression experienced by the Irish. Cultural nationalism, soon inseparable from its political counterpart, greatly affected the fact that Ireland was eventually divided into the Republic and Northern Ireland, also playing a major role in the formation of culture and society in independent Ireland, as will become clear later on.

As I hope to have established above, in this thesis, my main goal is to show how Ireland's postcolonial status can be seen as affecting the identities of the characters in O'Brien's novels. The following sections will reveal that Ireland, as any former colony of England or

other colonisers, deserves its place in the field of postcolonial studies. In Section 2.1, I will introduce postcolonial studies, and consider the emergence of Irish postcolonial studies in particular. I will consider definitions for the concepts of colonialism, imperialism, and postcolonialism, and through a survey of Irish colonial history, I will point out issues that reveal Ireland's colonial status. Section 2.1 will also give background to how colonialism stimulated the birth of Irish cultural nationalism, which will be further discussed in 2.2. My aim is to show how cultural nationalism, eventually, came to define the terms on which culture and society in the Irish Republic were developed. Cultural nationalism was the key issue laying the grounds for manhood and womanhood in independent Ireland, and as can be seen in O'Brien's novels, Irish men and women have been carrying the legacy of colonialism and cultural nationalism ever since.

In the analysis sections, I will deal with the pressures set by Irish postcolonial culture and society upon an individual, and the ways in which the characters of *House of Splendid Isolation*, *Down by the River*, and *Wild Decembers* react to this. The first part of the analysis, Section 3, will focus on how cultural nationalist symbols and definitions of Irishness restrain the lives of Irish men and women in O'Brien's novels. Section 3.1 will reveal how the images of the heroic Irish rebel and the ideal Irish citizen distort the lives of the male characters in *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Wild Decembers*, Section 3.2 showing how women in all three novels are trapped inside Catholic and nationalist symbols, the most important of which are Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland.

In the second part of the analysis, Section 4, I will consider how the patriarchal structures of the society, after first forming as a consequence of colonialism and cultural nationalism, were nailed down by promoting certain forms of culture, and creating legislation that gave little space for variation. Whereas Section 3 deals with nationalist symbols, Section 4 focuses on the roles of everyday life, and the concrete ways in which they are held up. How Irish

macho culture was born, and how the male characters in *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Wild Decembers* are pushed into the role it creates, will be discussed in Section 4.1. Section 4.2 will focus on the female characters, and on the strictly domestic and procreative role that is reserved for them. In this section I will also bring up the ways in which Irish culture and community work to keep men and women in their place, and the consequences for a person who fails to live up to society's expectations, and remain in the space that is reserved for her or him.

However, before proceeding to the discussion of postcolonial identities in O'Brien's novels, the course of which I outlined above, it is in order to introduce the field of postcolonial studies, define imperialism and colonialism, and situate Ireland firmly on the map of colonies.

## **2. Colonial Ireland and cultural nationalism**

As I mentioned above, this section will give background, and discuss issues that affected the formation of culture and life in independent Ireland. It will briefly introduce the field of postcolonial studies, and make an effort to define concepts related to colonialism and postcolonialism. For these purposes I will refer to the works of Edward Said and Ania Loomba, whose definitions I find useful and apt for my analysis. After clarifying the basic concepts, I will move on to discuss colonialism in Ireland, and bring up issues relating to culture, ethnicity, and economy that are revealing of Ireland's colonial status. The observations presented here are largely based on studies by Declan Kiberd, L. Perry Curtis, and Joe Cleary.

In Section 2.2, consulting E. J. Hobsbawm, I will move on to discuss European nationalism, and show how Irish nationalism, and cultural nationalism in particular, gained ground as a consequence of the oppressive and racist measures discussed in 2.1. The main focus in this section is how the cultural nationalist movement gave birth to the idea of true Irishness, and the problems that revolve around that idea. These problems arose, above all, from the fact that giving a clear-cut definition for what is regarded as Irish neglected the fact that Ireland was full of divisions, the strongest being the division to those with a Gaelic Irish and those with an Anglo-Irish background. Cultural nationalism also had very different conceptions of true Irishness for men and women, which is an important issue in regard to my analysis of O'Brien's novels. This section thus begins with a view to complexities arising in the aftermath of European imperialism, and ends with a glimpse of what it all came to mean in the lives of ordinary Irish men and women.

## 2.1 “The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads”<sup>1</sup> – Ireland and postcolonial theory

European imperialism was a phenomenon that touched the entire world, and it has had consequences beyond understanding. According to Loomba (1998, xiii), “[b]y the 1930s, colonies and ex-colonies covered 84.6 per cent of the land surface of the globe”. In the course of decolonisation, there has been, and remains, an endless effort and need to reveal and discuss these consequences. In the 1990s this discussion was placed under the umbrella term of postcolonial studies. Loomba (1998, xii) is right in saying that postcolonial research is coloured with complexities, starting with its interdisciplinary nature, and the problems with defining the term ‘postcolonialism’ in the first place.

The roots of modern postcolonial criticism are to be found in the 1960s; Franz Fanon is one of the earliest writers to overtly deal with the consequences of colonialism for the colonised. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les Damnés de la Terre*, 1961) he writes about the Algerian struggle for independence, criticising colonialism and imperialism, and considering their psychological legacy. In the field of postcolonial literary analysis, one of the ground works is Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), in which Said uses Foucault’s concept of discourse to consider how the idea of the Orient is created and enforced in European literature. *Orientalism* focuses on how Europeans presented the non-Europeans, and how these representations created certain power relations thus enabling imperialism. This was the first phase of postcolonial criticism, and the focus of the studies soon shifted away from Eurocentrism.

As Loomba points out, “[c]olonial discourse studies today are not restricted to delineating the workings of power – they have tried to locate and theorise oppositions, resistances and revolts (successful and unsuccessful) on the part of the colonised” (1998, 51). Said, too, moved to this direction after *Orientalism*, for instance in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), which is an important source for this thesis. Other major works grounding the field are, for instance, Gayatri Spivak’s *In*

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<sup>1</sup> A comment by Jimmy Rabbitte in Roddy Doyle’s novel *The Commitments* (1993, 13).

*Other Worlds* (1987), Bill Ashcroft's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), and Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* (1990).

Postcolonialism continues to be an area of contradiction and dispute for critics, and presents a wide range of approaches. Its development is often compared with that of feminist criticism, since “both feminist and anti-colonial movements needed to challenge dominant ideas of history, culture, and representation” (Loomba 1998, 40). Loomba goes on to say that similarly to postcolonial critics, the feminists “too questioned objectivity in dominant historiography, they too showed how canonical texts disguised their political affiliations, and they too broke with dominant, Western, patriarchal philosophies” (1998, 40).

As I pointed out in the introduction, my intention is to apply postcolonial theory in the case of Ireland, considering how the country's postcolonial status comes through in O'Brien's novels. According to Cleary (2003, 16), Irish postcolonial studies “as a distinct mode of critical analysis” has existed since the beginning of the 1980s. Throughout the decade, a number of texts were published “that *implicitly* situated modern Irish culture within a colonial framework” (Cleary 2003, 16, my italics). Irish postcolonial studies as an *explicit* field of research started to gain popularity in 1988, after the publication of pamphlets by Edward Said, Fredric Jameson, and Terry Eagleton. These pamphlets, “Yeats and Decolonization” by Said, “Modernism and Imperialism” by Jameson, and “Nationalism: Irony and Commitment” by Eagleton, were later published together as *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (ed. by Seamus Deane, 1990).

1988 also saw the publication of *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* by David Cairns and Shaun Richards, a historical survey of Irish literature in the light of Said's *Orientalism*. The field was developed throughout the 1990s; in addition to the works of Kiberd and Deane that were mentioned in the introduction, important contributions were made by, for instance, Thomas Boylan and Timothy Foley's *Political Economy and Colonial Ireland* (1993), and two books by David Lloyd: *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (1993) and

*Ireland after History* (1999).

Despite the growing body of criticism, the approach has not been universally accepted. Critics such as T. C. Barnard and Karl Bottigheimer have suggested that Ireland's status cannot be compared with, for instance, the "newly found" Americas; Irish culture was much closer to English than cultures in the other colonies, and the country's relationship to the British crown was more ambivalent.<sup>1</sup> In other words, according to this view, Ireland was not a colony, and should not be analysed in postcolonial terms. Thus, to be able to regard Ireland in the light of postcolonialism, it should first be established that Ireland was a colony, and can now be regarded as postcolonial. In order to do this, it is necessary to understand the concepts of imperialism, colonialism, and postcolonialism.

According to Said (1993, 7), "[a]t some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others". More or less in all cases, imperialism leads to colonialism, that is, "the implanting of settlements to distant territory" (Said 1993, 9). Loomba (1998, 6), on the other hand, describes imperialism as "the highest stage of colonialism", and points out that it can mean different things in different circumstances. She makes a distinction between imperialism as a political system, and imperialism as an economic system. Political imperialism ends when the colonised country gains political independence, but economic imperialism is not directly affected by political changes, which is the case with, for instance, United States imperialism today. (Loomba 1998, 6.) Economic imperialism can thus function without colonialism in the traditional sense, but colonialism is not possible without imperialism.

Said (1993, 9) points out that imperialism and colonialism are never simply about growth or gaining more possession; they are sustained by ideological establishments that give them justification. These ideologies incorporate the idea that some peoples require domination for their

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Barnard, T. C. 1990. "Crisis of Identity among Irish Protestants, 1641-1845". *Past and Present*. 127, 1: 39-83.

own benefit, since they are, according to the coloniser, simply “inferior”, “subject races”, and “subordinate peoples” (Said 1993, 9). As Said effectively puts it,

[a]lmost all colonial schemes begin with the assumption of native backwardness and general inadequacy to be independent, “equal,” and fit. Why that should be so, why sacred obligation on one front should not be binding on another, why rights accepted in one may be denied in another, are questions best understood in the terms of culture well-grounded in moral, economic, and even metaphysical norms designed to approve a satisfying local, that is European, order and to permit the abrogation of the right to a similar order abroad. (1993, 80-81.)

The definitions of what imperialism and colonialism consist of according to Said and Loomba could thus be summed up as follows: imperialism means taking control of land that you do not possess, and justifying the subjugation of the colonised people by defining them mentally, morally, and racially inferior. Colonialism, on the other hand, means creating settlements on the land taken from the colonised. It should be noted that all of these aspects are true in the case of Ireland.

Things turn even more problematic when thinking about a definition for postcolonialism. I find Loomba’s discussion of the term useful in that it brings up the complexities. She notes that

[i]t might seem that because the age of colonialism is over, and because the descendants of once-colonised people live everywhere, the whole world is postcolonial. [...] To begin with, the prefix ‘post’ complicates matters because it implies an ‘aftermath’ in two senses – temporal, as in coming after, and ideological, as in supplanting. It is the second implication which critics of the term have found contestable: if the inequities of colonial rule have not been erased, it is perhaps premature to proclaim the demise of colonialism. (1998, 7.)

This takes us to the questions of when the postcolonial begins, and does it ever end. Critics have different views on whether a country is postcolonial since the colonisation has begun, or whether postcolonial begins after the colonisation has ended. In addition to this, it is also worth considering if a country can ever cease to be postcolonial. In the case of Ireland, there is also the question of whether it ever was a colony, in the manner that a colony is understood in the light of the above definitions, and whether it is thus appropriate to include it in the field of postcolonial studies.

Some of the problems regarding Ireland and postcolonialism were brought up in the introduction; there is, for instance, the geographical aspect, the ethnic aspect, and above all, the fact



that Ireland took part in the British colonial enterprise as part of the coloniser. The question of Ireland's status in the colonial world is no small issue, since, as Said points out, "what is at stake is nothing less than the whole question of Irish identity, the present course of Irish culture and politics, and above all, the interpretation of Ireland, its people, and the course of its history" (2003, 177).

When considering why Ireland is excluded from postcolonial discussion, one reason might be based on an idea presented by Loomba. She points out that postcolonial critics often tend to draw on the basis of their knowledge of a particular case, which results in a very narrow view of what counts as postcolonial (Loomba 1998, 16). If, according to the view of a postcolonial critic, one of the criteria for a country to be postcolonial is the fact that it is geographically distant from the coloniser, then, obviously, Ireland, as a neighbouring country of England, does not fulfil the criteria. Although this view seems extremely limited, it has, according to Cleary (2003, 22), often been used as one of the arguments against regarding Ireland as postcolonial. The argument is based on the assumption already mentioned; as part of Western Europe, Ireland should rather be compared with other small European countries that have been dominated by their neighbours than with more distant overseas colonies. Cleary is aware of this view, stating that "[i]n geographic, religious, racial, cultural and economic terms – so this argument runs – Ireland was always an intrinsic part of Western Europe" (2003, 22).

There is, naturally, no way of denying the fact that Ireland is, and has always been, geographically a part of Western Europe, but none of the other features listed above are as straightforward. It is not, for instance, clear at all that Ireland in "racial, cultural and economic terms" has always been seen as a part of Western Europe – a point that I will shortly discuss in more detail. Nevertheless, Cleary is right in finding it important to take these kinds of issues into consideration, and admit that they are true to the extent that they are, since they are useful in preventing the critic from making too easy identifications between Ireland and the "Third World" colonies (2003, 23). In several aspects, Ireland has developed side by side with the rest of Europe,

and no one should argue that the colonial situations in Ireland and everywhere else were similar. This, nevertheless, does not give basis for arguing that Ireland was not a colony throughout its time under the English regime.

It was suggested in the argument above that the Irish have always been regarded as Western European in cultural, economic, and ethnic terms (Cleary 2003, 23). Nevertheless, there are several instances in Irish history which show that Ireland was not seen as being on the same level with the rest of Western Europe. Kiberd suggests that ever since the early days of colonisation, the Irish culture, for instance, was regarded by the English as something strange and threatening. He validates this view by pointing out that the poet Edmund Spenser, among others, was of the opinion that, if not altogether exterminated, “[t]he Gaels must be redeemed from their wildness: they must cut their glibs of hair (which concealed their plotting faces); they must convert their mantles (which often concealed weapons) into conventional cloaks; above all, they must speak the English tongue” (Kiberd 1995, 10).

Thus, for Spenser, the Irish presented themselves as characters with strange hair, strange clothing, and a strange language. All this was regarded as threatening, and something that should be erased. Spenser had understood the essence of the colonial enterprise; the fact that the culture of the colonised people should be replaced by that of the coloniser in order for colonial domination to succeed. In “A View of the Present State of Ireland” (1596), Spenser sums up the thought: “[T]he speech being Irish, the heart must needs be Irish, for out of the abundance of the heart the tongue speaketh”. In other words, as long as the Irish had their own language and ways, they were disloyal, and posed a threat to England.

Kiberd suggests that one reason for Spenser and his fellow Englishmen to emphasise the differences between Irish and English cultures was the fact that they were worried about how similar the two cultures were in reality. The fact that the Irish looked the same as the English, that they had, for instance, court poets – an occupation similar to that of Spenser’s in England – and that

they were Christian, was a clear threat to the legitimacy of the English colonial enterprise. (Kiberd 1995, 11.) Consequently, it was necessary to attack Irish culture, and mark it as backward; the colonised culture had to be different and inferior so that there would be a reason to overcome it. The campaign was successful; Irish culture declined slowly but surely under the English influence up until the beginnings of the nationalist movement in the nineteenth century.

Whereas Irish culture and tradition remained far from the admired position which they now again occupy, it is the aspect of ethnicity that gives the most poignant examples of the way in which the Irish were regarded as non-civilized and, to some extent, non-European. As I mentioned in the very beginning, English colonisation over Ireland spanned a period of nearly eight hundred years, continuing from the twelfth century up to the twentieth. According to Said (1993, 220), ever since the first moments of English colonisation over Ireland, “an amazingly persistent cultural attitude existed toward Ireland as a place whose inhabitants were barbarian and [of a] degenerate race”. This is reflected in, for instance, the ideas of Spenser, presented above, and also in the epigraph of *House of Splendid Isolation*, where O’Brien quotes a letter by Sir John Davies, Attorney General of Ireland, written in 1606:

*‘For St Patrick did only banish the poisonous worms, but suffered the men full of poison to inhabit the land still; but his Majesty's blessed genius will banish all those generations of vipers out of it, and make it, ere it be long, a right fortunate island ...’*  
(Original italics.)

The above sort of English contempt toward the Irish is also detected by Kiberd, who argues that “from the later sixteenth century [...] the English have presented themselves to the world as controlled, refined and rooted; and so it suited them to find the Irish hot-headed, rude and nomadic” (1995, 10). This, of course, did not only include the Irish; the same applied, for instance, to the Scottish and the Welsh. To emphasise the alleged difference between the English and the other groups inhabiting the British Isles, a new term, *Celtic*, was introduced in the eighteenth century. Laura O’Connor (2006, xii) describes the origins of the term, and writes that

[t]he term *Celtic* emerged in the eighteenth century to codify an ancient and increasingly imperiled European cultural tradition. In the British Isles it was invoked to sanction the polarization of Britons into two racialized groups, the best (Anglo-Saxons), and the rest (Celts). The pan-ethnic term posits a sameness among the Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Cornish, and Manx which singles out their difference from the “Anglo-Saxon” English.

Thus, according to O’Connor, a term that originally referred to a certain form of cultural tradition soon came to be used as an ethnic marker, defining a certain group of people, the Celts, as inferior, and the other, Anglo-Saxons, as superior. That there was a need to create an ethnic hierarchy through definitions on the British Isles is also noted by Kiberd:

*Victorian imperialists attributed to the Irish all those emotions and impulses which a harsh mercantile code had led them to suppress in themselves. Thus, if John Bull [the Englishman] was industrious and reliable, Paddy [the Irishman] was held to be indolent and contrary; if the former was mature and rational, the latter must be unstable and emotional; if the English were adult and manly, the Irish must be childish and feminine. (1995, 30; original italics.)*

The definition of the coloniser as masculine and the colonised as feminine is one of the basic features in European imperialism. As will be clarified in the following sections, this assimilation of Irishness with femininity and emotionality was fiercely fought against by Irish cultural nationalists in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, and the trauma it created can be seen in the way the roles of men and women came to be constructed in the Irish Republic.

The idea of Irish inferiority was taken further in the nineteenth century, when race became the object of several forms of scientific research. As L. Perry Curtis (1997, 3) points out, the methods that were used for exploring people’s ethnic origins were from a field of “science” called *physiognomy*. Physiognomy, “[n]either entirely clinical nor occult in its so-called methods”, was the art of judging people’s mental attributes based on their physical features by analysing, for instance, the shape and size of the head, facial features, and structure of the body (Curtis 1997, 3). According to Curtis, physiognomy had been a part of European culture since the times of ancient Greece and Rome, and continued to be equally eagerly practised, for instance, in “France, Spain, Italy, Germany and England during the Enlightenment” (1997, 5). Loomba discusses the phenomenon as well,

noting that the advance of science during the Enlightenment did not lessen previous prejudices, but was used to fortify them (1998, 62). She argues that

the discourse of ‘race’ was the product of Western science in the eighteenth century. The nature of and reason for differences in skin colour had been debated for centuries within Europe. [...] The important point is that science did not shed any of the earlier suppositions about inferior races: thus, race explained not simply people’s skin colour, but also their civilisational and cultural attributes. ‘Nature’ thus ‘explained’ and linked black skin, a small brain, and savagery! (Loomba 1998, 62-63.)

The Irish were a white, European people, which is why Loomba’s argument does not seem to include them, but actually it does. According to Curtis (1997, 19), one of the most influential ethnologists practising physiognomy on the British Isles was Dr. John Beddoe (1826-1911), who developed a mathematical formula by which he claimed it was possible to find out people’s ethnic origins. This formula was called the “Index of Nigrescence”, and the calculations were based on the colour of people’s eyes and hair. Beddoe, then, went calculating through the British Isles, and his results showed that the index rose while moving west. The bigger the index, the darker, and thus lower, the race, which, for Beddoe, meant that people in the West of Ireland were extremely low on the scale. This led him to suggest that the Irish were actually of African origin, and consequently, representative of an inferior race.

Beddoe was by no means alone with his racist views; according to Curtis, “[v]irtually every country in Europe had its equivalents of ‘white Negroes’ and simianized [apelike] men, whether or not they happened to be stereotypes of criminals, assassins, political radicals, revolutionaries, Slavs, gypsies, Jews, or peasants” (1997, 13-14). Considering the past hundred years and more, it can be seen that these stereotypes have often been effective, and resulted in some of the darkest moments in world history. The belief that people’s ethnic origins define their value and human rights is what allowed tragedies such as the Holocaust and apartheid to take place, and continues to create hostility and conflict in different times and places throughout the world.

The power of ethnic stereotypes can be seen in the case of Ireland as well. Beddoe's so-called scientific calculations and the fact that he thus introduced the idea of "Africanoid Celts" contributed greatly to the later Victorian image of the Irish (Curtis 1997, 19-20). As Curtis (1997, 21) puts it,

[t]he net effect of Victorian ethnology, as professed and practiced in these years, was to undermine the environmentalist view that Englishmen and Irishmen were fundamentally alike and equally educable. Instead of narrowing the gap between Anglo-Saxons and Celts, the newer forms of evolutionary thought associated with Darwin, Wallace, Huxley, and their disciples, tended to polarize Englishmen and Irishmen by providing a scientific basis for assuming that such characteristics as violence, poverty, improvidence, political volatility, and drunkenness were inherently Irish and only Irish.

The idea that some group of people is inherently violent and politically volatile is reflected in O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation*, where the setting has changed so that it is now the people of the Irish Republic attaching these features to members of the IRA. I will come back to this in Section 3.1.

The fact that English prejudices toward the Irish deepened throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century becomes evident, for example, in English satirical cartoons, which, given their immense popularity, can be regarded as mirroring, and creating, the attitudes of the English at that time. The caricature of the Irishman in magazines such as *Punch*, generally known as Paddy, went through a radical transformation during the Victorian era (Curtis 1997, 29). Whereas Paddy in the traditional imagery of Elizabethan times, the sixteenth century, was the "wild Irishman", sometimes even handsome, he slowly changed into a more brutish and disorderly version, found in images from the eighteenth century. At that time, however, even if Paddy was often depicted as a comical figure, he usually remained harmless.

A rapid transformation took place in the nineteenth century imagery, where Paddy started to look more apelike than human. As Michael Hughes (1994, 18) points out, "[t]he Irish were no longer portrayed as figures of fun but as simian subhumans carrying daggers dripping blood". Curtis (1997, 29) shares Hughes' observation, and describes this new image of the Irishman as "a monstrous Celtic Caliban capable of any crime known to man or beast". What is notable here is the

fact that the monstrous Irishman was often depicted as threatening Hibernia, or Erin, that is, Ireland depicted as a young maid. As Curtis (1997, 31) notes, “the only Celt admired by *Punch*’s cartoonist was ‘Hibernia’, the intensely feminine symbol of Ireland, whose haunting beauty conveyed some of the sufferings of the Irish people”. In these pictures, Hibernia is often crying and leaning on to stronger and older Britannia, who is protecting her from the apelike Paddy. The fragile maiden representing real Ireland is threatened by the monster, representing the Irish anarchist, which suggests that, for the English, the true and loyal Irish colonial subject remained feminine, helpless, and in need of help and guidance.

The reasons for the nineteenth century transformation in the imagery are found in the political atmosphere of the time. After the unsuccessful Irish uprising in 1798, an attempt motivated by the example of the French Revolution, Ireland was more thoroughly integrated to England with “The Act of Union” in 1800, which made the country an official part of the United Kingdom. This meant the end of the Irish Protestant parliament in Dublin, which was replaced with direct rule by the Parliament in London. Cleary points out that in many historians’ opinion this marked the end of colonisation in Ireland, since Ireland, as a separate country, ceased to exist (2003, 25). There is, nevertheless, little proof to support the view that the colonial situation ended there. Even if Ireland was said to be an integral part of the United Kingdom, and enjoyed certain privileges that were not granted to any other colony, the developments taking place during the nineteenth century tell a different truth.

As for economic issues, Cleary argues that “the Act of Union” severely hindered Ireland’s promising economic development, and resulted in the fact that the country was still “overwhelmingly agricultural” in the 1840s, whereas, for instance, Scotland at that point was becoming more and more industrial and advanced (2003, 40). That the Irish development was somehow intentionally held back is, perhaps, an overstatement, but, without doubt, it was the strong landlord system, made possible by English structures of colonial rule that retained the country as

feudal, or “quasi-feudal”, until the end of the nineteenth century (Cleary 2003, 35).<sup>1</sup> Remnants of landlordism are present in O’Brien’s *Wild Decembers*, where Joseph Brennan is merged into ancient family feuds, and also in *House of Splendid Isolation*, where McGreevy is targeting an Englishman called Sir Roland, who occupies an old country mansion, not taking the trouble of learning the name of his Irish servant Jakko, naming him “Paddy” instead (*HSI*, 89).

The economic calamity of Ireland culminated in the Great Famine, which reduced the country’s population by 20 percent between 1841 and 1851, as nearly a million people died of starvation and disease, and one and a half million emigrated (Kiberd 1995, 21). The situation was the most desperate among the poorest people, the Irish-speaking population in the rural West, who were entirely dependent on the potato crop. The Famine is echoed in the prologue of *Wild Decembers*, where O’Brien paints a picture of a landscape, where hunger is still present, “*the bone babes and the bone mothers, the fathers too*” (*WD*, 1). O’Brien writes,

*[a]ccording to the annals it happened on Our Lady’s Eve. The blight came in the night and wandered over the fields so that by morning the upright stalks were black ribbons of rot. Slow death for man and beast. A putrid pall over the landscape, hungry marching people meek and mindless [...] Death at every turn.* (*WD*, 1-2; original italics.)

O’Brien seems to suggest that, just as the trauma of the Famine remains in the Irish landscape, it remains in the minds of Irish people, who continue to be obsessed with the land that provides them with livelihood. This comes through especially in Joseph Brennan, whose obsession eventually leads to disastrous consequences, as will become clear in Section 3.1.

As was mentioned above, the Famine had its most destructive effect on the Irish-speaking population, resulting in the fact that, by 1851, only one fourth of the inhabitants of the country spoke Irish (Kiberd 1995, 21). English was, literally, the language of survival; those who only spoke

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<sup>1</sup> The landlord system was based on the division between the Protestant, Anglo-Irish landowners, and the Catholic Gaelic Irish tenants. As Riana O’Dwyer (1988, 115) points out, “[t]he Anglo-Irish class was charged with the administration of English government in Ireland, but was frequently denied the rewards which might have been expected for carrying out similar duties in England”. The landlord system started to break in the late 1870s, as a result of “the land war”, which began a series of events that finally, in 1903, resulted in the land purchase act, “which enticed the bulk of the landlords and tenants to embark on the transfer of ownership to the [Gaelic Irish] occupiers” (Ó Tuathaigh 1988, 140-141).



Irish did not have a chance to leave and start a new life elsewhere. This is why many of the survivors, wanting to spare future generations from what they had experienced, refused to speak Irish to their children. Irish-speaking parents reared their children in a flawed and incomplete English, thus producing a gap in history, as folklore and tradition were lost in the new language.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the Famine, in addition to all of its other horrors, gave the final deathblow to the Irish Gaelic language, which had already been declining under the English influence, and which is today spoken as the native language in only a few isolated pockets on the Western coast of Ireland.

There is speculation among critics and historians on whether or not the Famine catastrophe could have been avoided, or at least made more bearable, with some political will from England. There were disturbing instances supporting the idea that the English did not make an effort to help Ireland, supposedly a part of their own country, in the tragedy it faced. According to Kiberd,

[t]hrough the earlier years of hunger, the British held to their laissez-faire economic theories and ships carried large quantities of grain from the starving island. Arguments raged (and still do) as to the degree of British culpability, but the Irish public opinion was inflamed. (1995, 21.)

Thus, whatever the final truth, the Irish themselves felt they had been betrayed by England once again, and left to deal with the situation by themselves. This view is supported by Cleary, who argues that the economic hardships, the English attempts of suffocating Irish culture, and the greatest outrage of them all, the Famine, made it clear for Irish nationalists that, regardless of the country's constitutional position, the relationship between Ireland and England continued to be a colonial one (2003, 41). This resulted in radicalisation of Irish nationalism, one of the best-known examples of which is the Fenian Brotherhood, emerging in post-Famine Ireland. As Kiberd points out, "the Fenian philosophy was summed up by one of the leaders, John O'Leary, who opined that it was useless for an Irishman to confront an Englishman without a gun in his hand" (1995, 21-22). In other words, Irish militant nationalism became more organised, and, in addition to causing

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<sup>1</sup> This view was presented, for instance, by Dr Louis de Paor from the Centre for Irish Studies in the National University of Ireland, Galway, during his lecture "Irish Studies and Interdisciplinarity. The Decline and Revival of Irish" at the course "Imagining Modern Ireland: An Introduction to Irish Culture Studies" in September 2008 at NUI Galway.

restlessness in Ireland, it boomed among Irish emigrants in, for instance, England, America, and Australia.

It is no coincidence that this is the phase when the transformation of the Irish caricature Paddy from man to something of an ape took place. The Irish were becoming an increasing threat to the Empire, setting, from the English point of view, a bad example to other colonies; according to E. J. Hobsbawm, Irish influence could later be seen, for instance, in Indian nationalism (1990, 105). The fact that they were becoming politically more educated and active created a need for the English to enforce the stereotypes of the Irish as irrational, uncivilized, and violent (Curtis 1997, 94). An effective way to accomplish this was to present them as more animal than human, even monstrous, creatures that were a threat to civilisation, if not controlled.

The idea of militant nationalists as monsters and animals is also present in *House of Splendid Isolation*, where O'Brien parallels nationalist efforts in Ireland before independence, and those fuelled by the problems in Northern Ireland during the latter part of the twentieth century. Setting side by side a volunteer in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) who fought during the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921)<sup>1</sup>, and a volunteer in the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) from the late twentieth century, O'Brien brings up the paradox of one being regarded as a national hero, and the other as a no good terrorist, even a monster.

Returning to the stereotypes of late nineteenth century, for the English, the Irish represented “the other” as much as the people in their other colonies. No claims of the effect of geographical vicinity to the coloniser, or of the “special” relationship between Ireland and England, are enough to overrule the fact that the English applied many of the same, racist methods to the Irish that they did to their other colonial subjects. Returning to the definitions of imperialism and colonialism, given

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<sup>1</sup> The Irish War of Independence, also known as the Anglo-Irish war or the Tan War (the soldiers of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) were called “Black and Tans” after the colouring of their uniforms) was fought between the IRA (Irish Republican Army, formerly known as Irish Volunteers) and the RIC, consisting mostly of former soldiers and officers of the British Army. The IRA fought a guerrilla war, attacking anyone who served the Crown. These attacks were answered by the RIC, who quickly developed an ugly reputation for their methods, including extensive attacks on Irish civilians, and the terrorisation of judicial processes against members of the IRA, making fair trials an impossibility. The war ended in 1921, after the British government offered a truce (see, for instance, Hughes 1993, 49-53).

above – that is, taking control of land that you do not possess, creating settlements on that land, and justifying the subjugation of the colonised people by defining them mentally, morally, and racially inferior – it can certainly be stated that Ireland was a colony among other colonies of the British Empire.

The length of Ireland's time as a colony had far-reaching consequences for Irish culture. As became clear in the course of this section, the first serious steps to anglicise the Irish were taken as early as the sixteenth century. Ever since then, Irish culture had been strongly under English influence, and by the nineteenth century, and at the latest, after the catastrophic effects of the Famine, it was on the verge of destruction. Every aspect of Irish culture had been deemed backward and worthless by the English, the emergence of militant nationalism ultimately proving the Irish to be bloodthirsty monsters. It is no wonder that, as national feeling began to rise all around Europe at the end of nineteenth century, the Irish, too, found the keys for ending the oppression in promoting a culture of their own. As will be revealed in the following section, this resulted in a variety of cultural nationalist movements that were all aiming to restore the value of a once great culture that had been suffocated for centuries.

## 2.2 “A terrible beauty is born”<sup>1</sup> – Irish cultural nationalism

In this section I will show how Irish cultural nationalism, arising from resistance against English colonisation over Ireland, influenced the formation of Irish identity, and laid the grounds for what it meant to be an Irish man or an Irish woman. As Hobsbawm points out, several European nation-states came to existence throughout the nineteenth century, and from the 1870s onwards, nationalism became an important part of the domestic politics in countries throughout Europe (1990, 104-105). On the British Isles, increasing nationalist aspirations became evident, for instance, in that Irish nationalism “grew – the number of newspapers describing themselves as ‘national’ or ‘nationalist’ rose from 1 in 1871 through 13 in 1881 to 33 in 1891 – and became politically explosive in British politics” (Hobsbawm 1990, 105). During this time, nationalist movements also emerged among the Welsh and the Scottish; the latter were able to improve their position in British politics, securing “a Scottish Office in government and [...] a guaranteed national share of the public expenditure of the United Kingdom” (Hobsbawm 1990, 105).

According to Hobsbawm, nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century meant that

*any* body of people considering themselves a ‘nation’ claimed the right to self-determination which, in the last analysis, meant the right to a separate sovereign independent state for their territory. [...] [E]thnicity and language became the central, increasingly the decisive or even the only criteria of potential nationhood. (1990, 102; original italics.)

This newly found importance of ethnicity and language goes hand in hand with the emergence of racial science, discussed in the previous section. Whereas the concept of ‘race’ was used to undermine certain groups of people, it was also used conversely, to unify and create a feeling of belonging. As Hobsbawm points out, the ideas of ‘race’, ‘nation’, and ‘language’ were mixed, and often used almost interchangeably (1990, 108). He goes on to say that “there is an evident analogy between the insistence of racists on racial purity [...] and the insistence of so many [...] forms of

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<sup>1</sup> A line from the poem “Easter 1916” by William Butler Yeats (2001, 2380).

linguistic nationalism on the need to purify the national language from foreign elements” (Hobsbawm 1990, 108). This is true in the case of Ireland, where the above-discussed concept of ‘Celtic’, previously regarded as something negative, was now used in the opposite sense, and came to signify things positive and valuable. Irish nationalists defined Ireland as the nation of a Celtic people who speak a Celtic language, Irish Gaelic, and have a glorious, Celtic Gaelic tradition separate from the Anglo-Saxons. However, the idea of a unified, Irish people with a unified, Irish tradition was complicated by several issues.

For one, the Irish people were divided in two; there were the Gaelic Irish Catholics, that is, the descendants of the Celts inhabiting the island since ancient times, and the Anglo-Irish Protestants, the descendants of the Norman settlers. In reality, it was difficult, if not impossible, to define whether a person was of Gaelic or Anglo-Irish descent; families ought to have become mixed in the course of centuries. Nevertheless, as Riana O’Dwyer (1988, 117) points out, the friction between these two classes was the main political issue in Ireland throughout the nineteenth century. Whereas for the Gaelic Irish the Anglo-Irish were to a great extent just English, the Anglo-Irish themselves felt thoroughly Irish. Their families had occupied the Irish soil for centuries, the first remarkable waves of settlement coming to Ireland in late sixteenth century, and they had, by now, most certainly developed a unique, Irish identity. Despite this, the Gaelic Irish still seemed to regard them as occupiers, who had stolen the lands of their ancestors. This becomes evident in an observation made by Hughes (1994, 17):

The land issue had great symbolic importance: not surprisingly, it was the subject of numerous myths, in particular that of the oppressive English landlord. In many cases the oppressor of tenants was in fact a substantial Irish landlord. This is an example of how nationalism acted as a cloak for self-seeking and a means of disguising divisions in Irish society.

In other words, the tendency to simplify the border between Englishness and Irishness became a great separative factor at the birth of Irish nationalism, and, as shall become clear later on in Section 3.1 in relation to O’Brien’s trilogy, remained as such throughout the first century of Irish

independence. This separation resulted in the fact that there emerged two strong forms of cultural nationalism in Ireland: the Gaelic one and the Anglo-Irish one.

In the course of the colonial period, a variety of nationalist movements, stretching through both political and cultural aspects, had risen in Gaelic Irish and Anglo-Irish groups alike. According to O'Dwyer (1988, 122), a clear separation between “those who were working politically and those who were working culturally for change in Ireland” took place after the death of Parnell<sup>1</sup>. This marked the beginning of the phenomenon known as cultural nationalism in Ireland. John P. Harrington, in his introduction to *Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama* (2009), defines cultural nationalism as follows:

Cultural nationalism, generally a corollary movement, is an aesthetic program to organize for a native population a sustaining image of itself, its uniqueness, and its dignity, all contrary to the subordinate and submissive identity nurtured by external, foreign administration. (2009, xiii.)

This supports the view that, in the case of Ireland, the emergence of cultural nationalism was clearly a response to colonial oppression. Harrington remarks that with the eclipse of Irish political nationalism, resulting from Parnell's fall, cultural nationalism rose to inherit its influence (2009, xv).

In the light of the issues discussed in Section 2.1, it is no wonder that there was a great need among Irish nationalists on both sides to show that, contrary to prevalent ideas, Irish were a noble people with a culture of their own, separate from the English, and valuable in its own right. Perhaps the most famous manifestation of the goals of Irish cultural nationalism is Douglas Hyde's (1860-1949) “The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland” (1894). In the essay, originally presented as a lecture in Irish National Literary Society in Dublin in 1892, Hyde, who eventually became the first President of Ireland, discussed the destructive effects of anglicisation on Irish culture, and criticised

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Stewart Parnell was the leading figure in the field of Irish politics in the 1880s. Of Anglo-Irish ascent, Parnell took an active role in the Home Rule movement, and promoted the Irish cause in the British Parliament. He was, nevertheless, brought down by his love affair with Kitty O'Shea, who was the wife of another member of his party. After this, the Catholic Church condemned him “as a public sinner unfit for leadership”, and there was a radical split in his party. Parnell died in 1891, soon after his fall from grace. (Kiberd 1995, 23-25.)

the “men who read English books, and know nothing about Gaelic literature, nevertheless protesting as a matter of sentiment that they hate the country which at every turn they rush to imitate” (1894, 119). He went on by describing the paradox that, even though the Irish imitate the English, they have still been unable to adapt to the rule of the Empire. Since the Irish were unable to become English, the only thing to do, according to Hyde, was “to cultivate what they have rejected, and build up an Irish nation on Irish lines” (1894, 120).

The only problem was the fact that, after eight hundred years under Foreign rule, it was not clear for anyone what Irish culture actually was. Nevertheless, at the end of the nineteenth century, both groups, the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish alike, saw it as their task to construct an Irish culture out of the scraps and fragments that were retrievable from under centuries of English influence. The keys for reviving, or rather, inventing an Irish culture, were found in the glorious past of the country before English oppression. Consequently, there emerged a flood of movements which aimed at reviving Irish tradition, folklore, music, and language.

The most influential movement on the Gaelic side was the Gaelic League, founded in 1893 by Douglas Hyde, David Comyn, Eoin Mac Néill, and Fr O’Growney, among others. As Noel McGonagle (1988, 100) remarks, the goal of this movement was, in short, “to revive the Gaelic [Irish] language as the vernacular of the people of Ireland and secondly to create a new literature in that language”. Reviving the Irish language comes up in O’Brien’s *House of Splendid Isolation*, where McGreevy is fond of Irish expressions throughout the story. One of his comrades actually refuses to admit to know any English, having spoken it fluently just moments before, only communicating in Irish as he is caught by the Police; “*Ni Tuigim Bearla*”, I do not understand English (*HSI*, 173). Thus, McGreevy’s organisation seems well aware of the goals of the Gaelic League, stated nearly a hundred years before their time.

One of the most important figures in the Gaelic League was Patrick Pearse (Pádraig Mac Piarais, 1879-1916), who contributed greatly to the creation of a new literature in the Irish language. How

this new literature should be constructed was the object of great dispute: some wanted to base it on the Gaelic oral tradition, which was “native and Irish *in extremis*”, whereas others were of the opinion that it should be “modern in diction, content, and life” (McGonagle 1988, 102). Pearse was of the modern school, and experimented with new forms of literature; he was one of the first to write short stories in Irish.

His career, and life, nevertheless, ended tragically in the Easter Rising of 1916<sup>1</sup>, in the aftermath of which he, along with other leaders of the rising, was issued a death penalty under martial law, and executed by the order of Sir John Maxwell, who did not stop to consider the consequences, or consult a higher authority on the matter (Hughes 1994, 40). As Hughes (*ibid.*) points out, Maxwell’s decision can be understood when considering the circumstances from his point of view – “a group of terrorists had launched an armed insurrection against the government while that government was engaged in a major war [that is, the First World War] – but it was politically very short-sighted”. By executing the leaders of the rising, the English made them martyrs of the struggle for Irish independence, and helped enforce the bond between Nationalism and the Catholic Church (Hughes 1994, 41).

The heroic death of these men fit right into the Irish “cult of Heroes”, as well as to Catholic idealisation of self-sacrifice, greatly inspiring the cultural, as well as the political, nationalist movement. Heroism was an important theme in Irish culture since ancient folklore, the folk stories relating the adventures and bravery of heroes such as king Conchobar Mac Nessa, Lugh Lámhfhada (that is, “Lugh of the Long Hand”), and the greatest hero of all, Cúchulainn, who will be introduced in more detail in the following section. As Brown (1981, 80-81) points out, “[t]he heroic ideal [...] entered the consciousness of twentieth-century Ireland as a metaphor of political hope”. In other words, it was hoped and believed that brave men would save the day, and Irish heroism would

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<sup>1</sup> The Easter Rising took place in Ireland on Easter week (24–30 April) 1916. It was carried out by Irish republicans, and the aim was to end English rule in Ireland, and establish an Irish Republic. Members of the organisations involved, led, among others, by Patrick Pearse and James Connolly, took over key locations in Dublin, and proclaimed Ireland independent. The Rising was subdued by the British Government, the leaders were tried in court-martial, and executed. (See, for instance, Hughes 1994, 39–41.)



prevail once more.

According to McGonagle (1988, 105-106), the death of Pearse, and some other “very enlightened people” in the same instance, resulted in the fact that, in the subsequent years, the Gaelic cause took a more traditional, puritanical, perhaps even antiquarian, approach, and turned its back on modern developments. This had far-reaching effects, since it was on the principles of the Gaelic League, the principles set, among others, by Hyde in his 1892 lecture, that the society of independent Ireland eventually came to be built upon. As the following extract reveals, Ireland was to become Irish and Irish only. Hyde declares that,

[i]n a word, we must strive to cultivate everything that is most racial, most smacking of the soil, most Gaelic, most Irish, because in spite of the little admixture of Saxon blood in the north-east corner, this island is and will ever remain Celtic at the core, far more Celtic than most people imagine [...] [W]e must create a strong feeling against West-Britonism, for it – if we give it the least chance, or show it the smallest quarter – will overwhelm us like a flood [...] (1894, 159.)

Hyde’s belittlement of the Anglo-Saxon influence is remarkable; to talk about a “little admixture of Saxon blood in the north-east corner” is to deny the actual origins of a great part of the population, including several leading characters in the nationalist movement, and, most likely, Hyde himself. The antipathy towards “Saxon blood” and “West Britonism” that Hyde here is presenting was a common feature in Irish cultural nationalism, and contributed to the eventual division of the country. It is also echoed in both of O’Brien’s novels, especially in the male characters’ contempt for everything that is not Irish. However, before proceeding to O’Brien and life in independent Ireland, I will introduce the most influential cultural nationalist movement on the Anglo-Irish side, the Irish Literary Revival.

Whereas the Gaelic League, despite the fact that it was not founded as a political organisation, soon became radically politicised, the major movement on the Anglo-Irish side, the Irish Literary Revival, despite the fact that the majority of its leading figures were politically active, was not as overtly political. The key figures in this movement were William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta

Gregory, John Millington Synge, Edward Martyn, George Russell, and Douglas Hyde (who, as mentioned above, was also involved in the Gaelic League). Whereas the Gaelic League, especially after the Easter Rising, emphasised “preservation and restoration”, the Literary Revivalists saw themselves as promoting “creativity and exploration” (O’Dwyer 1988, 122). According to O’Dwyer (1988, 122), it was the view of Yeats and his friends that “[t]he Gaelic material, ancient and modern, should be used for the purpose of throwing new light on the situation of contemporary Ireland, self-aware, self-confident and culturally distinct from England”. In other words, the goal of this movement was to find the unspoiled, “real Ireland”, hidden under colonial rule, and return it from margin to centre.

As Harrington (2009, xv) points out, the Irish Literary Revival swept through all literary genres: “poetry, fiction, criticism, new histories, and translation from and into Irish Gaelic”. Nevertheless, the most influential public role was carried by the revival of Irish drama. In 1897, Yeats, Gregory, and Martyn set the foundations for a “national dramatic movement of Ireland”, the high point of which was the founding of Abbey Theatre, the national theatre of Ireland, in 1904 (Harrington 2009, ix). The agenda behind the plays staged in Abbey Theatre was clear: on the one hand they were to represent the theatre’s audience, that is, the people of Ireland, and on the other they aimed at elevating that audience. As Harrington rightly remarks,

national drama has a complex relation to its audience: to reflect the audience as it is, and simultaneously to improve it. Both roles are presumptuous. The first presumes the authority to identify the nation, and exercise of radical reduction and selection in even so small a country as Ireland. [...] The second [...] presumes to identify the people’s proper aspirations and to require their enrolment, by attendance, in an improving program. (2009, x.)

The fact that the writers, that is, Yeats, Gregory, and Martyn, among others, who undertook the mission of revealing the essential Irish identity were of Anglo-Irish descent, and to a great extent, upper-class, was seen as problematic by some political nationalists (Harrington 2009, xiii). This, nevertheless, did not hinder them from making their own interpretations and images of what the

Irish culture was, or should be, and turning those interpretations into successful plays. Harrington is correct in saying that the most influential plays from the early days of Irish national drama could be seen as creating an “invented folk culture that served the needs of artists and intellectuals”, rather than representing any real Ireland (2009, xiii-xiv). However, even if the culture represented by the plays was, to a great extent, a product of the writers’ imaginations, it did not reduce the effect they had on the audience.

*Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), a play written by W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, is one of the most famous examples of how the Revival worked in creating national identity.<sup>1</sup> That the Poor Old Woman, and Cathleen Ni Houlihan, into whom she is transformed at the climax of the play, are both traditional symbols of Ireland was clear to every single Irish person in the audience. The function of the play was, thus, to encourage men to fight for Cathleen, that is, their country. As Nicholas Grene (2009, 428) points out, the fact that the main male character Michael, performing the heroic act that enabled the transformation of Cathleen, was an ordinary peasant man, meant that any *male* member of the audience could take up a similar role, and be rewarded by the transformation of the old woman into a beautiful young girl. Any Irish man could, thus, defend his country against the English menace.

Brown (1981, 80) clarifies the issue further by pointing out that “[w]hen such literary antiquarianism had managed to suggest a continuity of experience between past and present, a powerful propagandist weapon had been forged”, and the people were convinced that “the heroic could yet again dominate the Irish world”. This is the mentality taken up by the participants of the Easter Rising of 1916, who, as I mentioned earlier, ended up as heroic martyrs. The call of Cathleen

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<sup>1</sup> *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is set in Killala, west of Ireland, in the year 1798, when French forces landed there to support the Irish rebellion. The setting is a cottage, where an Irish family is preparing for the wedding of their eldest son, Michael, which is to take place on the following day. The preparations are interrupted by a strange, old woman, who comes to visit the house. The woman has been forced to leave her home and wander around the country on the account of “[t]oo many strangers in [her] house” (Yeats and Gregory 2009, 7). The family offers her food, drink, shelter, or money, but it is not any of these things that she is looking for. She is only looking for help to regain her “four beautiful green fields” (*Ibid*). In the end, as the French ships land the shore of Killala, Michael rejects his bride, and follows the old woman to join the rebellion. After Michael has decided to help her drive away the strangers in her house, the old woman turns into “a young girl [with] the walk of a queen” (Yeats and Gregory 2009, 11).

has also been heard by McGreevy in O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation*, as I will soon point out.

The role that *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* offered for men was clear, and taking a closer look, the role offered to women is equally clear. The play presents two types of Irish womanhood. On the one hand there are Michael's mother and bride, that is, Bridget Gillane and Delia Cahel, who "represent a realist, maternal order, the values of hearth and home", and on the other hand, there is "the Poor Old Woman", or Cathleen Ni Houlihan, who is "symbolic, nomadic, virginal, sacrificial rather than procreative" (Quinn 2009, 429). It becomes quite clear in the end which of these types is preferred. As Michael leaves his bride in favour of Cathleen, the realist peasant womanhood is made voiceless by "the symbolic woman-nation" (Quinn 2009, 430). As Antoinette Quinn, who refers to the end of the play as "[t]he notorious transformation scene", puts it, "*Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, which subordinated the interests of women to a sacrificial paradigm of male patriotism and invoked a literary tradition of political allegory, was enshrined as the exemplary nationalist play" (2009, 429).

Using woman as symbol for the nation is by no means exclusively an Irish phenomenon.

According to Nira Yuval-Davis,

[w]omen [...] are often required to carry this 'burden of representation', as they are constructed as symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, both personally and collectively. [...] A figure of a woman, often a mother, symbolizes in many cultures the spirit of the collectivity, whether it is Mother Russia, Mother Ireland or Mother India. (1997, 45.)

These symbols result in the fact that women are often regarded as bearing the "collectivity's", for instance, the nation's, honour; it is the "proper behaviour" of the women that embodies the borders of the community (Yuval-Davis 1997, 46). This is essential in all three of O'Brien's novels, most visibly in *Down by the River*. As Mary's effort to have an abortion in England is revealed, and she is forced to return home, politicians and barristers are alerted. Irritated at the inconvenience, a senior barrister, first hearing the reason for the interruption of his supper, calls Mary "[s]ome little slut about to pour piss on the nation's breast" (*DR*, 167). Thus, her primary crime seems to be that by her actions, she is disgracing the nation that she ought to represent.

Yuval-Davis goes on to say that women's position in the "collectivity" is often ambivalent. Whereas "they often symbolize the collectivity[']s] unity, honour, and the *raison d'être* of specific national and ethnic projects", they are still "excluded from the collective 'we' of the body politic, and retain an object rather than a subject position". (Yuval-Davis 1997, 47; original italics.) In other words, despite, or because of, their symbolic value, women in real life are often in a marginal position in the society. As Yuval-Davis remarks, "[s]trict cultural codes of what it is to be a 'proper woman' are often developed to keep women in this inferior power position" (1997, 47). These codes are a key feature in O'Brien's trilogy, and they will be further discussed in the following sections.

The issue that comes across from what has been said above is the fact that cultural nationalism in Ireland, as well as several other locations, was essentially a male enterprise. Despite the fact that Lady Gregory, for instance, was an immensely important figure in the Irish Literary Revival both intellectually and financially, she always remained in the background. Her invisibility is detectable, for instance, in the fact that she was never mentioned as a co-writer of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*; up until recently, it has been regarded as a play by Yeats alone. According to Quinn, it was, nevertheless, Lady Gregory, who "scripted the roles of the realist peasants [in the play], the Gillane family and Delia" (2009, 430). Furthermore, the contribution of a nationalist, political and cultural movement of Irish women, Inghinidhe na hEireann (Daughters of Ireland), to the production of the play as its sponsor was never acknowledged by Yeats. Later on, the Inghinidhe broke away from the Irish National Theatre Society as a protest against its representation of women. (Quinn 2009, 432.)

Irish writer Roddy Doyle refers to the dismissal of Irish women in the nationalist movement in his novel *A Star Called Henry* (1999). The novel gives a detailed account of the 1916 Easter Rising through the eyes of Henry Smart, a young boy, who takes part in the rising as a volunteer. Henry is in the group of volunteers led by Pearse and Connolly that take over the General Post Office in

Dublin, and make it the rebel headquarters. The Irish Volunteer Army is supported by republican women's organisation, Cumann na mBan, who perform important supportive tasks, such as intelligence and maintenance, for the army. Nevertheless, as can be read in the following discussion between Henry and Miss O'Shea, a member of Cumann na mBan, the women are soon disillusioned, and disappointed in finding what is the role planned for them in independent Ireland.

As Miss O'Shea puts it,

- I didn't come here to make stew, Henry, she said.
- She sighed. She sounded angry.
- I never asked you for stew, [Henry] said.
- She sighed again.
- I'm here for my freedom too, she said. Just like you and the men upstairs.
- Yeah, [Henry] said.
- I want my freedom too, she said.
- Yeah.
- To do what I want. [...] –Do you know what I'm talking about, Henry?
- Yeah, [Henry] said. –You want to behave like a man.
- Yes, she said. I think you understand.
- But they'll never let you, [Henry] said. [...]
- I know, she said. –I knew it the minute they started shouting for their tea. (Doyle 2000, 122-123.)

Thus, Doyle's Miss O'Shea, and the hundreds of real women who joined the nationalist cause in the hope that they would create a modern country, where men and women would be equally free, found that, in the new state, they were to become invisible, and confined to the home.

As I wrote in the introduction, the voicelessness of Irish women continued throughout the twentieth century, and distorted Irish history, in that it became a history of great men, where women were only to appear on a symbolic level. When, for instance, talking about the Easter Rising, it is rarely mentioned that there was, as Doyle suggests, a large group of women involved; in the books of history, the Rising remains the story of heroic, male martyrdom, a sacrifice made in the name of Cathleen Ni Houlihan. This legacy, the "burden of [silent] representation" as Yuval-Davis (1997, 45) puts it, is the legacy that writers such as Eavan Boland, Nuala O'Faolain, and Edna O'Brien have had to deal with, and overcome. Boland writes effectively about her relationship with

symbolic women in Irish literature, asking

[w]hat had happened? How had the women of our past – the women of a long struggle and a terrible survival – undergone such transformation? How had they suffered Irish history [...] only to reemerge in Irish poetry as fictive queens and national sibyls? The more I thought about it, the more uneasy I became. The wrath and grief of Irish history seemed to me, as it did to many, one of our true possessions. Women were a part of that wrath, had endured that grief. It seemed to me a species of human insult that at the end of all [...] they should become elements of style rather than aspects of truth. (1996, 135.)

The cultural nationalist images of heroic men and symbolic women are very much present in O'Brien's 1990s trilogy. The society she is depicting is a society distorted by these images, and her characters are, to a great extent, people who face problems and intolerance due to the fact that they clash with these images. All of the characters are struggling with the narrow definition of Irishness, and experiencing difficulty in adapting to the position that is given to them in the community. In the following sections, I will show the problems faced by the characters of *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Wild Decembers* in a postcolonial, extremely conservative, and xenophobic society in which they fail to find acceptance. The main characters I will be focusing on are Josie O'Meara, McGreevy, and James O'Meara in *House of Splendid Isolation*, and Breege Brennan, Joseph Brennan, and Michael Bugler in *Wild Decembers*. I will refer to *Down by the River* and Mary MacNamara where it is evident in regard to the analysis, and describe Irish historical and cultural developments where it is essential to paint a picture of the culture and society around the characters at different points in the twentieth century.

The Irish Free State, which is the setting for Josie's younger days in *House of Splendid Isolation*, and which later formed into the Republic of Ireland, was first established as a self-governing dominion of the British Empire in 1922. It originally included the entire island, but Northern Ireland soon opted out, thus remaining a part of the United Kingdom. Since then, there have existed two Irelands: the Republic and Northern Ireland. The division is essential especially in *House of Splendid Isolation*, in which the Northern Irish IRA gunman McGreevy travels to the Republic in

order to perform an attack on a holidaying Englishman. Even if O'Brien does not specify when the events take place, it can be gathered from several clues in the course of the story that *House of Splendid Isolation*, similarly to *Wild Decembers*, is set in Ireland at the turn of the 1990s. This was the period of time when the Troubles of Northern Ireland, the violence between the (mostly) Catholic nationalists, and the (mostly) Protestant Unionists, were the most aggressive.

Since the beginnings of the Irish Free State, there was a determination to develop the country along the lines set by the cultural nationalists towards a unique, essentially Irish society and culture. Anticipating independence, Douglas Hyde had begun his aforementioned 1892 lecture by claiming that

[w]hen we speak of 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising the Irish Nation', we mean it, not as a protest against imitating what is best in the English people, for that would be absurd, but rather to show the folly of neglecting what is Irish, and hastening to adopt, pell-mell, and indiscriminately, everything that is English, simply because it is English. (1894, 117.)

Nevertheless, when regarding the politics in the Free State, and later, in the Irish Republic, the ultimate goal seems to have been exactly the opposite of what Hyde is saying; it came to be the tendency to reject everything English on the account of it being English, whether it was good or bad. Being Irish was actually, to a great extent, about being non-English. Whereas England was headed towards a more liberal society, Ireland took up extreme conservatism, counting on Victorian values. Irishness in the newly independent Ireland could be summarised as follows; a true Irish citizen was Celtic, Gaelic, Catholic, rural, and male.



### **3. Éire, a land of heroic men and symbolic women**

As I pointed out in the course of the previous section, the narrow definition of Irishness had far-reaching effects on Irish identities – especially on the definitions of Irish manhood and womanhood. It created an intolerant, patriarchal culture, in which the heroes of the past were the ultimate role example for men, and women were refused a voice of their own, only represented through male nationalist allegories or Catholic images of womanhood. The Irish cult of heroes and essential Irishness, as well as the cult of the Virgin Mary / Mother Ireland resonated far, and as can be seen in O'Brien's novels, these phenomena have continued to distort the lives of Irish people throughout the first century of independence.

In the first part of the following section, on the basis of what I have written in the course of this thesis, I will consider the role of the Irish hero and qualifications for a real Irishman in relation to McGreevy, Joseph Brennan, and Michael Bugler. The second part will be an analysis of how the nationalist and Catholic symbolism related to Josie O'Meara and Breege Brennan affect the treatment and actions of these two female characters. I will begin by considering the relationship between IRA gunman McGreevy and the Irish society.

### 3.1 Irish heroes and outsiders – McGreevy, Joseph Brennan and Michael Bugler

The main male character in *House of Splendid Isolation*, McGreevy, is an IRA fighter from Northern Ireland, famous for his violent deeds, and feared on all sides. The story begins with McGreevy hiding inside a tree trunk, after having narrowly escaped an ambush set for him and his comrades by the Police. He feels betrayed by all parties, since it has been someone in his own company who has deceived them, and caused the death of those he was travelling with. “English bastards, Free State bastards, all the same” (*HSI*, 7).

From the very first moments, O’Brien brings up the paradox in relation to McGreevy, that is, the paradox in how the crisis in Northern Ireland and the actions of the IRA are regarded by Irish society. The people in the Irish Republic do not have any sympathy for the situation in Northern Ireland; they are only concerned with the uncertainty that these terrorists are inflicting upon their everyday lives and basic security. The first view of what is happening is given by Sheila, police officer Rory Purcell’s wife, who tries to understand what is going through her husband’s head:

A war of a kind was going on, though no one admitted it, a war in bursts, young men coming down from up North, coming down to rob banks and post offices, postmistresses in lonely stations in dread of their lives, ordinary folk too in dread of these faceless men with their guns and their hoods. [...] Once she had asked Rory what he would have done if he hadn’t been a policeman and he said the same, the very same, it’s either them or us, him or me. (*HSI*, 9.)

It becomes clear by what Sheila is thinking that the efforts of the IRA are seen as nothing else than deeds of terrorism, and the organisation is regarded as the enemy. “[T]hem”, the “faceless men” are the opposite of “ordinary folk”, who are just trying to live their lives in peace.

As Hughes (1994, 69) points out, the problems of Northern Ireland are rooted in the fact that it originated as “the state that no one wanted”, and it has thus never to this date formed into a functioning political entity. Whereas the Northern Republicans would have liked to become a part of the Irish Free State, the Unionists wanted to remain an intact part of Britain. “Nationalists saw Northern Ireland as temporary and illegitimate, and refused to have anything to do with its

institutions”, which contributed to the fact that Protestant Unionists saw the Catholic Nationalists as disloyal (Hughes 1994, 71). Among the Unionists, this created hostility towards the Nationalists, and resulted in “an almost racial contempt for the Catholic Irish” (Hughes 1994, 71); they became “*Papist leper scum*”, as McGreevy puts it (*HSI*, 113; original italics). Consequently, the partition between the two groups continued to deepen, and resulted in the fact that Northern Irish Catholics faced discrimination in all aspects of their lives. Some of Northern Ireland’s biggest employers refused to hire Catholics, and the living standards in Catholic communities were often low. In addition to this, the Irish flag, along with Gaelic names, was officially banned. (Hughes 1994, 72.)

The terror and violence was continuously present on both sides, and all the years of problems and disappointments culminated in the late 1960s in what Hughes (1994, 81) calls the beginning of the “renewed bout of Troubles”<sup>1</sup>, which continued up to the late 1990s, ending, at least for the moment, in the Belfast “Good Friday” Agreement of 1998. During the Troubles, the Catholic IRA (the Provisional Irish Republican Army) committed terrorist attacks against extreme Unionist organisations such as the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) which, in turn, answered with terror and violence against the IRA, both sides also causing a great number of civilian casualties. The official security force of Northern Ireland, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), as well as the British Army, were also involved in the violence. (See, for instance, Hughes 1994, 81-83.) This is the setting from which McGreevy is coming.

Soon after they had begun, the Troubles were inflicted upon the South as well, as Northern IRA activists were trying to make their cause known, and wanted the South to wake up to their crisis. This is the situation in *House of Splendid Isolation*, where McGreevy has been sent down South to the Republic on a mission. The fact that the Irish Republic was seen as turning its back on the

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<sup>1</sup> The reason for calling this “the renewed bout” of Troubles is the fact that, originally, the Troubles referred to nationalist activism of Irish Volunteers and Irish Citizen Army from 1914, the beginnings of the First World War, up to 1921, up to the end of the Irish war of independence. (See, for instance, Ó Tuathaig 1988, 145-149.) J. G. Farrell’s famous novel *Troubles* (1970) is set in this period of time, describing an outdated way of life of Anglo-Irish aristocracy that clings on to old perceptions of British imperial authority despite a rising rebellion, and a falling empire around them.

problems of the North is reflected in McGreevy's bitter thoughts: "Oh the sunny South where people had time for love and strawberries, forgot their brothers and sisters across the border, let them rot" (*HSI*, 63). Thus there were bomb attacks and other violent outbursts to make the South see the gruesome reality that their fellow Catholic Republicans up North were living in. However, as it becomes clear in *House of Splendid Isolation*, most people in the Republic failed to see the political scheme behind IRA terrorism, and did not, quite understandably, sympathise at all with the "faceless men" who were threatening their lives.

McGreevy, who, for Sheila, her family, and all decent Irish folk, represents yet another example of these "faceless men", is rarely thought to be human. McGreevy himself is the first one to acknowledge this in the novel. "He's had deaths in his own house so he knows what it is through and through and still they call him an animal" (*HSI*, 13). The animal comparison continues throughout the story; McGreevy is referred to as "[a] savage ... Out and out savage" (*HSI*, 151) by people in the village, and the guards who are searching for him are of the opinion that "[t]he hounds would smell him for the animal he is" (*HSI*, 70). Josie O'Meara, whose house McGreevy chooses as his hiding place, also regards him as inhuman at the beginning of their acquaintance. As McGreevy first appears at Josie's bedroom door, she observes that "[t]here is something animal within the stillness of him, as if he is covered in a tawny fur that cannot be seen or smelt with lay senses" (*HSI*, 61). Later she writes in her diary that "[h]e is like some sort of wood animal" (*HSI*, 78), and as she loses her temper with him, she refers to McGreevy and his kind as "[m]aggots" (*HSI*, 110).

The fact that McGreevy is regarded as animal parallels disturbingly with the late nineteenth century English caricature imagery of animal Irishmen, discussed in Section 2.1. Just as Irish nationalists at the turn of the twentieth century were deemed inhuman, bloodthirsty monsters by the coloniser, so were the IRA activists in the latter part of twentieth century regarded by Irish people as beasts who are incapable of any sympathy or human feeling. This is also confirmed by the behaviour of Rory Purcell's daughter, Aoife. Aoife claims that, returning from school, she has seen

McGreevy, “the red man”, “around the corner, nearly naked, washing himself in the rain barrel and seeing her, said he was starving, he’d eat a young child” (*HSI*, 100). Although it turns out that this was all a product of Aoife’s imagination, it reveals how children are afraid of McGreevy as if he was not a human being at all, but rather a child-eating monster.

*House of Splendid Isolation* reveals a determination among the people of the Irish Republic not to make any connection between the IRA members of their day, and the Irish nationalists of the past, although their goal is, to a great extent, the same; a united, independent Irish Republic. Whereas those taking part in the Easter Rising of 1916, and those fighting in the IRA during the war of independence (1919-1921), are regarded as national heroes and martyrs for Ireland, people such as McGreevy, who base their philosophy on similar ideas, are regarded as the enemy. “Evil men. Evil men. Patrick Pearse, Michael Collins and co. would have their brains sprayed on a roadside”, is the judgement made of IRA terrorists by Josie’s unpleasant acquaintance Martin, “the Snooper” (*HSI*, 106). Thus, in the Snooper’s opinion, the current IRA has nothing to do with the heroes of 1916; whereas the Easter Rising was performed in the name of Irish independence, the IRA, claiming to have a similar motivation, is regarded as a group of terrorists who would be better off dead. This view is quite similar to the one that the English commander presented when deciding on the execution of Patrick Pearse and others in 1916.

Whenever the similarities between Irish national heroes and the members of the current IRA are hinted at, the one suggesting anything of the like is quickly silenced. This comes up when policeman Rory’s son, Caimin, hears the news about McGreevy’s escape, and remembers something he has learnt in school. McGreevy is said to be on the run, to which Caimin says: “Cúchulainn did that Daddy... He ran the length of Ireland, kicking a ball” (*HSI*, 12). As I mentioned in the previous section, Cúchulainn – a character embraced by cultural nationalists, and referred to, for instance, by Yeats in several plays and poems – is the hero of ancient Irish folklore, known for his adventures and heroic deeds. Rory is not pleased with his son making the

comparison, and replies irritably to Caimin's observation: "Don't you be getting any ideas" (*HSI*, 12). A similar situation appears when two members of the Police are keeping watch by Josie's house, as they suspect that she is hiding McGreevy. The younger guard, Cormac, points out that "if you'd been in 1916 you'd be on their side" (*HSI*, 187). His companion, Matt, will not accept the allegory, and rejects Cormac's statement, arguing that "[t]hat's different ... That's a totally different ball game ... These guys are without conscience, without ideals and with only one proclamation, money and guns and murder, guns and money." (*HSI*, 187.)

The question of whether or not McGreevy as an IRA member is a terrorist, or equal to a soldier fighting for independence, is constantly present in the discussions he has with Josie. As he has settled in the house, Josie ponders upon what he intends to do with her. "He will kill her, put her body in a sack and dump it in the lake, he will not kill, one of his comrades will come and do it. He will maim her." (*HSI*, 63.) She also recalls "details she has read of, shops, houses and people blown to crazed insignificances" (*HSI*, 72). Later on, as they start to communicate, their discussions show a profound failure in understanding one another's position. As McGreevy justifies his control of Josie's life, he points out that "[t]hat's how it is in war". Josie claims that it is not her war that he is fighting, to which McGreevy replies: "It's your war whether you like it or not". (*HSI*, 74.)

After experimenting with hostility, Josie tries a different kind of approach, bringing up her old age, and appealing to McGreevy with all the trouble that his arrival has brought upon her. McGreevy apologises for the inconvenience, but points out that the size of the house easily allows for two people to live there. The discussion ends with McGreevy sarcastically referring to Josie in Irish as "*Bhean an Tighe*", "[w]oman of the house", suggesting that he despises her upper-class view of the world. (*HSI*, 75-76.) Josie feels humiliated after the discussion, since McGreevy seems to think that her life is out of touch with the reality of current Ireland, and she lives in luxury in her big country house, continuing the old landlord tradition of her deceased, Anglo-Irish husband. Even if, in reality, Josie's life has been far from luxury, an issue that will be clarified in the following

sections, she seems to feel a sting in her conscience, since she had not, for instance, been in Ireland in the turbulent years of fighting for independence; during the struggle, she was in America, working as a maid in Brooklyn.

With McGreevy undermining Josie's national loyalty, she wants to show him that she too knows about "[h]istory... Our woes" (*HSI*, 85). Josie lets McGreevy read the diary of her uncle, a young man who fell in the "Tan War", the war of independence. McGreevy is moved by what he reads, and identifies with the volunteer's experiences: "Your uncle was one of us". Josie, however, is quick in replying that "what they did was different", that McGreevy and his kind are only murderers of innocent people. (*HSI*, 85.) Josie's uncle is a real hero, and even a song was written about how he and his comrades were shot on a bridge. This shows that Josie is very much attached to the Irish cultural nationalist tradition of worshipping national heroes, and is unable to make the connection between the struggles of the past and the struggles of the day. McGreevy loses his temper with Josie, her "gracious living", and her "folklore", accepting heroes only in songs, but not in real life. "For Christ's sake, I'm trying to save my fucking country so stop telling me about innocent people". (*HSI*, 85.)

When Josie inquires what McGreevy and his kind are actually aiming at, what exactly they mean by saving the country, McGreevy says that their goal is "[t]o get the British out of Ireland". After that they want "[j]ustice for all. Peace. Personal identity. Racial identity." (*HSI*, 77.) McGreevy's statement takes us right back to colonial Ireland; he is repeating the goals of the Gaelic League, and Literary Revivalists alike. He seems to think that the situation in Northern Ireland continues to be a war between Ireland and England, neglecting the fact that the Unionists that he is fighting are Irish, even if they are accompanied by, and loyal to, the British government. In the words of Farquharson and Schrank (2006, 112), the "orderly categories of English = bad and Irish = good [have] broken down, even if characters like McGreevy do not understand the new realities". Josie is of the opinion that the people of Ireland could have justice and peace, as well as personal and ethnic identity,

whether or not Ireland was united (*HSI*, 77). This is revealing of the fact that, just as McGreevy is unable to understand that the old juxtaposition between England and Ireland is no longer true, Josie, similarly to the majority of people in the Republic of the time, is unable to understand the realities of life in the North.

As McGreevy is unable to make Josie see why he is acting the way he is, he makes a final effort by writing her a letter.

*[...] No one knows or cares about our struggle. [...] But for one moment, look at it from my side of the street. [...] Not to grow up in hate, not to have been Papist leper scum, not to have been interned at fourteen and fifteen and sixteen, not to have been in the Crum and long Kesh and waiting to go on the blocks, now that would have been out of this world. To be an ordinary bloke with a wife and kids – I just can't imagine it. Not to have screws and RUCs tell you they'll get your sister or your mother or your aunt, that would be bonus. [...]* (*HSI*, 113; original italics.)

After this, Josie is finally able to understand that McGreevy is not, in fact, asking for anything other than being allowed to be Irish in an independent Ireland – the same thing that Irish people in colonial times were asking for. In McGreevy's world, the colonisation has never ended. This, however, is not understood by the rest of the society. McGreevy, in a country where patriotism, heroism, and respect for history are celebrated as the best qualities in a man, would seem to be the prime example of all of these qualities, but is still regarded as an outsider, an animal, and the number one enemy of the state.

Although the Northern Irish conflict is not present in *Wild Decembers*, counting out a few references quite insignificant to the story, the idea of who is Irish and who an outsider is still there. A similar "us and them" attitude pervades the lives of farmers in a small Irish town. For generations, Joseph Brennan's family has lived by a mountain in the village of Cloontha, in Western Ireland. His peace is interrupted by the arrival of a new neighbour, Michael Bugler, who has come from Australia to reclaim the estate he has recently inherited after the death of his uncle. The Brennan and Bugler families have had a feud going on for centuries, the beginnings of which no



one can remember. Joseph is, nevertheless, assured that, just as Mick Bugler is a newcomer, so were Bugler's ancestors who came and took half of the mountain that originally belonged to the Brennans:

‘Who came first, Bugler or Brennan, the Brennans came first, the Brennans of the moor, the Buglers played bugles and came hence from Wales with the soldiers ... Welsh men ... And on the last day the Brennans will be first, for many are called but Brennans are chosen.’ (*WD*, 43.)

Joseph claims that the Buglers have arrived with the English settlers, thus being no better than the coloniser, whereas his own family is rooted in Ireland from ancient times. His first impression of Bugler is that he has come to take over their lands, just as his ancestors did. “Tricky Micky means to take us over ... Treasons, stratagems and spoils” (*WD*, 43). The fact that the Bugler family is of Welsh origin resonates far back to the times of the Norman invasion; Strongbow was a Welsh baron, and thus, as Edwards (1973, 48) points out, the entire invasion is regarded as carrying a “Welsh character”. The fact that it was, in fact, a Welshman who led the attack to Ireland, is revealing of how complicated, irrational, and absurd the strict division between Anglo-Ireland and Gaelic Ireland has been in the first place.

Nevertheless, when Bugler first arrives, the two men make an effort to form an awkward friendship. From Bugler's side the will to be friendly neighbours seems to be genuine; he has not grown up in Cloontha, and thus has not been exposed to the old family feuds similarly to Joseph. Joseph, on the other hand, is suspicious from the beginning, and sure that Bugler will make his move if he is not careful. Bugler does not understand Joseph's obsession with the mountain, and begins to pursue his dream on the lands that he has legally inherited. He has grown up hearing stories of Ireland from his mother, who grew up in Cloontha, and later emigrated to Australia, where Bugler was born. The Ireland that Bugler knows and has dreamed about is based on the romantic picture he has formed upon his mother's stories – quite similar to the imagined Ireland of the cultural nationalists. He has a great urge to find his Irish roots, and to make the best of his

inheritance.

In the beginning he asks Joseph to tell him about the history of Cloontha, and Joseph is happy to share his knowledge “of the old customs, things our folks did and that I saw and did as a youngster” (*WD*, 29). Joseph laments over the fact that no one cuts turf anymore, and over the fact that the Irish way of life is changing. However, when Bugler starts to pursue this Irish lifestyle, for instance, by learning traditional activities such as cutting turf, Joseph becomes alarmed. He has enjoyed telling him stories similarly as he enjoys telling them to tourists who come from overseas in the summer, but now that Mick Bugler is actually starting to act upon them, a great resistance arises in him against yet another Bugler, yet another intruder. After that, Joseph sees each step that Bugler takes as an attack against him and his ancestors.

The first source of irritation for Joseph is the fact that Bugler’s tractor is kept on the Brennans’ yard, an arrangement which had originally been welcomed by Joseph. However, the actual battle begins when Bugler rents a field that Joseph had been renting from a local landowner, Lady Harkness, for years. “He’s a thief ... That’s what he is”, is Joseph’s view of the situation (*WD*, 77), even if the field belongs to Lady Harkness, who can rent it to whomever she chooses. Other issues come along to worsen the quarrel, but what eventually leads to open war is Bugler’s above-mentioned decision to start cutting turf. He prepares with great care, examining thoroughly which parts of the turf bog belong to him, and which to the Brennans. Nevertheless, as he anticipates in the extract below, Joseph claims that Bugler is, once again, tampering with his land:

Bugler was under no illusion that the day he started to cut turf would lead to more strife and a last division. [...] [H]e wanted to cut turf. It appealed to him, a new skill to be learned, to be mastered, a whole tract of it spread out to dry, then brought home and burned in his big new inglenook fireplace. He had only smelt turf once and that was in a big hotel where he had gone one evening for his dinner out of an unwarranted loneliness. (*WD*, 138.)

Bugler is, thus, aware of the fact that what he is doing is going to finalise the hatred that Joseph feels for him, but he cannot let that stand in the way of his intention of living the life of a true Irishman. The fact that Bugler has only smelled turf once and now wants to learn how to cut it is

revealing of the fact that he is very much romanticising the traditional Irish way of life.

Sophia Hillan (2006, 155) argues that it is both Bugler and Brennan's obsession for land that drives them to destruction. I would say that it is, actually, Joseph, and his obsession with the past – the past referring to both that of Ireland, and his own family – that causes the way things develop. Bugler does not, at any point, seem to understand the gravity with which Joseph regards his advances. In his youth, Joseph had been planning on leaving Cloontha, but his plans “got thwarted, his mother finding the letter, begging him to stay, saying that if he left what would happen, their little farm would be chopped up, like in a butcher's shop, different people getting different cuts, strangers crossing in front of the kitchen windows” (*WD*, 25). After he decided, or realised that he was obliged, to stay, he committed his entire life to keeping together the farm, his ancestors' legacy, never revealing to anyone that he had had other plans. He dug deep into family history, mixing it up with classical mythologies, seeing his ancestors as similar to Greek heroes.

When his ancestors arrived in Cloontha, “the father, the stern Moses, had the acumen to drive his haggard family up the mountain where no one could find them and hence no one could evict them”. (*WD*, 9.) The idea of eviction is related to the landlord system, which I brought up in Section 2.1. With the same logic that Joseph regards Bugler as a Welshman, he now again sees him as representative of the old enemy, even if Bugler's family have never been landlords. Joseph is still determined that they were minions of the oppressor, as becomes clear from the following argument between him and Bugler:

‘Get off my back Brennan.’  
 ‘Get off my mountain,’ Joseph said.  
 ‘It's my mountain too ... it's halved.’  
 ‘Your half is only yours because your people worked for the landlords ... they were bailiffs ... they were hated. That's why most of them emigrated ...’  
 ‘Well one of them is back’ (*WD*, 103.)

In addition to revealing Joseph's attitude, this discussion is also revealing of the fact that Bugler does not really care about what has been, but is more interested in working for the future. Unlike

Joseph's reactions, his actions are, to a great extent, reasonable, and, unlike Joseph thinks, his goal is not to steal anything. He only wants to make the most of what he has, and try and become a successful, Irish farmer – even if his conception of what this means is quite naive.

What irritates Joseph even more is the fact that the community seems to accept Bugler, and he becomes quite popular among most of the villagers. At a dinner dance Bugler sings a “song about a town in the north devastated by war, his voice almost breaking as he laments a community divided”. After this, he is praised by the crowd, but Joseph and the Crock, a character I will come back to, irritated by his success, sarcastically name him “Micky Dazzler”. (*WD*, 42.) Later on Joseph complains to his sister Breege:

‘A showman ... nothing but a showman ... the way he hogged the limelight ... up on the stage with the crooner ... singing a song he only just learned ... what does he know about the North or the South either.’ (*WD*, 51.)

Joseph's assumption that Bugler has just learned the song is, most likely, false, since Bugler's mother was Irish and had familiarised him with Irish culture ever since his childhood. Thus, even if Bugler was raised in Australia, his family is just as much rooted in Ireland as that of Joseph's.

To go back to the definition of Irishness in independent Ireland that was introduced at the end of Section 2.2 – that is, a true Irish citizen is Celtic, Gaelic, Catholic, rural, and male – Bugler fulfils the criteria just as much as Joseph. Most importantly, he is Catholic, and the fact that even in Australia he had been working as a shepherd certainly makes him rural. Even if Joseph was right in saying that Bugler's family originally came from Wales, Bugler is still, to the same certainty as Joseph himself, of Celtic origin. In reality, it is quite impossible to find out who is and who is not of Celtic and Gaelic origin, since, as I have pointed out, during the centuries, the Irish have become mixed, among others, with Vikings and Normans. Thus, the idea of a pure Gaelic Irish origin can mostly be deemed a product of the cultural nationalists' imaginations. Nevertheless, both Bugler and Joseph believe in it, and strive to fulfil the qualifications for an Irishman. At least from the language point of view neither Joseph nor Bugler are Gaelic, since their mother tongue is English

and not Irish, as it has been for most Irish people since the Famine.

Even if there is really no detectable difference in the level of Irishness in these two men, Joseph is determined in his juxtaposition, and willing to pay the price. Unfortunately, the price is his fortune and, above all, his mental health. He takes up legal action against Bugler's turf-cutting, and later on, against Bugler's efforts to build a road up to his own house. Eventually, his obsession with somehow overcoming Bugler takes up all of his time and money: "The bill had not been paid. Bills were not paid. Bugler's doing." (*WD*, 268.) Joseph cannot pay the bills, since he has no time to work, as he travels around, and tries to get hold of ancient documents proving his ownership of the areas under dispute. His sister Breege, who tries to remain neutral throughout the story, but still has to suffer a great deal in the process, sees the signs of madness in him, but is unable to alter the way things develop.

Finally, Bugler decides to put an end to the craziness, mostly because he is in love with Breege, and writes to Joseph in an effort to make peace: "I am giving up the fight over the Mountain and with it I could say giving up a part of myself. I do it on account of your sister. Let's meet and talk things over." (*WD*, 267.) Joseph, nevertheless, is still unable to let go of his siege mentality, and sees "treachery in [the letter], something in it above and beyond what it said". (*WD*, 267.) This is Joseph's tragedy from the beginning; he is obsessed with finding hidden meanings in everything that Bugler says or does. He is unable to take him as a fellow Irishman cultivating the fields next to his, and living a quiet life up the mountain. He is determined to see him as a plotting menace, the latest plan of whom is to steal his sister away from him.

As can be predicted, the end result is tragic. After receiving the letter, Joseph meets Bugler and tells him to stay away from his sister. "Don't touch her ... Don't tamper with her ... Don't go near her" (*WD*, 273). When Bugler tells him that it is too late, that they are already having an affair, Joseph feels he has to settle things once and for all. He takes his shotgun, and shoots Bugler as he enters the Brennan yard in an attempt to meet Breege. When the guards ask him why he killed

Bugler, Joseph answers: “‘Twas him or me” (*WD*, 279). As came up earlier in this section, this is exactly what policeman Rory in *House of Splendid Isolation* tells his wife: “it’s either them or us, him or me” (*HSI*, 9). Thus, just as Rory and his fellow guards see IRA as the enemy, a threat from outside their community, Joseph sees Bugler as the enemy, a foreigner who has come to take his lands. These juxtapositions are revealing of the fact that the characters are carrying the colonial legacy both politically, in the form of the Northern Irish conflict, and personally, in the form of suspicion and intolerance toward the neighbour.

Thus, the divisions that colour the lives of people in O’Brien’s novels are mostly the result of a turbulent, colonial past. What O’Brien seems to be saying is that these divisions are, in fact, purely artificial; they are the product of history, misinterpretation, and the made up images of true Irishness, originally formed through cultural nationalist ideals. In reality, there are no outsiders in *House of Splendid Isolation* or *Wild Decembers*; there are only Irish people fighting against Irish people. An understanding of this is presented towards the end of *House of Splendid Isolation* after a guard called Tommy has shot an IRA gunman, and says in a state of shock: “Half of you hopes you got him and the other half hopes you didn’t”. His fellow guard answers, “I know ... I’d be the same ... We’re all Irish under the skin.” (*HSI*, 177.) This statement, nevertheless, is only allowed in the most private of conversations, and the revelation of these two policemen is never passed on to the rest of the society.

Through the issues that have been discussed in this section, it can be seen that the legacy of colonialism and cultural nationalism resonated far to the end of twentieth century in Irish culture. In a world painted black and white, men were to remain unquestionably Irish, upright heroes. This is exactly what all the parties introduced in this section are trying to be; the policemen by fighting a group of terrorists, McGreevy by fighting the English and the Unionists, Joseph by fighting for his land and legacy, and Bugler by returning to his roots, and learning the lifestyle of an Irishman.

As O'Brien seems to be saying through McGreevy, Joseph Brennan and Mick Bugler, the heroic imagery that had been established in literature and in plays such as *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* distorted the lives of men in Ireland in several ways. However, returning to my quotation of Antoinette Quinn in the previous section, this imagery was also detrimental to Irish women, in that it "subordinated their interests to a sacrificial paradigm of male patriotism" (Quinn 2009, 429). Reducing women to symbols in a male narrative made them voiceless, and made it impossible for them to find their place in the society outside the domestic sphere. Since woman now equalled Ireland, any real experience of Irish women was written out. How this comes up in *House of Splendid Isolation*, *Down by the River* and *Wild Decembers* will be discussed next.

### 3.2 Suffocated symbols of the nation – Josie O’Meara, Breege Brennan and Mary MacNamara

Whereas men were identified as heroes for the nation, women were deprived of activity; on the one hand, they were put on a pedestal to act as muses for the national aspirations of men, and on the other, they were confined to the domestic sphere. In this section I will focus on the first of these two aspects, bringing up the ways in which the tendency of Irish culture and society to use women as symbols affects the lives of Josie in *House of Splendid Isolation*, Mary in *Down by the River*, and Breege in *Wild Decembers*. The most obvious of these symbols include the representation of the nation as a woman – a popular practice all around the world, as was mentioned in the previous section – and biblical references to Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. Ingman (2002, 253), who brings up figures embraced by cultural nationalists, some of which already came up in Section 2.2, points out that

[o]n a symbolic level, going back to eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry, Ireland was constructed as a woman victimised by the colonising English male. She was Hibernia, Mother Ireland, the Poor Old Woman, [also known as the Old Woman of Beare and] the Shan van Vocht, Cathleen ni Houlihan, the Dark Rosaleen.

Edna O’Brien dealt with woman figures in Irish literature in an article published in *The New York Times Book Review* in 1986, called “Why Irish Heroines Don’t Have To Be Good Anymore”. Moving in similar lines with Ingman, O’Brien argues that these images were not originally reductive to women, but only took their oppressive form in the nineteenth century. According to O’Brien, in earlier Irish literature there was “no deference to the weaker sex”, and “[l]ove and passion suffused these early poems, both those written by women and those written about women”. She refers to Irish literary tradition up to the eighteenth century as “the glorious tradition of fanatic Irish writing which flourished before sanctity and propriety took over” (O’Brien, 1986). O’Brien does not really clarify what exactly she means by this tradition, but it seems that she is referring to the time before cultural nationalism, when there were still active female figures in Irish literature.



As an example, O'Brien mentions "The Old Woman of Beare", a poem written in the tenth century by an anonymous writer, which relates a story "in which a goddess has to put aside earthly pleasures and become a nun. She reflects on her figure as it once was, plump and round, her cloak, her jewelry and 'men most dear – horseman, huntsman, charioteer'" (O'Brien, 1986.) In other words, whereas O'Brien, and almost every other Irish woman growing up in Ireland during the same period of time, had been raised to accept that female sexuality should not exist, a poem that was written over a thousand years before their time is an open lamentation over the fact that a woman, previously enjoying a life full of lovers and other earthly joys, has become unattached from her sexuality.

Thus, before cultural nationalism swept over the island, there had, since the early Irish sagas, existed a rich literary tradition full of powerful and overtly sexual women. As O'Brien (1986) points out, there was, for example, "Grania [...], the sorceress who left her elderly royal husband and eloped with a young lover, Diarmuid". To pursue this view further, in addition to Grania, Irish folklore offers several other examples worth noting; for instance, in a tale called "The Wooing of Étaín", a woman named Fúamnach does not accept her husband bringing home another wife, but turns the other woman into "a pool of water" ("The Wooing of Étaín" 1981, 45), and leaves the house of Mider, her husband, because "she preferred being good to herself to being good to anyone else" (ibid, 46). Fúamnach is thus able to make her own decisions and take control of her own life.

To mention but a few other examples, there is Queen Medb, who appears in several legends, often presented as having more power than her husband Ailill, and known to have had several husbands before him. Cúchulainn's wife Emer is also a character presented as having power over her husband; for example, in a story called "The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulaind", Emer is able to prevent Cúchulainn from having an affair with another woman. To bring up an example in much newer literature, O'Brien (1986) mentions Eileen O'Leary, who is famous for her poem "Lament For Art O'Leary" (1773), in which she calls for revenge after her husband has been killed by a

English soldier, and which O'Brien describes as "one of the most rapacious love poems and one of the greatest laments ever written". These women were far from pure, chaste, and obedient to male authorities.

However, as Ingman (2002, 253) points out, all this was effectively erased in the nineteenth century by "the cult of the Virgin Mary". All the previous examples of womanhood became covered with a Catholic cloak, and all the figures that had once been celebrations of female sexuality and female power in society were now read as virtuous manifestations of Ireland. Those who could not be fitted into the preferred image were abandoned. As Ingman (2002, 254) rightly puts it, the fact that nationalism became mixed with Catholicism resulted in the conception that "[a] certain female behaviour, based on chastity and purity, guaranteed the purity [...] of the Irish nation". This is in perfect accordance with the views presented by Yuval-Davis, brought up in Section 2.2; women act as symbols for the honour and identity of the "collectivity", which, in this and many other cases, is the nation, and through their "proper behavior" and even "proper clothing", "embody the line which signifies [the nation's] boundaries" (1997, 45-46). In other words, female sexuality is not only immoral – it is also anti-patriotic.

The fact that the sexuality of women is attached to anti-patriotism becomes clear, for instance, in *Wild Decembers*, where an attorney called O'Dea asks Breege whether she is familiar with Irish history. O'Dea is of the opinion that Breege should be aware of Ireland's colonial history, that she "should know it, because it all happened on account of a woman" (*WD*, 133). He then relates the story of two Irish kings, O'Rourke and McMurrough, who started to fight on account of O'Rourke stealing the latter's wife. This takes us to the chain of events that was presented in the introduction; McMurrough turned to England and Henry II for help, unknowingly inviting the coloniser into the country; "*Nine hundred years of turbulence to follow and all because of a woman*". (*WD*, 133-134.)

For O'Dea, it is of no relevance here that, in reality, McMurrough's wife had little to do with him asking for help from Henry II, and in fact, he even fails to remember the story correctly. In the

official version, it was O'Rourke's wife stolen by McMurrrough, and not the other way around. Whether it was O'Rourke stealing McMurrrough's wife or McMurrrough O'Rourke's, if this incident even ever occurred, the real reason behind the beginnings of Irish colonial history had nothing to do with it. It was actually McMurrrough's wish to have the people of the neighbouring isle help him overcome other Irish kings, and become high king of Ireland that originally brought the English to Ireland. Nevertheless, in the mind of O'Dea and many others, it was the wife, never mind whose wife, representing Irish women, who was responsible for the fact that Ireland eventually became a British colony.

This conveniently parallels with Eve being responsible for having people expelled from paradise, but, in addition to carrying the original sin of mankind, the lewdness of the wife, whose name never comes up in O'Dea's story, resulted in the fact that Irish women were now burdened with the sin of treason as well. Consequently, in order to atone for both of their sins, the only possibility was to follow the example of Virgin Mary, whose ultimate purity and self-sacrificiality produced the saviour of mankind. Irish women thus had to show virtue, chastity, and self-sacrificiality, the high point of which was, of course, to produce sons of Ireland, who could then sacrifice themselves for the nation. In order to remain respectable, an Irish woman had two options; she was to be either Cathleen Ni Houlihan or Virgin Mary – preferably, a mixture of both.

As I mentioned earlier, the outrage surrounding Mary's effort to have an abortion in *Down by the River* is very much related to this idea. Before the public finds out that she has become pregnant as a result of incest, she is accused by many of having brought this upon herself. The mother of Mary's friend Tara, for instance, puts the blame fully on Mary's loose character; she is "frothing, sermonising, depicting a night paradise of foul pleasures which the girl enjoyed; woods, bogs, callows; undressing herself for any man, any man, married, cracked, single" (*DR*, 150). Even many of those who suspect from the beginning that Mary has been raped seem to be more appalled by the fact that she was willing to have an abortion than the injustice she herself has experienced. One of

the women taking over Mary's life when she returns from England, Eilie, asks Mary "did she realise the miracle that had happened, that it was that thing, the little life growing in the depths of her body which brought the truth to light, the whole sordid business of rape, that the little life was the savior and that it would also save the rapist". She continues this perverted trail of thought by saying that "Mary must see that too, see the pregnancy as a solution and not a problem, as a gift from God". (DR, 152.)

The fact that O'Brien has named her main character Mary seems to suggest that the writer herself wants to draw attention to the biblical parallels. As becomes clear from the above, the public seem eager to see this 14-year-old as either Mary Magdalene or Virgin Mary. Mary tries her best to keep people from finding out what has happened, and the fact that the father of the child is unknown gives the pregnancy a mystical character. The references to the child as a "savior" and a "gift from God" is revealing of the public's eagerness to regard the case of Mary as symbolic of something greater. That she was prevented in time from going through with the abortion is regarded as a sign that she and the child are blessed, and that she should accept her destiny as a part of God's greater plan. Thus, she is expected to sacrifice herself as any proper Irish woman should.

The persistence with which these symbols are forced upon women is clear in all three novels, the above treatment of Mary being, perhaps, the most obvious example. In *House of Splendid Isolation* it becomes most evident from the conceptions of Paud, a man who worked for Josie during the earlier days of her marriage, and had worshipped her ever since. Paud, a young boy referred to by Josie as "a simpleton" (HSI, 53), had been deeply affected by what he had learned in school about "how their country, their beloved country had been sacked, plundered and raped by the sister country" (HSI, 50). When Josie asks Paud if he could help them around the farm, he effectively mixes up serving Josie with serving Ireland. "He wanted to kneel down at her feet and adore, touch the grey cloth with the moving procession of pleats" (HSI, 50), "[n]ow he had two loves [...] two women to die for, Ireland and the Missus" (HSI, 52). This is revealing of the fact that Paud is unable

to regard women, at least Josie, in terms other than those given by the cultural nationalists. Clearly, he does not see Josie as a normal human being, but as representative of something greater; for him, Josie is the embodiment of Ireland, virtuous, flawless, and worth dying for.

Paud's obsession with serving his "two loves", nevertheless, has detrimental effects. In his effort to serve Josie in every way that he can, Paud returns a corset of Josie's that he has found in the woods, and thus, unintentionally, provides Josie's husband James with the conception that Josie has met her lover in the forest, leaving her corset behind on the crime scene. Consequently, James, infuriated by the deception, abuses Josie worse than ever before – an incident that I will return to in the following section. Although nothing had happened in reality – it is true that Josie had been waiting in the forest for Father John, her lover, but he never appeared, and they never had a physical affair – she is deemed a sinner by her husband and the villagers who soon learn about what has happened:

Her husband never addressed her and if he passed he merely made a grunt. People knew about it, and knew how Paud had been sent away and knew that she was in disgrace. There was speculation as to who it was she had the assignation with. A foreigner it was felt. (*HSI*, 140.)

In the passage above it becomes clear that Josie is, automatically, seen as a fallen woman, both biblically and nationally. She is now known to have sexual desires, which means that she is not Virgin Mary, but Mary Magdalene, she is in disgrace. It is also assumed that the man who has corrupted her is a foreigner, which supports the idea of female sexuality as anti-patriotism. Josie, as a woman, is supposed to be a symbol of Ireland, pure and chaste, but, having given up her purity, she is no longer fit to represent her country; Ireland has, once again, been corrupted by a foreign power. No one even considers the possibility that the man could also be a member of their own community – he is automatically deemed an outsider. To think that a respectable Irish man, let alone a Catholic priest, could ever take part in such obscenity is not an option. Thus, whereas Josie is easily transformed from Madonna to whore, there are no consequences for the man, who is soon forgotten altogether.

In addition to failing in his efforts to serve Josie, Paud also fails in his attempts at serving Ireland. Some decades after the incident above, Paud, obviously not quite aware of the full meaning of what he is doing, agrees to guard a cache of arms for the IRA. Josie's husband James, ignoring Josie's objection, and "resurrecting every bit of Fenian feeling that he ever had" (*HSI*, 53), wants to help Paud and offers to hide him. Josie, worried about what might happen, tips off the police with an anonymous letter. As a result, the police wait at the cache, and end up shooting James dead. Thus, Paud's love for symbols of the nation results in an immense amount of human suffering for Josie, first being attacked by her husband, and then losing him and feeling that she has caused his death.

Paud, nevertheless, continues his worship of Ireland and "the Missus", and does not seem to realise that he has only succeeded in making things worse. Later in life he works for the IRA and meets McGreevy. He tells him of Josie, and thus causes the fact that McGreevy chooses Josie's house as his hideout. In his discussion with McGreevy, Paud has referred to Josie as "Cliadhna, Queen of Munster Fairies" (*HSI*, 190). Finding Josie old, unpleasant, and not at all the great queen that Paud had described, McGreevy laughs at the comparison. Later on, as McGreevy tells Josie what Paud has said about her, she says blankly: "He always got things wrong" (*HSI*, 190). Paud, who thought that by putting Josie on a pedestal and treating her as a queen, he would bring her happiness, was regarded by Josie all along as "the Republican Bull" (*HSI*, 52), the "simpleton" (*HSI*, 53) who had succeeded only in triggering most of the greatest tragedies in her life.

Whereas McGreevy thinks of Paud in similar lines as Josie does, he is, nevertheless, equally eager to think of Josie in terms of symbols. When he first meets her, he is disturbed by "her wild, staring, Virgin Mary eyes" (*HSI*, 63). This is revealing of the fact that he is automatically forcing the most obvious of Catholic symbols on a woman who, as will be uncovered in more detail later on, is neither virtuous, chaste, nor a mother. Thus, similarly to Josie believing all the stereotypes that she has heard of McGreevy and his kind, McGreevy sees Josie only through stereotypes of Irish

womanhood.

Even if the men in *House of Splendid Isolation* are eager to describe Josie in terms of these stereotypes, the obsession with regarding women as symbols becomes even more evident in *Wild Decembers*. Throughout the novel the male characters seem to be unable to regard Breege Brennan as a real human being – she is constantly evaluated on mythological or biblical bases. The most overt references come from the Crock, a deformed man who has become embittered by constant rejections on account of his appearance, and now devotes his life to making others suffer as well. He first refers to Breege, his secret love, as “Ivory Mary” (*WD*, 17). It is, nevertheless, clear that he uses this name sarcastically, and is constantly looking forward to seeing Breege fall from grace, since he can never have her for himself. Joseph, Breege’s brother, tells stories from ancient Greece, and inspired by the story of Helen of Troy, the Crock thinks of Breege as “[h]is chosen sandalled queen” (*WD*, 20), thus also implying that Breege has other similarities with Helen.

Paralleling Breege with Helen of Troy, “the romping woman” (*WD*, 8), suggests that, despite the fact that Breege, quiet, chaste, and obedient to her brother, has always lived up to the expectations of the Catholic society, the Crock sees her, or wants to regard her, as potentially promiscuous. The obsession of the Crock to attach these qualities to Breege resembles Paud’s obsession with Josie in *House of Splendid Isolation*. The difference between them is the fact that, whereas Paud wants to devote himself to serving his imagined Josie, the Crock wants to destroy his imagined Breege. That the Crock actually wants Breege to be a “romping woman” can be seen in the way he fantasises about entering her room in the night, “lifting the gown to see her white legs and her white thighs” (*WD*, 90). This is why he is constantly looking for an opportunity to push Breege off the cliff; to show everyone that there is, as with most women in the Crock’s opinion, a whore inside her Virgin Mary attire. As he finally has a clue of Breege having something to do with Bugler, he does not hesitate to take action. “Ivory Mary no more. Mary Magdalene now” (*WD*, 90).

Just as in the case of Josie in *House of Splendid Isolation*, it is of no importance that Breege, at

this point, is totally innocent – even more so than Josie, who had at least attempted to deceive her husband. So far, Breege is only guilty of thinking about Bugler, and of being too honest to hide her affection; they have barely spoken with each other, and Bugler has no idea that she feels anything for him. The Crock, nevertheless, quickly develops an image of their immoral relationship, the dirtier the better, and enjoys painting a picture of the lovers meeting “at all hours, anywhere, everywhere, a spider getting into her web, hi diddle diddle, their springtime rite” (*WD*, 90). The contempt that the Crock is showing has great similarities with the way Tara’s mother regarded Mary in *Down by the River*; they are eager to present Breege and Mary in an unfavourable light.

Probably knowing that nothing has happened in reality, the Crock then starts a campaign to bring Breege down in the face of her brother and, preferably, also the community. The fact that his plan works remarkably well is revealing of how ready people are to attach the label of Mary Magdalene on Breege, even if she has always been a respectable member of the community. Her own brother, who has known her and taken care of her all her life, needs but a hint from a random outsider in order to curse her from a pure and beautiful Virgin Mary to the lowest of sinners. Joseph hears a rumour about Breege having gone on a tractor ride with Bugler – which is true, but, again, absolutely harmless – and decides on that moment that she is a fallen woman:

Everything that had been insinuated became true, became fact. Blind of him not to have noticed the change in her appearance, the glow, bits of her hair held up with a tortoiseshell comb and other bits straggling down, come-hitherish. (*WD*, 78.)

After Joseph has suddenly become convinced of his sister’s promiscuity, she becomes a “tramp” and a “Jezebel” (*WD*, 97), the main message being that she is “[n]o better than a streetwalker” (*WD*, 98).

This entire episode carries a great resemblance to the events in *House of Splendid Isolation*. As I pointed out above, neither of the women are guilty of what they are accused for, and, as will be discussed in more detail in the following section, both of them are violently attacked by, and unable to protect themselves from, the men nearest to them. In addition to this, in both cases, female



treachery is connected with anti-patriotism. Bugler, just as the supposed mysterious foreigner who corrupted Josie, comes from outside the community. For Joseph, the fact that Breege has anything to do with Bugler means that she has betrayed her brother and her country – be it a question of their land in Cloontha, or Irish land in general. Joseph is soon blaming Breege for things that Bugler has done, or at least accusing her of conspiring with him:

Your Shepherd [Bugler] went up to Lady Harkness two nights ago and rented the lake field behind my back [...] ‘Is it true that you drove up the mountain with him ... to the wild?’[...] Then as if it was to her stomach – ‘Was he a gentleman?’[...] ‘I expect you pointed out the boundaries between his lands and ours.’ (WD, 79.)

The fact that Joseph refers to Bugler as “Your Shepherd”, and talks to Breege’s stomach, implies that he thinks that they have had a sexual encounter. Mentioning the land boundaries is revealing of how Joseph sees the events as something of a duplicate to O’Dea’s story about the beginnings of colonialism, discussed at the beginning of this section. Thus, he now regards Breege as Helen of Troy, and all other possible examples of female treachery, ceasing to see her as a person who he has known since her birth.

In addition to the fact that the heroines in all three novels are victims of simplification and symbolification coming from the world around them, O’Brien also shows how these symbols have become planted inside their own minds – how Josie and Breege are tormented by the idea that they have failed to represent the things that they are supposed to represent. They can never become Virgin Mary or Mother Ireland no matter how they try; they are human, and as human beings, both of them make mistakes that they have to pay for. Josie, throughout most of her life, has had to live with the knowledge that she has aborted her only child. At one point in her early marriage, after multiple rapes, her husband James had succeeded in his appalling effort of making her pregnant. As Farquharson and Schrank (2006, 121-122) point out, Josie

regards a child not as a source of joy and love but as tangible evidence of Jam[es]’ control and humiliation of her. From Josie’s point of view, the imperial logic of her marriage makes the duties of motherhood unbearable. Josie understands the abortion as a means of achieving autonomy and control of her own body.

Farquharson and Schrank (2006, 122) continue by saying that even if Josie takes “control of her own body” in the form of abortion, she ends up experiencing no liberation; rather, she is trapped in guilt for the rest of her life. In her lifetime, Josie never reveals to anyone what she has done – she is only able to make her confession as an old woman, writing it down on a note to be found after her death.

However, it seems that Josie is not only tormented by the issues brought up by Farquharson and Schrank – the guilt of having her only child aborted, and the fact that she has thus sealed her destiny of dying alone – but she is also, perhaps not even consciously, tormented by the idea that she has failed her country. As can also be seen in the treatment of Mary, described earlier in this section, in conservative, Catholic Ireland, abortion is the ultimate treason. By choosing to abort her child, Josie chose not to give birth to another son of Ireland to be sacrificed for the nation. That the primary task of every Irish woman is to be a mother was, and has remained, one of the strongholds of the Irish Free State and Republic since its beginning, and was firmly established in the constitution of 1937, which will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.2.

Josie has very much internalised this idealisation of mothers, and, inconsistently, keeps up the myth even if she herself has acted against it. When McGreevy is in her house, and she is afraid for her life, she hopes that McGreevy understands how she is feeling. “*He must know a woman’s feelings, how she wants to give life and not take it*” (HSL, 87; original italics). What Josie is thinking is entirely paradoxical, since she has, by her own actions, proved that the issue is far from straightforward. The fact that she refused to give birth to a child and affected the course of events leading up to the death of her husband shows that she has never given life to anyone, but only taken it. By taking this kind of path she turned her back on Virgin Mary – and Mother Ireland, for that matter – and in her own eyes became the sinner that everyone else had already deemed her for the reasons explained above. Thus, her effort to reject the symbols and lead her life as an individual became thwarted by the fact that the conceptions she was escaping from had been planted far too

deep in her own mind, and she could not let go of them. If the community had previously rejected her, she is now rejecting the community, staying by herself, growing old alone in her big house, dwelling on the things she had done wrong.

Similarly to Josie, even if decades pass between them, Breege too fails to keep up her role as a pure and virtuous Rosaleen. Long after the Crock has finished his above-described plot, Breege and Bugler actually do have a secret affair, resulting in Breege becoming pregnant. Breege, not possessing a rebellious mentality equal to Josie's, could never think of abortion, but is still terrified by the idea that she is unmarried and with child. Before she has the courage to tell Bugler, Bugler's fiancé from Australia, Rosemary, arrives in Cloontha, and Breege understands that she is completely alone in the situation. Knowing the consequences, fear comes over her, making her voiceless:

Breege stayed there, not looking in the mirror, feeling the cold truth of things run up and down her body and then it happened. When she tried to say something to herself the words would not come out. [...] 'I'm getting a stroke,' her mind said, though she did not know what a stroke was. Something awful had occurred and there was nothing else at all in her shattered world. (*WD*, 231.)

She then turns to her faith for help, hurrying to church, crawling into the crib of baby Jesus, silently praying for help from Holy Mary and the people that come to surround her. Virgin Mary, nevertheless, remains silent, and the people laugh at her and deem her insane.

What is different in the story of Josie in comparison to that of Breege or Mary is the fact that, whereas Josie silently suffers with her guilt until the end of her life, Breege and Mary are, eventually, able to overcome their silence and reject the guilt. Even though Breege is locked away in a mental institution after the incident in the church, and Mary too faces a period of imprisonment and public condemnation, in the end, they are able to find their own voices, stronger than ever, and come back to life. The reasons for the fall of Josie and the survival of Breege and Mary will be further discussed in Section 4.2.

As I have pointed out in this section, Irish men and Irish women were restricted, or even imprisoned, throughout the twentieth century by images and symbols that had become the norm in

the newly independent country. However, as time passed and war was no longer at hand, people started to become alienated from the past idols. Even if the heroic men and symbolic women of cultural nationalism continued to be embraced, it was soon necessary to come up with more down-to-earth examples, and find new kinds of justifications and regulations in order to sustain the patriarchal structures in the society. In the following section I will reflect on the issues in twentieth-century Irish culture and politics that helped secure these structures, emphasising the masculinity of men and the femininity of women to the extent that few had the strength to defy these roles. Through O'Brien's novels, I will also consider the consequences faced by those who were unable to carry out their role in the society, and failed to be what was expected of them.

#### **4. Éire, a land of macho men and silent women**

The idea that men must emphasise their masculinity is a common feature in postcolonial societies. This is due to the idea of the coloniser as masculine, and the colonised as feminine, which was brought up in Section 2.2. The view is supported by Seidler (2006, 23-24), who points out that “[t]he coloniser did not have to listen to the colonised, who were thereby positioned with the feminine”. Consequently, since the men of Ireland had been deemed irrational and sentimental during the centuries of colonisation, it became essential to prove that they were really the opposite; rational, masculine, white Europeans. Just as the coloniser had not listened to the feminine colonised, Irish men now refused to listen to Irish women.

In this section, I will focus on the models of masculinity and femininity in independent Ireland. These models were defined both by promoting certain forms of culture, such as “Blasket literature”, which will be introduced in Section 4.1, and by acts of legislation, which will be explained in more detail in Section 4.2. As I hope to make clear, O’Brien’s novels suggest that the strict conditions set for Irish masculinity and femininity often created perverted views of what is right and wrong; this can be seen, for instance, in the way that domestic violence is perceived by the communities surrounding the main characters.

I will begin by considering the formation of Irish masculinity, and the reasons behind the fact that the men in O’Brien’s novels all resort to violence at some point. In Section 4.2, I will present the roots of female subordination in Irish society, and consider the ways in which the women in O’Brien’s novels are held in their place by the community. I will also discuss how the characters rebel against the oppression, and whether they succeed in overcoming it. Nevertheless, the first issue to be considered is the cultural construction of Irish masculinity in the twentieth century.

#### **4.1 Made-up masculinity – Men and the legacy of Tomás Ó Criomhthain**

As R. W. Connell (2007, 245) points out, “masculinities come into existence at particular times and places, and are always subject to change. Masculinities are, in a word, historical”. In the course of this thesis I have suggested that in the case of Ireland, the essence of masculinity came to be defined by the cultural nationalists at the turn of the twentieth century. In the early years of independence, the idealisation of past heroes persisted, and, as Brown (1981, 88) points out, on the walls of most Irish homes there “would hang [...] pictures of the Pope and of Irish patriots and heroes that were the mass-produced icons of countryman and town-dweller alike”. Nevertheless, as Irish reality started to lose its heroic glow after the struggle for independence, there was a need to find a new source for heroism. This was found in the rural lifestyle of the extreme Irish west; the communities on the Blasket and Aran islands.

Whereas Irish countryside in general was becoming modernised, the islands of the West, due to their isolation, and rough natural conditions, provided an example of an ascetic way of life that had remained the same for centuries. According to Brown (1981, 94), from the 1920s onwards, the West in Irish literature began to “occupy the same primal, essentially mythic territory as it does in the concepts of purely nationalist ideologues”. The West was “a place of fundamental natural forces, of human figures set passively or heroically against landscapes of stone, rock and sea” (Brown 1981, 94). The idealisation of the West was not a new phenomenon in itself; it was one of the key issues in cultural nationalism that the rural, seemingly innocent and pure West was the place where real Ireland could be discovered. However, whereas the cultural nationalists had given descriptions of the Western isles and their inhabitants from the point of view of an outside observer, there now emerged a body of literature from inside the island communities. This literature consisted mostly of autobiographical novels by men and women on the Blasket and Aran islands, who had lived there their entire lives.

Perhaps the most famous work produced in the field of “Blasket literature”, as this phenomenon is often referred to, is Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s *The Islandman (An tOileánach)* from 1929. In *The Islandman*, Ó Criomhthain reminisces about his life on Great Blasket Island. The book paints a picture of a hard-working man, constantly facing hardship and death, but never complaining. As can be seen in the following extract, Ó Criomhthain’s life on the island was occupied with simple, traditionally Irish activities:

I had the turf cut now, and was fairly satisfied, only there was a great deal of work to be done on it as soon as it dried [...] My plan was to spend another day in fixing up a good shelter, so that all I should have to do would be to throw the turf in when it was dry, for it would hold me up if I left it till later. (Ó Criomhthain 1978, 94.)

Whereas the book devotes page after page to describing work and customs on the island in the above manner, it passes, for instance, the deaths of Ó Criomhthain’s wife and children in two brief paragraphs, without any emotion. “Such was the fate of my children” is all that the writer has to say about the tragedy of losing all his children, one by one (1978, 147).

This kind of attitude is reflected in *House of Splendid Isolation*, where McGreevy has lost his family, but avoids discussing the issue for as long as he can. Whereas Ó Criomhthain has been regarded by the Irish public as tough and heroic in his seeming indifference towards his losses, O’Brien suggests through McGreevy that this sort of indifference is, above all, an artificial “safety mechanism”. Unlike in the case of Ó Criomhthain, whose text has been carefully stripped of everything that clashes with the image of a hard and heroic islandman, in the case of McGreevy the reader is allowed to proceed beyond objectivism and see inside his thoughts. As will become clear later on in this section, it is not necessarily that these men lack emotion; rather, the culture that Ó Criomhthain and McGreevy are living in allows for no masculine weakness, which is why there is no room for their mourning.

As Brown (1981, 96) points out, in Ó Criomhthain’s novel, and in several others that came to follow a similar pattern, “[a] sense of an almost Homeric, heroically-charged zest, emerges from a keenly objective record of island life”. The heroism of *The Islandman* fit in perfectly with the

previous cultural nationalist ideals of Irish heroism, and Tomás Ó Criomhthain served as an example of the ideal Irishman. He was rural, hard-working, extremely masculine, and in constant control of the situation, not allowing for any manifestations of personal emotion. Whereas the public regarded the time of war heroes such as Patrick Pearse to be over, the new heroes were found in the tough, serious men of the Western isles.

In addition to McGreevy, Tomás Ó Criomhthain's legacy is present in other male characters of *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Wild Decembers* as well. In *Wild Decembers* it comes up, for instance, in Joseph Brennan's attitude towards his ancestors; as I pointed out earlier on, he colours their story with mythical features, and relates the history of their arrival in Cloontha in the form of an epic. This is quite similar to what *The Islandman* and other works of the same genre were doing to the stories of the people from the Aran and Blasket islands. Michael Bugler, on the other hand, wants to be a real Irishman, and decides to start his transformation by learning the craft of cutting turf, which is, incidentally, an activity also described in the above extract from *The Islandman*. However, it is not only in these simple activities of the characters that the mentality of "the Islandman" comes through; it seems to be an ideal that they follow in all aspects of their lives.

This need to over-emphasise masculinity resulted in extreme patriarchy, the consequences of which have resonated far, and continue to resonate on several areas of life in Irish society. However, what is rarely brought up in the discussion is the fact that, whereas the obsession with masculinity resulted in extreme subjugation of women, it also allowed little space for men, even if they did hold the power in the society. The fact that men refused to take into account anything that was regarded as feminine resulted in them blocking out a great deal of themselves as well. According to Seidler (2006, 24),

a dominant European masculinity did not have to listen to its own emotions, feelings and desires [since they were seen as] forms of unfreedom and determination which were a threat to reason and morality. Rather, men learnt to experience their emotions as a sign of weakness and thereby as a threat to their male identities.



What Seidler is saying becomes evident in both *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Wild Decembers*, where the male characters are preoccupied with showing no signs of weakness. They must stay strong and masculine in order not to lose their face; otherwise they will be brought down and destroyed by the surrounding community. In both of the novels, the determination of men not to risk their status in the society often results in violent behaviour, which can be seen especially in Josie's husband James O'Meara, and Joseph Brennan.

It becomes clear in *House of Splendid Isolation* that, throughout her entire marriage, Josie O'Meara remained in a state of mental, physical, and sexual repressiveness. Whereas McGreevy is terrorising the society, James O'Meara is terrorising his wife, and still manages to remain a respectable member of the community. As Josie recounts, “[u]p in the village he is a gentleman, talks to people, buys buns for girls and sings a song if asked” (*HSI*, 44). It is, nevertheless, no secret that back home, James is constantly violent towards Josie. When he finds out from Paud that Josie has been having an affair – even if she has not in reality, at least on a physical level – he attacks her in extreme rage:

‘Take that, and that ... and that,’ the sound of the smacking almost pleasant, mimicking the smacking of the butter paddle itself on the soft curds of half formed butter, but the blows, vicious and scalding as they landed on her flesh. [...] She was grasping the ladder, her eyes closed, allowing no whimper of pain or even protest to escape her lips. He was too mad for that. A cuckold. A cuckold. (*HSI*, 134.)

After growing tired of hitting Josie, James heads to the village and later comes back with a group of friends, forcing Josie to serve them food, and thus letting them see her injuries. One of the people to witness Josie's humiliation is the Snooper, mentioned in the previous section. “‘Good God ... You're black and blue,’ the unctuous voice unable to conceal its pleasure in being lucky enough to be the one to be sent up, lucky enough to see the harm for himself and be able to memorise it for his friends in the town” (*HSI*, 136). That James wants everyone to see Josie's injuries, and that everyone, without exception, seem to think that he has been right in hurting her, is revealing of the fact that James did what he did in order not to lose his status in the society. Josie had cuckolded

him, and he had to show that he would not be pushed around by anyone, least of all his wife.

Almost the exact same chain of events takes place in *Wild Decembers*, where Joseph, learning that his sister Breege has met in secret with Bugler, his arch enemy, has to prove through violence that he is in control of the situation. As I mentioned earlier, similarly to the case of James and Josie, Joseph too was informed of Breege's deceitful behaviour by an outsider, and automatically believed it to be true when, in fact, it was not. The issue initiating Joseph's violence against Breege is a phone call from a woman (who remains unidentified, but is most likely the local hairdresser Josephine, who plots with the Crock). "“You ought to know where your sister is’ [...] Then there was laughter at the other end as the phone was slammed down” (WB, 96). In reality, at this point Breege had not met Bugler at all, but the pressure put upon Joseph and his manhood by the phone call, the danger of being ridiculed, makes the truthfulness of the claim a secondary issue. Joseph feels he has to show that he is in control.

Thus, in both cases, the men feel that their authority and masculinity are being questioned, and they take up extreme means to prove their manhood. What differs in the two men is the fact that, whereas James wants everyone to witness the damage he has done, Joseph feels deeply ashamed after seeing what he has done to his sister. Violence against Josie is a routine activity for James, but Joseph has not laid a hand on Breege prior to the arrival of Bugler, and does not touch her again after the incident above. Nevertheless, in both cases, the violence is not only accepted, but also supported, and, in some sense, even assisted by the surrounding community; they believe that Josie and Breege have deserved their treatment. This is proved in the pleasure shown by the Snooper in seeing Josie's bruises, and the laughter of the mystery caller while knowing that the information will, most likely, lead to violent consequences.

However, even if the male characters are capable of horrendous deeds, and O'Brien does not spare any words in describing their appalling behaviour, there are still, in all of them, features suggesting that violence is not in their nature, but is put there by the need to survive in the society,

gain respect from other people, and hide any issues that may provoke emotion. Albeit briefly, James reveals to Josie his inside, which is usually suffocated by the violent shell. After James has ruined the economy of their household with his alcoholism, he breaks down:

“‘I’m ruined ... I’ve ruined you,’ he said and because he cried she was not able to turn on him”. He laments the death of his parents, and blames them for staying “in their bedchamber day in and day out, lovebirds, had a nurse for the children and stayed in that big room drinking and saying soft things to one another”. (*HSI*, 58.)

In other words, James has a childhood trauma that he has never spoken of, and will never be able to speak of again. The community does not want him to talk about it; as a man, he is expected to cope with such things. This is why, after this one moment of weakness, he continues in the path of violence and hatred that he has chosen.

Joseph, on the other hand, is never able to admit what he did to Breege, but Breege reads an apology in his behaviour:

He was up early, earlier than usual and left the first mug of tea outside the door, then another and still another, telling her that they were getting cold. She knew by his abject voice that he was sorry. [...] Taking one look at her bruises, like the purple pansies, he flinched and idiotically began to hum. (*WD*, 100.)

It can be seen in the passage above that Joseph has no skills for dealing with the situation. If he apologised to Breege, he would admit that he was wrong, and that he feels sorry for what he has done. This, being an expression of emotion, would be unacceptable for him as a man.

Eventually, it is the same assumption of the fact that he must remain in control, and is not allowed to back down or show any softness, that also drives him to kill Michael Bugler. Joseph cannot accept Bugler’s peace offer since it would mean that he would have to admit the irrationality of his actions against his neighbour. His killing of Bugler is his ultimate statement that he is, and will remain, rational and in charge. However, this final act of proving his manhood is what ends up breaking him. After hearing that Bugler is actually dead, Joseph falls to pieces, and is overcome by irrationality and fear:

All of a sudden he began to take off his clothes, saying they were bloodied, they were contaminated [...] And he stood before them naked, his arms slightly dangling like a crucified shape of pity and desolation staring into the space that was only a few footsteps away and into a long incarceration that he cannot yet imagine. (*WD*, 281.)

O'Brien continues her critique by showing that, whereas the conception of men only as tough and emotionless distorts the personal lives of people in Ireland, it also distorts the life of the entire community, depriving it of humanity. This is most clear in the case of McGreevy, who, since the beginning of the story, is regarded by everyone as a tough, merciless, emotionless terrorist who cares for no one and nothing. When he arrives in Josie's house, he makes a formal introduction, stating his organisation and rank, and maps out the situation that he is dealing with through a series of questions about the routines of Josie's life. "Who are you? Who else lives here? [...] Does the postman come indoors? [...] When were you last seen in the village?" (*HSI*, 61.) After finishing with the interrogation, he tells Josie to "[n]ever discuss my life or actions for your own sake ... And for mine" (*HSI*, 62). This leaves Josie with an image of a man very well organised, but entirely unsympathetic – an image shared by the rest of the society.

However, before Josie is given the chance to make her first judgement of McGreevy, it has already been revealed to the reader that the role he is playing is very different from the person that he actually is. The fact that the coldness is only on the surface becomes clear when he is hiding in a barn from those who are after him, and lets his thoughts trail to a painful past:

A child's coffin, a wife's coffin, he's seen one but not the other. He's seen the child's, brought, handcuffed, police on every side, searching the white habit for explosives. Couldn't look at the little face, the little bundle of frozen wisdom, that played games with him in the jail on visiting day, hid under the chair when it was time to go, went missing, said she was Minnie Mouse and her daddy was Mickey Mouse and he needed her to stay all night. With the angels. (*HSI*, 13.)

Nevertheless, as soon as McGreevy realises that his thoughts are betraying him, he forces himself to return to where he is. "He can take anything, heat, cold, even the electric wires flaring his inner temples", "they won't break him" (*HSI*, 13). After this he tries to fall asleep in order to have his strength back, but is soon interrupted by another incident forcing him to show his true nature. A cow

in the middle of calving wanders into the barn, and as he sees that the birth is not proceeding as planned, McGreevy does not hesitate to act, but takes a rope in order to help the calf out. He succeeds, and his reaction reveals that he is genuinely happy for having been able to help. “‘You divil,’ he says. The mother starts to lick, licking with a terrible assiduousness [...] and he thinks after the agony, the love, the impossible licking love of it” (*HSI*, 15).

The two instances described above – McGreevy thinking about the death of his wife and child, and helping deliver the calf into the world, when he could have just fled or stayed in his hiding place – show that he is, in fact, far from emotionless and unsympathetic. By helping the cow he took a conscious risk, since the owner of the cow could have walked in at any moment to find him, as he eventually did. However, seeing what McGreevy had done, he felt gratitude and, despite realising that he was a gunman on the run, he invited him in his house and gave him food. This is revealing of the fact that, if allowed to take place, humanity and kindness are answered with humanity and kindness.

Nevertheless, as can be seen in the earlier description of McGreevy by his daughter’s coffin, the Irish society in general does not allow for this kind of humanity. McGreevy, the mourning father who, at that point, had already suffered the loss of his wife, stands handcuffed, surrounded by policemen, and has to watch as the clothes of his dead child are being searched for explosives. He is facing the ultimate tragedy of a parent, but the treatment he is receiving is completely inhumane; he always remains a terrorist, and nothing else. Returning to McGreevy’s letter to Josie, quoted in the previous section, it can be gathered that he has not been given much choice to where to go with his life. According to his own words, he grew up surrounded by hate, in a place where he was always regarded as “*Papist leper scum*” (*HSI*, 113; original italics). The fact that he was interned already as a fourteen-year-old makes it clear that the label of the terrorist has been attached to him since childhood. Since the society around him has never recognised him as a human being with human feelings, he answers by living up to everyone’s expectations, setting aside any personal regret, and

becoming a ruthless killing machine.

Comparing this to the case of Tomás Ó Criomhthain, discussed above, it can be speculated whether Ó Criomhthain's indifference towards the death of his wife and children was genuine, or whether there was a pressure from his publishers and the surrounding community for him to leave his grief out of the narrative. If the latter is true, as I strongly suspect, Tomás Ó Criomhthain, or at least the fictive version of him presented in *The Islandman*, and McGreevy alike were both deprived of a chance for humanity, and forced to hold back their emotions by the inhumane society around them, expecting them to remain strong and rational at all times. Seidler (2006, 25) supports this view by noting that “[i]t is difficult to reach out for the support of others, if [...] you feel depressed or lack direction, if you have grown up feeling that you ‘should’ be able to control your own life and that needing help is just another sign of weakness”.

However, in comparison to Tomás Ó Criomhthain, as well as James O’Meara and Joseph Brennan, McGreevy differs in that he, in the end, takes responsibility for his own feelings, and makes the decision of reaching out for support. Although James O’Meara has a brief moment of regret, and Joseph Brennan sinks into temporary madness after killing Bugler, neither of them actually admits their vulnerability, and both of them, eventually, continue their lives without any visible alteration in their being – even if Joseph continues his in prison. McGreevy, on the other hand, is made to lower his weapons, both metaphorically and literally, by Josie’s determination to reveal the human being behind the myth of the monster, and see the person that he actually is.

After McGreevy has left Josie the letter about his life in Northern Ireland, quoted in the previous section, he leaves Josie’s house in order to perform the assassination of an Englishman that has been assigned to him. Josie tries to run after him and stop him, and to tell him that she has been wrong in judging him so harshly. She is, nevertheless, unable to catch up with him, and loses her way on the fields. As she lays exhausted and unconscious, McGreevy comes back to her – yet another manifestation of his humanity – and takes her to the house of a girl called Creena and her mother,

who are known to be sympathetic to his cause. After Josie recovers, she goes back home, disappointed and desperate at having not been able to talk to McGreevy.

Even if she thinks she failed, she actually succeeded; Josie has, in fact, had an impact on McGreevy. He has been moved by her friendship, and her will to stop him. He decides to return to Josie's house, and thus, even if he never consciously decided to do so, ends up leaving his mission unaccomplished. Josie, having learned the fate of McGreevy's family from Creena, asks questions and receives answers from McGreevy, who is now totally losing his protective mask, and opening up to Josie. In the end, the fact that he is made to remember and feel makes him shatter into pieces:

Twice in the day she knocked having left tea and eats and the third time she peeped in and saw him as she had not ever seen him, defenceless and muttering and insignificant. He had changed his lair to the shoe closet and lay under a shelf, doubled up, shoes and must all around him. After dark she asked him to come out. (*HSI*, 183.)

Comparing this image of McGreevy to the one that was formed in his first encounter with Josie, there is a remarkable difference. Josie, who had first been alarmed by “the hooded face and the pitilessness that dwelt both in the eyes and in the black blank monstrosity of the hood” (*HSI*, 65), and overcome by McGreevy's cold and systematic invasion of her house and life, is now suddenly in charge of the situation. McGreevy has been able to struggle through the horrors of his past with Josie, and finally allows himself to be weak. He, for once, does not feel threatened by his environment, and admits to Josie that he wishes for a different life: “Don't think I wouldn't like things like this ... Warmth and food and company ... I like it here, now ... Many's the night I've gone past a house and looked in and wished” (*HSI*, 191). In other words, if he thought he had the choice, he would live his life in peace – a similar peace that Josie has made it possible for him to experience for this brief moment.

Nevertheless, the fact that McGreevy dares to open up and show a softer side, ends, once again, in a tragedy. In the night, the police take the house by storm, surprising McGreevy and Josie in their sleep. As a result, McGreevy is captured, and Josie dies by accident from the bullet of a young guard. With Josie dead, no one will ever know that she has seen the man behind the myth; “all they

see is a woman with a face pale as the albumen inside an eggshell, the berry of blood, a stilled twitch around the mouth, suggesting an unfinished utterance” (*HSI*, 208). Once again McGreevy is facing the death of someone he cared for and, once again, he is treated inhumanely.

As Josie is carried out, the guard who shot her, Cormac, is lamenting over what he has done. The other guards tell him not to blame himself, but to blame McGreevy:

‘Stop crucifying yourself,’ Sergeant Slattery says and others assure him that it is not his fault but the fault of the man, the scum, lying there with not a single tear in his eyes. They converge on him now. Some stoop as if they could see into him, see into the sick mind, and transcribe it for others. (*HSI*, 209.)

Thus, the truth about McGreevy dies with Josie, and he remains, for everyone around him, a “fucker” (*HSI*, 207), “a tadpole” , and “[a] sicko that held the country hostage” (*HSI*, 209). Since no one believes that he could feel anything, he returns to his previous state of indifference. He has seen, once again that, for men such as him, revealing any emotion, giving way to any softness for even the briefest of moments, ends up in unbearable punishment. If he had not returned to Josie, she would still be alive.

As becomes clear from what I have said in this section, since the birth of the Republic of Ireland, Irish men have been living in a narrow space, struggling with notions of Irishness and masculinity. Nevertheless, when it comes to women and femininity, the rules become even stricter. In the following section I will discuss the role of women in Irish society, dictated, to a great extent, by the Catholic Church, and consider how Josie O’Meara, Mary MacNamara, and Breege Brennan live up to this restrictive role. In order to shed light on the roots of Irish femininity, I will, once again, return to the early days of Irish independence, and bring up certain issues that affected the development.



#### **4.2 Forced femininity – Women in the claws of patriarchy**

As Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (1995, 119) points out, “[f]rom the onset of the 1916 Rising through the struggle for independence and the civil war, women assumed a prominent role in putting Ireland’s case for freedom before the world and blackening the reputation of the British government”. Their input was mostly of a domestic nature – although, as I mentioned earlier on, they did also perform some military tasks such as intelligence – but they were still able to participate in public life, since what they were doing was an important part of a common cause. Nevertheless, returning to the issues discussed at the end of Section 2.2, as independence was gained, women of Ireland found that their new freedom did not last long. Not only were they returned to their previous disposition; additionally, the political leaders wanted to deprive them of some of the rights that had been gained prior to independence.

According to Valiulis (1995, 120), this culminated in two legislative instances: the Civil Service Amendment Act in 1925, and the Juries Bill in 1927. In short, the first piece of legislation enabled the exclusion of women from positions in the Civil Service, whereas the second promoted the idea that women should be excluded from jury service, since, according to the male legislators, they did not want to serve in juries. (Valiulis 1995, 120.) What the politicians were aiming at was to have women excluded from public life, and this was eagerly supported by the Catholic Church. As I have repeatedly brought up during this thesis, the campaign was a success, and resulted in a long period of voicelessness for Irish women.

As Valiulis (1995, 127) points out, the church blamed women of moral deterioration, and the rejection of their true identity by leaving the home. It was seen as the natural function of women to stay away from public life, taking care of the household; those who longed for life outside the domestic sphere were blamed for harming both the family and the nation with their unnatural behaviour. Thus, whereas the English in the 1920s were already well over Victorianism, the Irish were celebrating its values. By confining their women to the home, the Irish wanted to show their

moral was higher than that of the old coloniser.

As the Irish Free State became the Irish Republic in 1937, the new constitution nailed down the conservative frame of life in independent Ireland, defining family as “the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society” (*Constitution of Ireland*, 1999, Article 41). In Article 41, which continues to exist in the constitution of Ireland in its 1937 form, even if some amendments have been made, it is also stated that:

In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. [...] The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. (*Constitution of Ireland*, 1999, Article 41.)

Thus, the constitution reinforced the hierarchical structure inside the family by stating very clearly that a woman’s life is lived “within the home”, and she should not work, since it would harm the family. In practice, this meant that married women were not allowed to work in Ireland; it was not until the 1970s that this ban began to loosen.

Revealingly, whereas the constitution is very specific in defining the role of women, it says nothing about the role of men. This supports Valiulis’ statement about there being a great urge among the legislators to deprive women of any status they had managed to gain in the public life of the country during the struggle for independence. In addition to the above extract, establishing that it is the sole duty of an Irish woman to stay at home and become a mother, the same Article also prohibits divorce: “The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack” (1999, Article 41). These are the guidelines for the society in which Josie, Mary, and Breege are living, and, as has been revealed in the course of the previous sections, they are living entirely at the mercy of the family hierarchy, established by law and the Catholic Church.

Whereas Josie, already an old woman when McGreevy comes along, has spent her youth – counting out her time in the United States – and the early days of her marriage in Ireland of the

1920s and 1930s, Breege and Mary are young women in Ireland of the late twentieth century. Despite several decades between them, the experience of the three characters is, in several aspects, strikingly similar. The most important similarity is the fact that their actions are under constant surveillance from their families, and from the community around them. There are, nevertheless, important differences between them; whereas Breege has always wanted and tried to settle in the role that she is given by the culture and legislation of the country, Josie never agreed to it. Similarly to Breege, Mary has no desire to stand out from the crowd, but, in the circumstances that she is facing, she is forced to do so.

Josie, a woman of the world, arrived in the O'Meara house as a fashionable "bride with a loose fox collar over her velvet outfit" (*HSI*, 27), whose "finery was from America and so was the accent that switched on and off like a tap" (*HSI*, 30). Even if Josie acknowledges the fact that she is regarded as extremely lucky to have been chosen by a man such as James, a man with fortune and a great estate, she understands since the first day of her marriage that she has made a mistake. "[S]he thought 'I can't, I cannot go through with it' and asked someone, some female saint – Agnes it was – what she should do, if she should escape there and then, go back, get her trunks and run" (*HSI*, 29). However, the moment that she realises she has made a mistake, she also realises that she cannot do anything to make things right again. Having said yes to James's proposal, she has also said yes to living at his mercy.

To a modern woman who has just returned from America – where she has led an independent life, being able to support herself financially, and make her own decisions – being thrown in the middle of Irish countryside, into a small village where Victorian values persevere, is a nightmare. James, however, is extremely content and proud to bring home such a fine and beautiful wife – "a good mare", as he eagerly puts it. The fact that he thinks of Josie on similar terms as he thinks of horse breeding makes it quite clear what he, in perfect accordance with Irish legislators and the Catholic Church, sees as the primary task of his wife; procreation.

Nevertheless, whereas James is first dazzled by Josie's exotic and sophisticated appearance, and "[h]er haunches [...], wide and yet with a daintiness to them" (*HSI*, 29), his admiration is soon turned into hatred. Josie does not become pregnant, and James finds it intolerable that she talks back at him, and overlooks some of the issues that he sees as important. He begins a campaign to subordinate her once and for all, and as Farquharson and Schrank point out, the "masculinized politics and practices of the State are enacted in the O'Meara Big House" (2006, 116). In order to show that, as a man, he is in control of Josie, James takes up the means which have already come across in the course of the previous sections. Using the power invested in him by the state, he molests, rapes, and abuses Josie, because she refuses, or fails to be what she is supposed to be.

As I mentioned in Section 3.2, James never finds out that, at one point in their early marriage, Josie did become pregnant:

A baby. It cried inside her. She could hear it at all hours. It wasn't thumping, just crying. It was not a normal child. She prayed for it not to be. [...] It cried inside the walls of her womb. It was more like a banshee than a child. She prayed that she would lose it, that its crying meant it did not want to live. (*HSI*, 47.)

Josie, seeing the child as nothing else than a triumph for James in his efforts on breaking her, knowing that she could only regard it as an ally of her husband in a conspiracy against her, turns to the local doctor for help. The doctor is, nevertheless, appalled by what she is implying; she is quickly turned down, and thus made to know for certain that nobody in the community surrounding her has any sympathy for her situation, since, as a married woman, she is supposed to have children whatever the circumstances. She then turns to someone outside the community; a woman called Onnie, who performs the abortion by using a wire, on the condition that she does not scream. After the extremely painful and dangerous operation, Josie nearly dies of blood loss, but she never tells a soul in her lifetime. "*We make our beds and we lie on them, our swamped beds*", says Josie in her posthumous letter (*HSI*, 196; original italics).

James never finds out that Josie has intentionally devastated their only chance of having a child. Nevertheless, knowing that "[p]eople began to talk" (*HSI*, 43) on account of him not succeeding in

making his wife pregnant, he becomes even more infuriated by Josie's "barren loins" (*HSI*, 46).

After receiving the opportunity to show his anger in public, that is, after the incident between Josie and Father John, discussed in the previous sections, it was not simply for her alleged adultery that he was attacking her; it was

for every drink she had ever grudged him, [...] for the offspring which she did not give him, the mares and the fillies she had reviled, but most of all for the dried up menagerie of her womanhood, the farce that was their bedchamber life. (*HSI*, 135.)

In other words, it is not for the affair that James is punishing Josie. It is for the fact that Josie had never been, and would never be what he had opted for, since, by marrying Josie, an Irish woman in her prime, James thought he would receive a quiet and obedient housekeeper and a mother for his children. Instead, he received a woman with a mind of her own, who refused to look up to him, and most importantly, failed to give him the offspring he needed.

As I mentioned above, Breege Brennan, unlike Josie O'Meara, had always been happy to live a simple life, taking care of her brother and their home, being a model citizen. The difference between these two women can be seen from the beginning; whereas Josie is introduced to the reader as a woman who arrives in the countryside from another world, even mistaken for American film star Gloria Swanson on her way back from overseas (*HSI*, 42), and astonishing the local folk by wearing a "fox fur on a warm day" (*HSI*, 27), Breege is presented as very down-to-earth. She has grown up as part of the community in Cloontha, and she is known to be a good Catholic, going to mass every Sunday, and happily remaining in the domestic sphere. Her nature could be summed up in a comment that she makes early on in the novel: "I love my deep-red dahlias and I love our Lord" (*WD*, 10).

However, as came across in the previous sections, Breege shares Josie's fate in failing to fulfil the task that the state, and God for all her knowledge, have assigned to her. Even if she has previously found it easy to live as expected, minding the house and her small garden, she now finds that her mind and her body cease to accept the narrow space they are allowed. Experiencing new

kinds of emotions, she cannot convince herself that there is anything unnatural about them, and suddenly finds herself in constant danger of facing disapproval from the people around her. Her feelings for Bugler overcoming her previously unbreakable sense of propriety, she ends up defying her brother's orders, and committing the most sinful of deeds; having a sexual affair before marriage.

For Breege, the consequences for following her heart are overwhelming. Finding that she is pregnant, Breege, similarly to Josie, and Mary, as I will soon point out, has nowhere to turn in the community, and turns to someone outside it instead. She goes and visits a Dutch woman, a healer who lives outside Cloontha, whom she tells quite opaquely that she has a problem with a man. The woman tells Breege to go and talk to the man, and Breege gains hope that things might turn out for the better, that Bugler would take care of her and the child, since it is his duty. "Already she felt heartened, she remembered how he held her that night in the graveyard, held her against the night, against the cold, against all that threatened" (*WD*, 217). Breege, full of hope, goes to Bugler, but, as was revealed in the previous section, is unable to tell him about the child, and soon finds out that he is to marry another woman.

Whereas Josie, an honourably married Catholic woman decides to have an abortion, Breege, even while she knows that it will be the end of her life as a respectable member of the community, never considers any option other than giving birth to the child, and keeping it. She does not seem to decide not to have an abortion; she simply does not even comprehend the possibility of having one, which is revealing of the fact that, despite her one error, she would never intentionally break the norms in the manner that Josie did. Nevertheless, for a person who has always striven to live a good life, following the rules of the society and church, the situation is unbearable. Thus, losing her hope for solving the problem in any decent way, Breege suffers the nervous breakdown described in the previous section.

As for Mary, she seems to be somewhere between Breege and Josie. Similarly to Breege, she would want nothing more than to be the country girl that she is expected to be, but similarly to Josie, she cannot bear the thought of having the child. For reasons quite understandable, she, too, sees the child as her enemy. She is horrified by the fact that the child would reveal its origin, that is, the fact that its father is Mary's father as well. As she tries to persuade their neighbour, Betty, to take her to England, she implies what actually happened: "It wouldn't be a right baby anyway... It would be a freak." (*DR*, 125.) Whereas Breege does not see any option other than having the child, Mary does not see any option other than aborting hers. Both women, if Mary as a 14-year-old can even be regarded as one, suffer similar consequences. When Mary is brought back from England, she too nearly loses her mind, and just as Breege, she reacts to an unbearable situation with silence.

The fact that Breege loses her voice, literally not being able to speak, can, at least partly, be seen as factitious; perhaps it is the final means for her to postpone the public disgrace, and instead of not being able to speak, she has, unconsciously, decided not to speak. Nevertheless, not even knowing of her pregnancy, the community is already prepared to condemn her strange behaviour as it is. As she is found in the crib of baby Jesus, it is not compassion or worry that the people show. Just as the people in Josie's community delighted in seeing her bruises, the people that find Breege delight in being able to witness the scene, and regard her with malicious amusement.

They are mostly women who have foregathered. They ask if she is drunk or drugged or out of her mind. They lean in, sniffing her [...] They are laughing now, all of them laughing at how grotesque she is in there, wet stockings, wet hair, hunched up like a wet hedgehog. One remembers how she saw it coming, Breege Brennan going into Mrs Mac and accusing the poor woman of stealing her ten pounds. They speculate on what she might next do, curse, scream, maybe even bite someone. (*WD*, 234-235.)

Despite the speculation, Breege does not do anything, but is, instead, taken to a mental institution by her brother.

Mary's situation parallels with what happens to Breege. As she returns from England, she is met with accusations. A leading character in the anti-abortion-movement, Roisin, is one of the first to get to her: "A little thing that hasn't harmed you... Would never harm you... Totally dependent on

you for its life, [...] [a]lready a person... It's sex, hair, eyes, fingers, fingernails already there... And what is it doing, it is listening to the music inside your womb and thinking that you are its friend”.

(*DR*, 151.) In the midst of all the accusations, and claims that she is truly blessed for not having had the chance to go through with the abortion, Mary feels ill. She is first taken to a hospital, and as it is decided that she should not be left without surveillance until the court has decided whether she can be held in Ireland against her will, she is kept in the house of her cousin Veronica, who quite clearly shares the views of the anti-abortionists. Thus, just as Breege, Mary is locked away until she “comes to her senses”. Mary does not literally lose her voice, but loses it in the sense that no one listens to her, and she is unable to state the issues that actually made her want to have the abortion in the first place.

Similarly to Breege and Mary breaking down under the pressure, Josie too reacts mentally to the several hardships she is facing; her abortion, the violence of her husband, and the relationship with Father John that ended before it had even started.

Going queer then, mixing up flowers and birds, still things and moving things, the pods of flowers full of compressed song. [...] Other times she'd stand in front of the long mirror of the wardrobe and decide that the sockets of her eyes were filling up with blood. She was tasting blood. She saw her priest being boiled, skinned, skinless. (*WD*, 139-140.)

Whereas Breege, and to some extent, Mary, manage temporarily to hide their disgrace behind silence, Josie's disgrace is public from the beginning; everyone knows of her alleged adultery. Her mental problems, however, remain undetected by the community for quite long, mostly because she does not socialise with anyone, and her husband does not have any interest in her mental condition, even if he, without doubt, notices her strange behaviour.

Eventually, the symptoms do emerge in public, and since the people in the community have always despised Josie for her aloofness, they delight in her downfall. The problems are revealed after Josie has developed kleptomania, and is caught stealing a mousetrap from the village store. As Josie pleads for the staff not to tell anyone, “[t]hey were pleased to see her so craven, she who had



never asked anyone to the big house, who had sat aloof at chapel and called people uncouth, at last brought low” (*HSI*, 143). Josie has never settled in the community, and nothing pleases the public more than seeing her abjection.

What is detectable in the situations of all three women is the fact that those who most readily condemn them are the other women in their communities. In the case of Breege, it was “mostly women who [had] foregathered” (*WD*, 234) to witness her downfall in the church. As for Mary, there were no men in the group that awaited her when she returned from England, except for the doctor who did not take part in the accusations, and all of those taking part in her imprisonment were also women. Josie, on the other hand, was caught stealing by “two women”, with “triumph in [their] eyes” (*HSI*, 143). O’Brien suggests that the reason behind this female hostility toward the three characters is found in jealousy. For instance, Tara’s mother, who is certain that Mary has lived in “a night paradise of foul pleasures” (*DR*, 150) is actually jealous of the fact that Mary has, according to her view, enjoyed a life without the restraints that she has always faced. O’Brien writes that “beneath the outrage [presented by Tara’s mother] was the jealousy of a thwarted woman seething over her own lost, never-ever-tasted delight of being thirteen and fourteen and fifteen” (*DR*, 150).

The fact that Breege, by her strange behaviour, Josie, by her seeming contempt and pride, and Mary, by rejecting Catholic values, are rebelling against the norms and expectations that the other women have always accepted as their boundaries, makes them angry. If it is not acceptable for all of them to overlook these boundaries, it cannot be tolerated that these three women have the liberty to overlook them either. Thus, women are keeping up the boundaries themselves; they have internalised their own oppression.

Whereas the public equally condemns Breege, Josie, and Mary, the consequences of this condemnation are quite different for all three characters. For Josie, they are detrimental. As she is convinced that James will find out about her effort to steal from the local shop, she rushes to tell

him of the incident before anyone else has the chance, hoping that he might offer her some kind of shelter against the hostile surroundings. James, nevertheless, refuses to show even anger anymore, and treats her with nothing but cold indifference. After this, Josie does not have anything; not even hatred from James.

How long did it all take? How long does it take to murder first a body and then the image interred within that body, outlasting it, outliving it, refusing to give up the ghost. You know by your clothes and your shoes, your worn-out shoes that cause you to trip on a pavement. (*HSI*, 144.)

Josie is thus proved to be entirely unfit to be a part of a family, or the village community, and she is shut out, even if she remains physically where she is for the rest of her life.

Breege, on the other hand, seems to be saved by the fact that her brother decides to send her to a mental institution. As she first arrives in the ward, she thinks that she will die. “In the mirror, I saw the terror jumping in my own eyes. Terror of what. Terror of everything.” (*WD*, 237.) This same terror, a terror of everything that has made Breege mute, and drove her to crawl up to the crib of baby Jesus, is shared by other women in the institution as well. A patient named Dolours clings desperately to silent Breege, asking “Why are we here, why are we here. She’s howling it. Explain. Explain. No one can. Is it the serpent. Is it that we love too much. Or is it that we don’t love at all.” (*WD*, 243.) Mentioning “the serpent” makes it clear that these women are asking, if their “promiscuous” behaviour is due to the fact that they are daughters of Eve, if they are simply too weak to resist the sin that respectable women easily resist. Remembering the story of an Irish woman’s lewdness causing hundreds of years of colonisation told by O’Dea, discussed in Section 3.2, it is quite clear that this is exactly what the Irish society wants these women to think; that they should blame themselves for not being able to fit in.

However, when receiving the chance to step outside the Cloontha community for a while, it does not take Breege long to understand that the problem is not, in fact, simply in her head. On Christmas Eve, there among strangers, she is encouraged to sing, and she does, thus receiving her voice back. She sings a song that was previously given to her by Bugler, which suggests that it is

now her secret love that gives her strength. Later on she sits with another patient called Mrs Hegarty, and a nurse called Ger, when she receives a note from Bugler, who has tried to come and visit her, but was not allowed in. Having read the message, telling her that Bugler is thinking of her, and sure that “[s]omething will come to make things better”, she finally opens up to the two strangers she is sitting with:

If she keeps staring at the candle flame, at the way it veers, she will not cry, she will be able to hold back her tears. Then she is unable. The tenderness of the words became harder to bear than all the cruelty. The tears, the trapped tears of shame and love come pouring out of her. (*WD*, 264.)

After this, Breege no longer hides her shame or her love; she begins to trust herself, her own feelings and reason, and the fact that, whatever happens, life will not end here.

Although it is Bugler’s note that pulls Breege back from the edge of a cliff, her newly found strength is not dependent on the idea that Bugler has decided to leave his fiancé and take care of Breege and the baby instead. This is proved by the fact that, even if Bugler is killed by Joseph right after Breege has returned home full of hope of a future together, she does not break down again. Instead, whereas Joseph falls to pieces after realising what he has done, Breege keeps her mind together, taking over the situation, and arranges for Bugler’s funeral, not considering for one moment whether it is appropriate or not. Breege, who had previously been silenced by the fear of everyone finding out that she is a sinner, a fallen woman, now silences the public by her overt protest. She no longer cares for what other people think, and even steps over Bugler’s former fiancé Rosemary, showing everyone that Bugler was her man, refusing to be overrun by fear or shame ever again.

The situation of Mary seems, as before, to end up somewhere between Josie and Breege. Josie is defeated by the society in that, when she tries after years of passivity and silence to make a statement, she is killed before she has the chance to utter a word. Breege, on the other hand, manages, with her own activity, to regain her voice, and somehow rise over the restraints of the community. Mary’s story is coloured with both activity and passivity; in the course of the novel she

tries actively to find help, and escape from those who are confining her. She literally escapes from the house of Veronica, and finds her way to the barristers that have taken her side in the legal sense. Nevertheless, she is not able in the end to overcome her oppressors and make the decision of the abortion herself; she miscarries before the court announces her fate.

At first, it seems that Mary's story ends with a similar silence as that of Josie's; that she did not have the chance to make a statement, but was defeated by the raging powers around her. It would seem impossible for a person to go on with her life after experiencing what Mary has, but O'Brien suggests that she has not been defeated. In a way, the fact that she miscarried seems to have convinced her that all those who tried to break her – the anti-abortion -movement, the confining religious views, and the state in itself – were wrong, and no longer had power over her. Instead of losing her faith in life, as seems to have happened to Josie, Mary decides to believe that there is still hope for her. She regains her voice in a manner much similar to Breege, the novel ending with her singing in front of people:

Her voice was low and tremulous at first, then it rose and caught, it soared and dipped and soared, a great crimson quiver sound going up, up to the skies and they were silent then, plunged into a sudden and melting silence because what they were hearing was in answer to their souls' innermost cries. (*DR*, 265.)

Whereas *Down by the River* ends in an atmosphere of careful hope for the better, *Wild Decembers*, ending the trilogy, states the existence of this hope perhaps more clearly. The novel ends with Breege alone in her house, Joseph having been put to prison, and Bugler in the grave. However, even if she is alone, there is nothing hopeless in the scene. Breege thinks of the endless cycle of violence, of the meaningless feud that came to set all of their destinies, and “wonders if the old wars are brewing again and will they, as women, be called on to fight the insatiate fight in the name of honour and land and kindred and blood” (*WD*, 296). She is, nevertheless, not afraid of what the future may bring, but believes that the past, despite the dangers it holds, is also the way to the future. This becomes clear in the final lines of the novel:

Shaped by that place and that loneliness she thinks that the longing which ran in her listening and ran in her veins was answered so and holding her belly she reaches back, back to those nameless and spectral forces of which she is made and reaches to him too in the hope that there is communion between living and dead, between those, who even in their most stranded selves are on the side of life and harbingers of love. (*WD*, 296.)

Comparing this with the ends of *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Down by the River*, an understanding emerges of what O'Brien is saying through her trilogy. In the first novel, Josie slowly fades away, and is finally silenced altogether. She becomes just another casualty of history, of a never ending struggle, the end of which remains unseen, as McGreevy's final thoughts reveal: "In thirty years what will he be. Who will he be. Will his heart be heavy. Or will everything continue just as it is." (*HSI*, 212.) No one can tell what is going to happen, and the future is covered in fear and darkness. Whereas Josie falls victim to history, Mary decides not to be defeated; she rejects her history in order to go on with her life. She is able to go on living, but not in the environment where she faced her tragedy. In the end chapter where she climbs up on the stage to sing, she is not in her home village, but in a big town, surrounded by people who do not know her. In other words, her freedom was gained by turning her back to the community that she was once a part of.

Thus, the first part of the trilogy ends in a dark atmosphere of hopelessness, and the second in the resolution that the only way for life to go on is the rejection of one's history and community. In the last part, however, O'Brien seems to give hope that there can, in fact, be a future as part of the community as well. As became clear earlier, Breege is aware of the dangers of history, and the fact that they may come back to haunt her. Nevertheless, even if she does not reject history, she refuses to let it define her life and actions in the present. Consequently, *Wild Decembers* ends in a more hopeful atmosphere, in anticipation of new life that is not a threat or an enemy, but something to be welcomed, and a future that will, perhaps, no longer be determined by a dark history.

## 5. Conclusion

In the course of this thesis, I hope to have revealed a variety of consequences that English colonialism had on Irish identity, culture, and society. The fact that Irish culture was defined by extreme patriarchy and strong gender roles throughout the twentieth century, and Victorian values survived in the Irish society long after they had been rejected elsewhere in Europe, is something that integrates Ireland to the rest of the postcolonial world. When considering O'Brien's trilogy, the issues that I have brought up during the past sections would seem to suggest that the writer sees Ireland as a country still very much defined by its colonial legacy. The novels came out at a time when, as I have pointed out, the position of Irish women in the country's history and literature was under re-evaluation, and Irish postcolonial studies were gaining more ground. I would say that O'Brien's trilogy is an important contribution in regard to the developments in both Irish feminist criticism, and Irish postcolonial studies. The value of the novels is to be found in the fact that, as I hope to have shown, they manage to paint a picture of the complexities that guided life in Ireland in the latter part of the twentieth century.

As I pointed out in the introduction, during the 1990s, the historical voicelessness of Irish women became an increasing concern in Irish literary world. O'Brien can be seen as addressing this matter by making the voice of the main female characters a major issue in all three novels. When looking at the way that things end for Josie, Mary, and Breege, it is possible to read their fates as paralleling the journey of an Irish woman writer in late twentieth century. Whereas Josie becomes yet another victim for the conspiracy of Virgin Mary and Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Breege, and in a way, Mary, succeed in crushing "the symbolic woman-nation" (Quinn 2009, 430) that had distorted the lives of Irish women since the times of the Literary Revival. Mary sees as her only solution to turn her back on history in order to live on, but Breege decides not to reject the past; instead, she starts to look at it from a different perspective.

In a way, this can be read as O'Brien's version of how to overcome the silence. What seems relevant here is the fact that Josie is of a different generation than Breege and Mary; her life story, ranging through most of the twentieth century in Ireland, ends in "an unfinished utterance" (*HSI*, 208). She can be seen as representing the silent past, the past of the ordinary Irish woman that Eavan Boland also tried to reach in a desperate search for the tombstone of her grandmother, of whom she knew nothing except that she died in 1909 at the age of thirty-one (Boland 1996, 3). These women were lost under the history of great men, their private history remaining a source of speculation.

As for Mary and Breege, the former found her voice after turning her back on the community that she grew up in. Avoiding all aspects of autobiography, I am tempted to look at this as carrying some similarity to the experience of O'Brien's generation. O'Brien herself has spent all of her literary career in "exile", and at least through the earlier years of her career, due to literary bans and other obstacles set by the state and community, it would have been relatively impossible for her to write what she wrote had she remained in Ireland. Thus, in a way, it was necessary for O'Brien at that time to reject her past in order to become the writer that she is, just as it was necessary for Mary to reject hers in order to continue her life. In Breege, however, there seems to be a promise of a changing society; a society in which women are not required to reject history or the community in order to find their voice.

Struggling free from the role that had first been assigned to her by cultural nationalists, Breege seems to be more in touch with the strong women of the past, that is, the women of the ancient stories, discussed in Section 3.2. Breege refuses to be Cathleen Ni Houlihan, who can only live if Irish men save her "four beautiful green fields" (Yeats and Gregory 2009, 7), and takes up the legacy of women such as Fúamnach, who "preferred being good to herself to being good to anyone else" ("The Wooing of Étaín" 1981, 46). She thus finds her own voice, as well as her own history, by not rejecting the community, but standing up to it and making an effort to overcome the intolerance. Through Breege, O'Brien seems to suggest that, for Irish women, there is a tradition to

cherish as well. Even if it is necessary to reject the confinements caused by history, it does not mean that all history must be rejected; instead, it should be re-evaluated.

The effort of Irish women to find their voice is, by no means, the only issue worth noting in regard to O'Brien's trilogy. As I mentioned above, the novels give a glimpse of several problems and complexities in postcolonial Ireland. The most striking aspect that comes across in the trilogy is how hostile, violent, and even sick a community O'Brien is depicting. Her characters seem to live in a world where the conceptions of right or wrong are twisted, and oppressive structures hinder any development on both a personal, as well as on a communal level.

As I pointed out in the introduction, the trilogy was regarded by some as outdated already at its publication in the 1990s. O'Brien was accused of backwardness, and of living in the past with her conceptions of the Irish society. In some sense, I find this criticism adequate, and as something that could also be applied to my choice of topic in this thesis. In my discussion, I have mostly moved in Irish history up to the 1990s, the time when O'Brien wrote her trilogy. I have thus overlooked entirely the immense change that swept over Ireland during the past two decades; the extraordinary boom in Irish economy from approximately 1995 to 2008, which resulted, for instance, in Ireland gaining the nickname "Celtic Tiger". During these years, Ireland became one of the economic leaders of Europe, and created a new image as a modern, advanced, and international country.

In the light of these developments, it should be asked whether the issues I have brought up in this thesis have any validity in current Ireland. The first issue to be addressed is related to the whole idea of Irish postcolonialism. Whereas I devoted a good part of this thesis for establishing the fact that Ireland should be regarded as postcolonial, the developments from the 1990s onwards make it necessary to ask another question; even if Ireland is postcolonial, what difference does it make, when the country has clearly been able to move to the frontline in European development? This takes us back to O'Brien's trilogy, and leads us to ask the following: if the novels at their publication in the 1990s were already regarded by some as outdated, what value do they carry in 2011?



I see the two questions, to a great extent, as interrelated, and so is my answer to them. As for the first one, in my opinion, the consideration of Ireland in the context of its colonial past continues to be essential in the twenty-first century, perhaps even more so than before. To support this claim, I will turn to a question, or rather an idea presented by Edward Said (2003, 179): “How can we assume that one phase of history does not imprint the next ones with its pressures, and if so, how are they to be discerned, recalled, rebutted, resisted if they are not admitted in the first place?” O’Brien suggests the same on the first lines of *House of Splendid Isolation*: “History is everywhere. It seeps into the soil, the sub-soil. Like rain, or hail, or snow, or blood. A house remembers. An outhouse remembers. A people ruminate. The tale differs with the teller.” (*HSI*, 3.) In other words, what Said and O’Brien seem to be saying is that, to some extent, the current situation is always somehow defined by history.

It should be remembered that, although Ireland has come a long way from the first decades of independence, and even from the beginning of the 1990s, there are still several areas in life and society where traditional values persevere. The Catholic Church, for instance, continues to have a powerful position in the society, and its effect on the development of Irish legislation is indisputable. This becomes evident, for instance, in the fact that abortion continues to be illegal in Ireland, unless the pregnancy poses a clear threat to the life of the mother. After ‘the X case’, the incident that inspired O’Brien to write *Down by the River*, it was established that Irish women cannot be prevented from travelling abroad for abortion, and that the risk of suicide should be regarded as fulfilling the criteria for “threat to the life of the mother”.

Another example of traditional views is the fact that the family continues to possess the status of “the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society”, which it was granted in Article 41 of the Irish Constitution, discussed in the previous section. Thus the society continues to be based on heteronormative conceptions of the family as a unit of husband, wife and children, excluding the idea that there also exist a variety of different kinds of families in Ireland today. It is true that some changes have started to take place in regard to this; it can be seen, for instance, in the fact that same-

sex couples have been able to register their relationship as civil partnership from the beginning of 2011. Nevertheless, family units other than the traditional one are still not equally acknowledged by the constitution, thus making, for instance, single parents, unmarried hetero-sexual couples, and same-sex couples less valid than the traditional family.

From what I pointed out above, it can be gathered that, despite Ireland's seeming progress and development, the society still holds on to several of the patriarchal traditions, and struggle with issues that have coloured the country's existence throughout its postcolonial history. The fact that the legislation is slow to change can perhaps be seen as reflecting people's personal attitudes; traditional values continue to be cherished by many. There are, unfortunately, more visible reminders of the country's postcolonial status as well. One of the most disturbing issues is the fact that, in the past couple of years, the Northern Irish Troubles that were put to peace in 1998 have started to show signs of re-emergence. The first incident took place in March 2009, when two British soldiers were killed, and two more soldiers and two civilians wounded in a shooting outside an army barracks in Antrim. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by paramilitary organisation RIRA (Real Irish Republican Army), and in the same month, another group, CIRA (Continuity Irish Republican Army), claimed responsibility for the shooting dead of a Northern Irish policeman in County Armagh.

In the subsequent years there have been bomb discoveries all over Northern Ireland, including some explosions that have caused injuries to civilians and members of the police. The first death victim after 2009 was a PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland) Constable, who was killed in April 2011 by a booby-trap device that had been set under his car. *Belfast Telegraph* instantly declared that Constable Ronan Kerr was targeted because of his Catholicism. It is stated in the article that "The murder [...] is the latest killing in a bitter campaign of violence specifically targeting Catholic officers." According to a former Police Federation Chairman interviewed in the article, "This is an attempt to drive Catholics out of the service." (Henry, 2011.)

In other words, the attackers are expressing their hostility towards those Northern Irish Catholics who, by joining the official police force, have proven to accept the fact that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. Even if the attacks can be regarded as a campaign by a small group of Republican dissidents, not comparable to the decades of terror that required an innumerable amount of casualties before 1998, they are still revealing of the fact that the old problems continue to be present under the surface; there are still people who are not prepared to accept the division of Ireland.

These more or less visible reminders of Ireland's colonial past are, in my opinion, also something that give validation for O'Brien's "backward" representation of the country. For me, O'Brien's decision to depict only rural Ireland, showing it as a place haunted by history, is not necessarily a sign of the writer being unable to see the new realities of life in Ireland. Rather, whereas those new realities were embraced by many as the only thing that matters, O'Brien's trilogy, as well as some of the novels she has written since then, such as *In the Forest* (2002) and *The Light of Evening* (2006), can be read as a warning against taking these new realities for granted.

The idea that O'Brien intentionally wrote against the view of an Ireland well over the calamities and restraints of the past is supported by her comments in the interview for *The Observer: The New Review*, which was already referred to in the introduction. After the years of success of the Celtic Tiger up until 2008, Ireland, similarly to many other European nations, faced a deep recession. It is stated in the interview that O'Brien

didn't see the crash coming, but she knew no good could come from the boom. [O'Brien points out that] "It generated an ethos of envy. I'll never forget walking along by St Stephen's Green [Dublin]. There was a big hoarding with an advert on it for a motor car. 'Enjoy the begrudgery' said the slogan. It was very cynical, but very true. Not a healthy sign." (Cooke, 2011.)

Thus, the reasons for O'Brien to emphasise, and even exaggerate, issues that are deemed by many as unnecessary to write about in the first place are perhaps found in her effort to make people remember how fragile their "new reality" actually is. What she seems to be saying is that, just as people were surprised to discover the neglect of Irish women's writing at the beginning of the

1990s, they might soon be surprised to discover how short a way they still are from the past that they deem as backward. This can be seen, for instance, in the atrocity that inspired *Down by the River*; before ‘the X case’ became reality, it would probably have been impossible for many Irish people to believe that such different views on questions of basic human rights could occur in Ireland of the 1990s.

For many, it is particularly O’Brien’s interest in the shady areas of Irish society and morality, and her seeming obsession with depicting Irish communities in general as carrying sick features that make them reject her novels as sensational and unnecessarily obscene. This view is supported by novels such as *Down by the River* and *In the Forest*, which are both based on shocking true events that were immensely visible in Irish and international media. The fact that O’Brien took up these sorts of subjects is regarded by some as her taking advantage of unthinkable tragedies, and making money on human suffering.

These are grave accusations, but I am inclined to see the novels as carrying a different agenda. It is undoubtedly true that O’Brien is out to shock people, and creates exaggerations for these purposes. This is supported, for instance, by the fact that the male characters in the trilogy are all violent, the women, without exception, face immense suffering, and the twisted values of the community distort the lives of men and women alike. Nevertheless, I am uncomfortable with the idea that this is O’Brien’s true view of the state of affairs in Ireland. I, for one, read the trilogy not as depicting life as such in modern Ireland, but as bringing up the undercurrents of the society, and – as I mentioned above – warning against neglecting their existence. They should not be forgotten in order to prevent them from rising in to surface again.

How Irish society deals with the defeat of the Celtic Tiger, and whether the recession makes people turn backward or forward, remains to be seen. What is certain is the fact that, whatever happens, it is essential to remember where the country and its people are coming from. Instead of thinking about the short-term developments that resulted in the ups and downs of the past couple of decades that seem to be the main concern for many, future is something that arises from the

complex, fragmented, and long history of colonial and postcolonial Ireland. Thus, at the face of a new era, Irish postcolonial studies become increasingly important, and so does the work of O'Brien as a link between the past and the present.

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