

Article

Edna O'Brien's Neglected Widows and Spinsters

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Abstract

From the witch-like widow on the edges of civilisation to the retired spinster who, after an active but disappointing sexual past, chooses to continue her single life, the celibate women of Edna O'Brien's fiction have as much to contribute to the author's career-long examination of the damage done by Irish patriarchy as any of the miserable housewives, resentful mothers, and abused girls who dominate critical analyses of her work. Unlike the many admirable nun characters in O'Brien's fiction, the women in this study are not consciously renouncing society or deliberately retreating from the world. While they can be vulnerable characters who risk disapproval and even violence, they can also offer alternative models of Irish womanhood, subtle and complex, alternatives not always recognised when the narrator is a young girl and sometimes appreciated too late by more mature narrators and characters.

Keywords: Edna O'Brien; Irish women's writing; celibacy; widows; spinsters

1. Introduction

At the height of her fame, in the 1960s and 1970s, Edna O'Brien was notorious for writing "racy" novels about the sexual (mis)adventures of young women. In this early reception, her name became a byword for cheap, salacious women's writing in a period of rapid changes in sexual mores and the rise of second-wave feminism. Scholarly reassessment of her work, which began to appear in the 1990s, corrected this sexist characterization by conducting insightful feminist analyses of O'Brien's representation of the damage wrought on Irish women by the patriarchal family as well as larger cultural and governmental controls of women's sexuality. Since then, much has been written about the miserable housewife, the restless, even neglectful mother, the lonely young woman, and the abused girl in O'Brien's work, but the figure of the secular celibate woman has received little attention. There are many admirable and attractive nuns in the fiction, as has often been discussed (see [Pelan 2006](#), pp. 66–69; [Balzano 2006](#), pp. 92–109), such as the teacher Cait falls in love with in *The Country Girls* (1960) ([E. O'Brien 1960](#)), the central character in the short story "Sister Imelda" (1981) ([E. O'Brien 1981](#)), or the heroic nun who provides life-saving haven for Maryam in *Girl* (2019) ([E. O'Brien 2019](#)). However, the voluntarily celibate who actively renounces the heterosexist imperative and retreats from the world entirely is different from the critically neglected women characters I want to consider. Specifically, my intervention will focus on O'Brien's depictions of widows and spinsters, whose exclusion from the heterosexual economy of value is more complex and varied, as they remain celibate in the term's original meaning of being unmarried (from the Latin *caelibatus*), or no longer married, but without the nun's vows of chastity.

Long-standing assumptions about O'Brien's own wild sex life in the swinging London of the 1960s and 1970s are challenged in a rarely referenced 1964 interview with Nell



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Dunn, in which the author reveals a perhaps unexpected attitude towards sex, or at least heterosexual sex. There she says, “I have some sexual terrors that still maim me. I’m frightened,” and discloses that when she thinks of sex, she “think[s] of daggers and needles” (Dunn [1964] 2018, p. 62). Extrapolating from her own experience, she maintains that “to some extent” for a woman, sex means “being violated and invaded” (Dunn [1964] 2018, p. 80). Bluntly, she asserts that “I think that a woman can never rely on a man the way she can on another woman, because to a great extent, man is a woman’s enemy” (Dunn [1964] 2018, p. 80).

While these attitudes and perspectives can be connected to the broader heteropessimism and separatism of second-wave feminism, O’Brien anchors her remarks to the specifics of post-independence Ireland. Throughout the interview, O’Brien is critical of the Roman Catholicism of her upbringing, highlighting the pressure on women in Irish society of the early post-Independence decades to contribute to the national cause by upholding the sanctity of the family. The newly emerged nation-state and the fraught issue of Irish identity were both reliant on a self-image of a distinctive and fervent Roman Catholic piety as well as the maintenance of “traditional” filial virtues of hearth and home. As Gerardine Meaney has observed, “[i]n post-colonial southern Ireland a particular construction of sexual and familial roles became the very substance of what it means to be Irish” (Meaney 1991, p. 191). Clair Wills has similarly noted that in “this period of consolidation of the rural Catholic nationalist ideology, [...] the ideological construction of the familial sphere was intimately bound up with the public image of Ireland as a traditional rural society” (Wills 2001, pp. 35, 37). More recently, Ed Madden details how, in such a cultural discursive context, celibacy, widowhood and late marriage came to raise anxieties about “race suicide” (Madden 2021, p. 304), culminating in *The Vanishing Irish*, John O’Brien’s hyperbolic 1953 portrait of a “country with the fewest and the latest marriages in the civilised world” (J. A. O’Brien 1953, p. 94), in which spinsters and bachelors were “dooming [the Irish] to extinction” (J. A. O’Brien 1953, p. 228).

In the Dunn interview, O’Brien refers to the married state for a woman as the equivalent of being a “prisoner” (Dunn [1964] 2018, p. 65). She recalls the limited and unappealing models for mature femininity of her youth in rural County Clare, as well as the lasting impacts on her own experience of relationships and female embodiment: “With my instincts and automatic behaviour I revert back to what my mother did and my grandmother [...], this thing of clinging on like a barnacle on a rock to the man” (Dunn [1964] 2018, p. 73). This urge to “cling” persists despite thinking that “our house was awful, was gloomy, but it never occurred to me that the world itself was treacherous and that our house was just a little extension of millions of houses and millions of people” (Dunn [1964] 2018, p. 65). This scarlet woman with the libertine reputation admits to Dunn that “I don’t find anything erotic” (Dunn [1964] 2018, p. 84):

the words vagina and womb fill me with terror [...] the bulk of my body is closed to my enjoyment of it [...]. I don’t think I have pleasure in any part of my body, because my first and initial body thoughts were blackened by sin and therefore I think of my body as a sort of vehicle of sin, a sort of tabernacle of sin. (Dunn [1964] 2018, p. 88)

Late in the interview, a remark hints at the possible appeals of celibacy, including a kind of eroticism, when O’Brien observes that “[r]estraint can be another form of indulgence [...] there is a tendency to confuse enjoyment with indulgence” (Dunn [1964] 2018, p. 89). O’Brien’s perspective here comports to Benjamin Kahan’s reconceptualization of celibacy as not only a tool of sexual repression (as it so often functioned under post-independence Irish Catholic hegemony) but also as an “an organization of pleasure” (Kahan 2013, p. 4) that

constitutes a sexuality in its own right, as well as “a mode of activism and of authorship” (Kahan 2013, p. 31) that troubles cisheteropatriarchal values.

O’Brien’s biography has long been entangled in readings of her work. By framing my analysis of her short fiction and novels with her Dunn interview, I echo that practice here, but to a different effect from the usual readings. I mean to demonstrate that the attitudes and perspectives on compulsory sexuality and female celibacy expressed in the Dunn interview are legible in O’Brien’s fiction, in which—contra decades of accusations that O’Brien was a sex-obsessed writer—heterosexual sex tends to be a disaster for women. Usually disappointing, it can be something much worse for many of her female characters. There are no happy heterosexual relationships in her work. Across the fiction, the only truly joyful, life-affirming sexual encounter that promises a relationship occurs between two women in her 1988 novel, *The High Road* (E. O’Brien 1988). However, male jealousy and entitlement put a fatal end to the love between Anna and Catalina. Their fate foregrounds a recurring theme in O’Brien’s work: namely, that women who settle for heterosexual marriage are disappointed and unfulfilled, while those who fail to conform to the narrowly defined gender and sexual roles prescribed by the procreative nationalism of post-independence Ireland are subject to exclusion, oppression, and violence. The Dunn interview steers us to notice these themes in O’Brien’s work, not only in instances of queer affiliation but also in her celibate spinsters and widows.

I have argued previously that O’Brien stages her systematic attempt to demolish a long-cherished illusion of ideological purity in Irish society, the patriarchal family, through the “alternative relationships imagined in the fiction, especially between and among women” (O’Connor 2021, p. 15). Building on this earlier work, the present article will attend to the typically more isolated figures of the widow and the spinster. These ambiguously celibate figures might variously be considered to be “pre-married” girls, “ever-married” widows, or “never-married” spinsters, but they are all independent and not necessarily chaste. They sometimes appear only marginally in the fiction and are not always explicitly allied with other women, but they nevertheless offer possible examples of oblique and often complex negotiations with the obligation to pursue heterosexual romance experienced so disastrously by most of O’Brien’s protagonists. Considered as a pattern across the oeuvre, these neglected figures contribute, often subtly, to O’Brien’s career-long exposure of the forces arrayed against Irish girls and women struggling to achieve self-determination.

2. O’Brien’s Widowed Sages and Witches

Even as they are often functionally ‘single’ women—in the sense of living independently without a (deceased) husband—widows differ from “pre-married” girls and “never-married” spinsters in so far as they register socially and culturally as “ever-married” figures who continue to be categorized by their relation to the conjugal household as “the basis of social, economic, and political thought and structure” (Froide 2005, pp. 16–17). And yet, even as her social position can be tenuously accommodated within patriarchal heteronormativity, the widow simultaneously troubles these paradigms as an economically independent and sexually ambiguous female head of a household. Anthropologist Marjo Buitelaar notes that “the anomalous position of the widow” vis-à-vis the social roles of married and unmarried women has often been “controlled by attributing danger[s] to her,” such as her “fatal sexual attractiveness to men, her association with black magic and her ‘working relationship’ with death” (Buitelaar 1995, p. 14). In Europe and post-European-settlement North America, the widow’s consequent association with witchery—as an evil “seductress” suspected of being in league with supernatural forces—has long functioned to “acknowledge and reinforce her ambiguous classification” (Buitelaar 1995, p. 14).

One powerful example of the witchy widow trope occurs in O'Brien's "Why Irish Heroines Don't Have to be Good Anymore." In this 1986 *New York Times* article, the novelist recalls this scene:

One day in the early 1950s I saw a very tall woman in St Stephen's Green in Dublin, bending over to talk to someone; she was dressed completely in black, almost like a nun, and indeed had what Yeats's sister Lily described as a sort of royal smile. It was Maud Gonne, the "burning cloud" as Yeats described her. Seeing her sent a shiver through me. I had touched or rather glimpsed both politics and poetry. Unwittingly it spurred me to write. (E. O'Brien 1986, p. 13)

At this stage in her life, Gonne had been a widow for several decades, the martyrdom of her late husband, Captain John McBride, having been immortalised in W. B. Yeats's poem "Easter 1916." She has persisted in her mourning attire, however, appearing nun-like to O'Brien, suggestive of not only self-discipline and detachment, but also an asexuality that challenges bourgeois heterosexist imperatives. Significantly, this appearance, which resembles an apparition or religious visitation, has a visceral, vaguely erotic effect on O'Brien, who identifies the "shiver" that the sight of Gonne sends through her with artistic inspiration. Gonne has enchanted O'Brien, put a life-changing spell on her, an instance of supernatural insight and connection, vision and influence wielded by the witchy woman.

Versions of this stereotype of the witchy widow persist on the margins of O'Brien's fiction, though rarely as a simple indictment. In *A Pagan Place* (1970), O'Brien presents the reader with the widow "who did cures" while she "cackled to herself," and of whom the narrator's mother says you "would not like to get in her black books because she wouldn't be surprised if she was a witch" (E. O'Brien [1970] 1971, p. 18). The widow in touch with otherworldly powers, capable of seer-like insights, appears early in *In the Forest* (2002), a novel based on a triple homicide committed in East Clare's Cregg Wood (called Cloosh Wood in the text). The woodland of the title is a sentient, haunted, living presence (granted speech at the novel's close), recognized as such by an unnamed "widow" early in the text. The novel opens when the victims are first identified as missing, and a search has been undertaken. The widow does not participate in the search, but enters into it psychically and describes an oneiric eco-revenge:

Yet she dreams of it, dreams she is in Cloosh Wood, running back and forth [...]. [T]he tall trees no longer static, but moving like giants, giants on their grotesque and shaggy roots, their green needly paws reaching out to scratch her to engulf her, and she awakens in a sweat, unable to scream the scream that has been growing in her. (E. O'Brien 2002, pp. 1–2)

This character does not appear again in the novel, but, significantly, she establishes the atmosphere of dread that pervades the narrative. She also makes an implicit link between the neglect of the ever-shrinking woods on the edge of an expanding, modernizing rural village and that same village's historic neglect of one of its own abused children, who returns to wreak a nightmarish revenge, prefigured in the widow's vision of inhuman, engulfing "paws," and her growing sense of inexpressible horror.

In the Forest is the last of O'Brien's state-of-the-nation novels, which were written in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, all controversial for their explorations of gendered and national violence in Ireland. Most of them also have in common the appearance of a widow at a crucial moment, or, in the case of *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), as the main character. In *Down by the River* (1996), based on the 1994 "X-case," Mary, a pregnant, adolescent rape victim, reveals her condition to Betty, a woman she does not know very well, but who is the only person with whom she trusts the terrible secret of her condition, if not—initially—the true horror of the incestuous rape that has caused the girl's plight.

Betty is neither a relation nor a family friend but nevertheless is someone Mary, like her late mother before her, has turned to at a moment of personal crisis. Betty is referred to locally as the lady of the “big house,” and, more sarcastically, as “Countess,” so she is, presumably, Protestant, though never explicitly identified as such. This sectarian identification, however accurate or otherwise, places her in the position of privileged outsider. This status includes her childless widowhood, rendering her not just a sexually experienced woman but also a potentially disinterested party, whose help and advocacy do not risk the same social ostracization that a married Roman Catholic mother of the community could face. She does, however, take very serious legal risks. Betty arranges for an overseas abortion and accompanies Mary to England for the procedure, illegal in Ireland at the time, only to be called back by the Irish authorities to face criminal charges.¹ Flying back to Ireland with Mary, Betty disconsolately predicts that once at home, “[s]he would become more of a recluse than ever” (E. O’Brien [1996] 2000, p. 173), the fate of the celibate woman in family-centric Ireland, up to the end of the twentieth century, as O’Brien understood.

Josie, the protagonist of O’Brien’s 1994 novel *House of Splendid Isolation*, is another reclusive “big house” widow. Her “strangeness” and isolation are the result of her late husband James’s self-imposed seclusion and his ideologically confused attempt to ape the landed classes while also falsely boasting of ties to Republican forces. This rumoured, fabricated connection leads McGreevy, a Northern gunman on the run, to seek out the widow’s home as a “safe house” during the Troubles, long after James’s death. Josie is sneeringly referred to locally as the “Queen of the Munster Fairies” (E. O’Brien [1994] 1995, p. 67), and McGreevy initially dismisses her as being interested only in “gracious living and folklore” (E. O’Brien [1994] 1995, p. 92). Josie’s discomfort with this implied connection with the otherworld is evident in her alarm at being approached by a young woman who assumes Josie would have a charm for getting pregnant. However, the association is eerily established before the narrative even begins with a prologue spoken by Josie’s aborted and ageless “Child,” who is also given the final words of the novel. The aborted “Child” communicates from a transhistorical realm, a source of urgent but unheeded wisdom, like the vision that visits the unnamed widow of *In the Forest*.

Like *In the Forest*’s prescient widow, and like many unmarried women in O’Brien’s fiction, Josie has prophetic dreams. Such visions are privileged by O’Brien as an alternative, usually gendered, source of knowledge, often characterized as a sign of madness. O’Brien regularly transvalues womanly “madness,” as it is usually ascribed to those who resist social norms, including those that dictate appropriate achievements and cultural milestones; however, time functions in a distinct way for many of the celibate figures in O’Brien’s fiction. Kahan identifies “Celibate Time” as a variation of queer temporality, according to which, “time is an ideological force that regulates sex: for example, the ‘old maid’ is ‘late’ according to a trajectory of normal sexual maturation that must pass through marriage” (Kahan 2013, p. 28).² The gently dotty grandmother of “Inner Cowboy” (2011), who “wasn’t as clued up as she used to be” (E. O’Brien 2011b, p. 117), is an example of a temporally “deviant,” idiosyncratic widow. She speaks tenderly to every beloved object in her chaotically cluttered home—including the soft white bed shawl that has taken the place of her late husband in her affections—and offers a dreamy world of small domestic pleasures and comforts to her orphaned grandson, Curly, which he spurns only to meet a tragic end. Her shed contains objects “going back hundreds of years,” some dating back to “Fenian times,” while in her house “every single chair and armchair was a throne of old newspapers and bags” (E. O’Brien 2011b, pp. 92, 104), a promiscuous assemblage of things stored and arranged without “regard to hierarchical [or] temporal significance” (O’Connor 2021, p. 48). Curly’s widowed granny has thus moved beyond the hierarchy that distinguishes between the human and the nonhuman and feels no allegiance to heteronormative clock time.

While Betty in *Down by the River* is not especially otherworldly or idiosyncratic, her relative seclusion from the rest of the local community contributes to Mary and her mother's view of her as perhaps uniquely charmed, certainly resourceful, unusually capable and independent. These qualities align with a certain kind of sexless or unsexed gender non-conformity, as, for example, when she is described as drawing on her cigarette "mannishly" (E. O'Brien [1996] 2000, p. 160). As James Eli Adams has argued, "[t]he provocative power of celibacy [...] is not its affiliation with transgressive sexuality, but its disturbingly powerful challenge to gender norms" (Adams 1995, p. 104). Kahan also notes that the use of the term "celibate" to describe an unmarried woman, in distinction to gendered terms labels such as "widow" or "spinster," has historically provided "a crucial modality of gender-bending" (Kahan 2013, p. 12). In *House of Splendid Isolation*, Josie also challenges gender and sexual norms, a challenge that, in her case, leads to tragedy. Josie's relationship with McGreevy begins in a tense hostage dynamic but develops into a friendship for which the widow sacrifices her life. The police have tracked McGreevy to Josie's house, which is now under observation. Having established a rapport that includes sharing meals, the house's occupants at one stage are seen attempting to avoid two angry wasps, movements seen in silhouette, misinterpreted by the observing guards, Matt and Cormac, as evidence of an "orgy":

"Oh, God, Matt," Cormac says, abashed. [...] "He's touching her."
"What? Where?"

Together now they jockey for it, each pushing the other aside to get a glimpse, each able to reassure the other that yes, they're on the ground, the woman and the boyo. [...]

"It's repulsive," Matt says. [...]

"It's an orgy, an orgy" Matt says, and together they watch the two bodies rise, then caper around the room, meeting and parrying like lovers. (E. O'Brien [1994] 1995, p. 207)

This perception of Josie's "repulsive" sexuality is replaced by gender 'deviance' or betrayal later when she chops off her hair, rendering her less legibly 'feminine.' Intending to plead with the guards not to kill McGreevy, whom she has persuaded to surrender, Josie is mistaken for a second gunman:

as she stands on the next landing and hesitates [...] Guard Foley glimpses her through a long stained-glass window, a figure moving in the gloamy light of pre-dawn, a silhouette in a raincoat, with closely cropped hair. "There's a second gunman [...]. A second gunman," he says and asks a comrade to come and look, but she has moved away. (E. O'Brien [1994] 1995, pp. 220–21)

When she reappears, Josie is shot dead, inadvertently achieving the heroic sacrifice her deceased husband had once fantasized about. In McGreevy's company, then, Josie manages to express both inappropriate elderly sexuality and, ultimately, indeterminate gender, leading to the novel's catastrophic conclusion, which suggests, in part, the widow's suspect role in, and troubling incompatibility with, 20th-century Irish gender and sexual norms.

3. O'Brien's "Pre-Married" Girls and "Never-Married" Spinsters

Nonconforming spinsters also often risk violence in O'Brien's work, although the author observes how their social roles and life scripts differ subtly from "ever-married" widows in an Irish context. In *A Pagan Place*, the novel's child-narrator overhears conversations and intuitively relationships using a disembodied second-person voice to describe her surroundings and the various gendered trauma that she witnesses, a narratorial effect Nuala O'Faolain described as "one of tranced recall" (O'Faolain 1970). The narrative is littered with accumulated details of the blighted lives of celibate women. Some are glimpsed in the margins, like an unnamed mad woman and a shamed girl in the parish engaged to a man with a family in England. Others are more central characters, like the family's widowed

neighbour Hilda, who hysterically performs an idealized femininity while pursuing an aggressive flirtation with a much younger priest. Lizzie, who comes home from Australia with “yellow jaundice,” is presented as a woman whose dieting, hair curling, and other attempts to conform to beauty standards fall short, consigning her to the dreaded fate of spinsterhood in the eyes of the naïve young girl observing her. Nearly every woman around the narrator, whether celibate or not, including her mother and sister, regularly suffers violent abuse. The narrator herself is raped by Hilda’s young priest and then savagely beaten by her father for “seducing” him. Her teacher, the insufficiently feminine Miss Davitt, whom the narrator describes as having “no romance at all” (E. O’Brien [1970] 1971, p. 28), drowns herself to avoid being committed to the “looney bin,” though none of the narrator’s accounts of the teacher’s behaviour indicate anything more unstable than the “oddness” of a dissatisfied, educated woman. Her desperate act is treated with casual cruelty by the visiting guard who shares the gossip with the narrator’s family, saying Miss Davitt “was always a screw loose” (E. O’Brien [1970] 1971, p. 54). An extraneous woman who can lightly be tossed aside, she is seamlessly replaced by Miss Bugler, who, it emerges, is in love with the town’s married guard, so also possibly facing a lonely, single life.

O’Brien’s immature child-narrators reflect the values of the prevailing patriarchal culture. The girl-narrator of *A Pagan Place* sees no other way out of this world of unrelenting oppression and violence than to decisively escape, and so she is packing to leave for a Belgian convent at the novel’s conclusion. In the short story “Green Georgette” (1978), the girl narrator, entranced by the luxury of the clothes and furnishings of a posh new neighbour, Mrs Coughlan, disapproves of Mrs Coughlan’s sister, Miss Effie, a former nun, whom the narrator finds odd, “quite sinister.” Amongst her unsatisfactory characteristics is a lack of sartorial “style,” wearing mannish tweed suits, in contrast to her sister’s dazzling fashion sense. The narrator assumes Miss Effie shamefully “had to leave the convent on account of her nerves” (E. O’Brien 2011a, p. 117). The short story “Savages” (1982) features another returned emigrant from Australia, Mabel, about whose fate the young narrator says, “I began to wonder who Mabel would marry, because of course she was not yet married and she must not be left on the shelf as that was a most mortifying role” (E. O’Brien [1982] 1990a, p. 86). Thus, the young narrator reproduces the cultural assumption, observed by Katherine Fama and Jorie Lagerwey, that young single women are not categorised as “never-married” spinsters but rather as “pre-married” (or “not-yet-married”) girls (Fama and Lagerwey 2022, p. 4).

Mabel repels her former neighbours in her small, rural, West of Ireland hometown, being too bold, abrupt, and outspoken, having experienced a more liberated atmosphere for women in her time away. Of further concern to the narrator is the fact that “the men who had come [to Mabel’s parents’ house] to vet her agreed that she wasn’t worth tuppence” (E. O’Brien [1982] 1990a, p. 88). Nevertheless, Mabel is an object of fascination to the narrator, who was eleven years old at the time of the emigrant’s return. Mabel’s perceived eccentricity has alienated nearly everyone else—she “had worn out her welcome in every house up the town” (E. O’Brien [1982] 1990a, p. 90)—so the two begin to spend time together, despite their age difference. Mabel mysteriously announces that “she had seen a thing or two, her eyes had been opened, but she would not say in what way. She hinted at having undergone some terrible shock,” leading the narrator to only one logical conclusion, according to her own understanding of the adult female world: “she had been jilted” (E. O’Brien [1982] 1990a, p. 89). Mabel warns the narrator against boys and their intentions, advising that if she does have a boy—an idea that makes the narrator feel faint—“to be careful not to let him lay a finger on [her] because it was a well-known fact that one could get a craze for it and end up ruined, imprisoned in the Magdalen laundry, until you had a baby” (E. O’Brien [1982] 1990a, p. 94). Lonely Mabel herself takes up with a young man,

is jilted by him, and starts a rumour about her own condition, letting it be understood that she is pregnant. The fact that she is not pregnant, after all, seems more shocking to the community than the usual trajectory of imprisonment in a Magdalene laundry. Mabel maintains her practice of puzzling defiance of expectations by disappearing, never to be heard from again, except in unfounded rumours of a mortifying life of unmarried, manual labour. The immature narrator is unable to imagine any happier alternatives.

The conclusion of “The Connor Girls” (1982) reveals the ultimate fate of another jilted woman, Amy Connor, having also been subject to rumours of humbled degradation. As the daughters of the Major, proprietor of the local big house, the local “Connor girls” are, from the youthful perspective of the narrator at the beginning of the story, the epitome of unattainable glamour. They are regarded as “snooty” by the narrator’s family and neighbours. The “girls” keep to themselves, refuse friendly invitations, and even do their shopping in the city rather than locally, until Miss Amy becomes engaged to a bank clerk who has recently moved to the town. Everyone shares in the excitement of the unexpected engagement of one of the spinster sisters; even the narrator’s parents, who have resented being snubbed by the girls, buy Amy a wedding present. Something appears to go wrong, however, and Amy disappears. Rumours circulate that the Major disapproves of the match and that “Miss Amy had gone berserk and was shut up in an asylum” (E. O’Brien [1982] 1990b, p. 17). The narrator yearns to “find the clue to Miss Amy’s whereabouts and her secret” (E. O’Brien [1982] 1990b, p. 18). It emerges that she has been jilted. The Major falls ill and dies, which brings Amy back from wherever she has gone for the funeral. Her appearance is shocking to the narrator: “Suddenly there was a hush and into the parlour came Miss Amy wearing a fur coat looking quite different. She looked older and her face was coarse. [...] She had got much fatter and was wearing no engagement ring” (E. O’Brien [1982] 1990b, p. 18). The changes in Amy are not all bad, according to the community: “It did not take long to realise that Miss Amy had become a drinker,” but “she would drink with anyone that would sit with her and had lost all her snootiness” (E. O’Brien [1982] 1990b, p. 18). She even becomes a confidante of the narrator’s mother.

The narrator loses track of the sisters as she grows up and moves away to college, where she hears the occasional rumour of Miss Amy working in a beauty parlour and humiliating herself in drunken ramblings. The narrator’s own life absorbs all her interests, until she returns home many years later, with her husband and young son. The marriage is a disaster. The narrator’s husband is cruel and controlling, a tyrannical father who has no patience with his wife’s family or former country neighbours, all of whom he considers “barbarians.” The young visiting family encounters the Connor sisters who greet the narrator warmly: “They were older but still healthy and handsome, and Miss Amy showed no sign of her past despair. They shook my hand, shook my husband’s hand, and were quick to flirt with him, to show what spirited girls they were” (E. O’Brien [1982] 1990b, p. 22). The narrator’s husband embarrasses her by treating the sisters with brusque rudeness, causing the sisters and the narrator’s parents to exchange meaningful looks. As the narrator walks away from the “restored” Amy and her sister, she concludes the story with the observation that “at that moment I realised that by choosing his world I had said goodbye to my own and to those in it. By such choices we gradually become exiles, until at last we are quite alone” (E. O’Brien [1982] 1990b, p. 23). The narrator implicitly compares her married yet lonely life to the relaxed and healthy contentment of the yet-spirited Connor spinsters, now comfortably integrated into the community from which the narrator regrets exiling herself.

The sexless maidenhood of the Connor sisters preserves their status as “girls.” This is not necessarily a belittling quality in O’Brien’s fiction, which has been dedicated to girls from her first novel, *The Country Girls*, to her last, *Girl*, and some of the healthiest spinsters

in the fiction retain this youthful spirit. Miss Hawkins, the energetic spinster of “Christmas Roses” (1978), is a retired performer who has retained her girlish figure and who now dedicates her quiet, single life to gardening, “more dear to her than ever her cabaret had been.” She has had her experiences of “lovers of all nationalities, endless proposals of marriage” (E. O’Brien [1978] 1986, p. 55), demonstrating O’Brien’s understanding that “‘never married’ does not equate to sexual abstinence, nor does it provide any indication of sexual orientation” (Lawless and Breathnach 2023, p. 188). Miss Hawkins’s passion and pride in gardening are detailed at the beginning of the story, as is her contentment, shared with Clara, her little dog: “She was quite content to go into her room at nightfall [. . .]. She retired early so that she could be in her garden while the rest of London was surfacing. Her boast was that she was often up starting her day while the stars were still in the heavens” (E. O’Brien [1978] 1986, pp. 56–57).

An unlikely romantic prospect appears, however, and makes Miss Hawkins reconsider her solitary life. She becomes self-conscious about her changed state, imagining that “lunchtime strollers in the garden came to the conclusion that Miss Hawkins had lost her head.” Her “unvoiced reply to these snooping people, these spinsters, these divorces etcetera,” is “No thank you very much [. . .]. She had not lost her head or any other part of her anatomy” (E. O’Brien [1978] 1986, p. 61). That she begins to see herself as apart from the company of prying spinsters and other celibate women is clear when she plans a special dinner and goes grocery shopping: “She now took her rightful place alongside other housewives, alongside women who shopped and cared for their men” (E. O’Brien [1978] 1986, p. 63). Preparing for the assignation, however, “unfortunately,”

brought to mind those earlier occasions in Miss Hawkins’ life when she had been disappointed, nay jilted. The day when she had been packed to go abroad with her diamond-smuggling lover who never came, and when somehow, out of shock, she had remained fully dressed even with her lace gloves on in her rocking chair for two days until her cleaning woman came. She also remembered that a man had proposed to her, gave her an engagement ring and was in fact already married. A bigamist. [. . .] Other losses came back to her. (E. O’Brien [1978] 1986, p. 65)

Miss Hawkins is jolted out of her dream of romance, leaves a peremptory note on her door, and gets on a train to visit a sick friend. She realises that while her flirtation may have been foolish, “the most stupid thing would have been to welcome him in” (E. O’Brien [1978] 1986, p. 66). Thus, the voluntary secular celibate Miss Hawkins embodies Kahan’s argument that “the celibate poses a threat, entailing a more radical withdrawal and reshaping of the social order than is the case with the recognized and validated sublimated subject” (Kahan 2013, p. 9). Her renunciation finds echoes in the defiant women of O’Brien’s fiction, as well as in the life of her author.

4. Conclusions

Miss Hawkins has been a creator for others’ pleasure her whole life, as an entertainer and, latterly, a producer of beauty in her municipal garden: “She kept busy in all the four seasons, busy and bright. [. . .] And not a month without blooms. At Christmas was she not proud of her Christmas roses and the Mexican firebrush with berries as bright as the decoration in a felt hat” (E. O’Brien [1978] 1986, pp. 55–56). In comparison, her romantic life, past and present, has not been as productive or pleasurable. She has kept herself bright and blooming throughout the years, into the wintertime of her life, a Christmas rose herself.

Edna O’Brien also kept vigorously producing in her winter, even after her ninetieth year. For decades, she repeatedly spoke of the incompatibility for a woman of family life and writing, the unfair burden on women writers who must sacrifice in one realm or the

other, or sometimes both. After her marriage to Ernest Gébler ended in the late 1950s, she never remarried. Even romantic entanglements interfered with her work, however, as she experienced when involved for nearly a decade with a married politician, a time of exceptionally low productivity in her career, which resulted in financial near-catastrophe. When discussing this dark time with her recent film biographer, Sinéad O'Shea, O'Brien revealed: "I used to think love mattered most to me. It doesn't" (O'Shea 2025). She regularly insisted on isolation and a kind of loneliness as vital to her creative process, a version of Kahan's observation of the "long genealogy that understands celibacy as deeply engrained in the history of authorship" (Kahan 2013, p. 9). As early as the 1964 interview with Nell Dunn, O'Brien regretted her inability to be the attentive and loving mother her young boys Sasha and Carlo wanted. About the writer's lonely writing life, she asserted:

I want to write, and I hope to write with vigour and muscle. I don't care whether I'm a man or a woman, I want to write as an androgynous person for whom language is sacred and for whom language is the powerhouse through which this story is told. (Smith 1998)

Given that she never remarried, talked with regret about the negative effects her affairs had on her work, and insisted repeatedly on loneliness as a condition for creativity, we can affirm that a muscular, unsexed celibacy enabled O'Brien's long career. The dangers, as well as the possible value, of refusing the limited options of marriage and motherhood, once the only legitimate choice for Irish women, may also be glimpsed in many of her fictional widows and spinsters. In the early decades of her career, O'Brien was dismissed by second-wave feminists for her failure to imagine empowering alternatives to the "woebegone" fates of her fictional women. Her characters, compelled to pursue heterosexual romance, marriage, and motherhood, were oppressed, punished, imprisoned, and sometimes murdered by the objects of their pursuit. As Julia O'Faolain argued in 1974, however, feminists "should be grateful to her. [...] Her stories are bulletins from a front on which they will not care to engage, field reports on the feminine condition at its most acute" (O'Faolain 1974, p. 3). Several of the rarely acknowledged celibate women in her fiction, such as Miss Hawkins, Amy Connor of "The Connor Girls", or Mabel, who escapes it all in "Savages," do offer an empowering, feminist alternative, one that O'Brien herself experienced in her own writing life once freed of the trammels of the heterosexual imperative.

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Notes

- ¹ In the 'X-case,' a fourteen-year-old rape victim, impregnated by a family friend, was, like Mary, forced to return from England where she had travelled with her parents for an abortion. This case led to changes in the law, allowing women to travel abroad for the procedure, even though it continued to be illegal in the state until 2018, when the near-total ban on abortions in Ireland was repealed. For a detailed timeline of the X-case and its impact on Irish abortion legislation, see Kelly (2012).
- ² For key work on queer temporality as distinct from 'heteronormative' or 'straight' time, see Halberstam (2005). There, Halberstam contends that "[q]ueer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (Halberstam 2005, p. 1). For a reading of O'Brien's writing through Halberstam's work, see O'Connor (2021, pp. 24–28).

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