

UNIVERZITA PALACKÉHO V OLOMOUCI

FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

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Rising from the Tracks of Their Mothers: Analysis of
Female Characters in the Selected Works of Jennifer

Johnston, Anne Enright and Edna O'Brien

Diplomová práce

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Olomouc 2018

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci na téma „Rising from the Tracks of Their Mothers: Analysis of Female Characters in the Selected Works of Jennifer Johnston, Anne Enright and Edna O’Brien“ vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V dne.....

Podpis.....

I would like to give thanks to my supervisor PhDr. Matthew Sweney, Ph.D. for his patience and encouragement during the research process.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to explore the contemporary situation of the position of Irish female writers in the commercial literary scene in Ireland with the focus on selected writers and consequently the selected fictional works of their production. The authors that will be studied as the point of reference to the female characters they created are Anne Enright, Jennifer Johnston and Edna O'Brien. The personal perspective and background of these authors regarding the professional position and stereotypical roles of Irish women will be essential to the further study of the characters of mothers and daughters in their fictional works.

The cause of the particular focus of this thesis could be accurately identified with some of the initial questions Ann Owens Weekes poses at the beginning of her own research:

And yet the student who searches the shelves for works of Irish women's fiction—surely, one thinks, an obvious subdivision—feels very much as Virginia Woolf did when she searched the British Museum for work on women by women . . . Thus one is forced to ask whether Irish women have written fiction; and if so whether this fiction has any artistic or historic value.¹

Such was the experience at the very beginning of this particular research as well. The surprising lack of material concerning Irish female writers has led to the discovery of long years of muted struggle among the contemporary Irish female writers who, despite being quite overlooked, have been pursuing their own voice.

However, this thesis not only aims to point at the potential discrimination and revolt that has been taking place in Irish literature, yet it seeks to explore the Irish womanhood itself as testified by the historical and social background and as portrayed by the selected authors in their works. One of the essential female identity features to be explored is the motherhood, as Kelly S. McGovern argues with regard to the invisibility

¹ Ann Owens Weekes, *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 2.

of girlhood in nationalist discourses, “in which passive femininity is invoked in terms of maturity: the Irish woman is cast as mother, reproductive guarantor of the future of the nation (and this national child is invariably male). . . . Girlhood is thus written out in national terms, in which the boy represents the idealized, heroic future of the nation and woman the passive producer of this future.”²

If motherhood is the stereotype female role assigned to Irish females throughout the history, this thesis aims to argue that the feelings of injustice accumulated in the eyes of the female writers will be reflected in the treatment of motherhood in their fictional works. All of the works selected for this thesis reflect an emotional foreignness in the mother-daughter relationships to some degree. The question that is intended to be investigated in this thesis is whether the authors will identify their artistic and female emancipation systematically with the daughter generation in these novels. Furthermore, the aim is to identify any common patterns among the daughters and mothers in these works as well as to analyze the ways in which the daughter characters either deviate from the tradition or persist in the patterns rooted by their mothers.

The selected fictional works that will serve as the primary sources for this study are *The Forgotten Waltz* by Enright, *The Gingerbread Woman* by Johnston and the trilogy *The Country Girls* by O’Brien. The daughter protagonists in the selected novels will be studied in the context of their family background, their choice of partners and their individual expressions of emancipation.

2. Historical and Cultural Background

2.1. Political Imperatives

The issues analyzed and presented in this thesis might not be related to politics in an apparent way and the aim of this study is not a thorough cultural and historical research. Yet, as everyone trying to study contemporary Irish literature will soon discover, even such a narrow topic as mother-daughter relationships cannot be separated from its political context and its implications. However tried to be avoided, the political history with all its accumulated feelings of injustice is part of the mundane Irish reality

² “Where Are the Irish Girls?: Girlhood, Irishness, and LT Meade.” In *Girlhood and the Politics of Place*, edited by Mitchell Claudia and Rentschler Carrie (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016), 212-27.

and penetrates into every part of it. Such was the attitude the female writers reflected when being interviewed on their identity as Irish women writers in the collection *Irish Women Writers Speak Out: Voices from the Field* by Moloney and Thompson. Upon being asked about the importance of the political situation in her work, Jennifer Johnston responded accordingly: “Well it is important. It is the background to all our lives. It does not go away if you shut your eyes. We all live against this background of hatred and violence. It has to color the way we look at the world, the way we write books.”³ If politics forms an essential part in the Irish perspective of the world, then it certainly cannot be detached from the writing of the Irish female writers, who have been frequently silenced as a result of the same politics. As a consequence, a brief presentation of historical and political background relevant to the topic of this thesis has been regarded necessary in order to provide a complete picture behind the individual stories.

The female writers selected for this thesis have each a little different stance with regard to politics as an intentional strategy in their works. Anne Enright, the youngest of the three, born in 1962, is said to be more interested in “the experimental and imaginative than the thematic,”⁴ and she approaches the political reality in her works in the same imaginative and symbolic way. As a writer, she has been called “post-identity-crisis-ridden”⁵. On a related note, Jennifer Johnston claims that her vision of Ireland is rather complex and readers can find “Irishness,” including its politics, in her novels on a rather peripheral level.⁶

I am not saying who is right or who is wrong in the Irish situations as much as I am trying to write about the complex overlapping of history and personalities involved in being Irish in the past and at the moment . . . All my books are about Irish people. They are the only people I honestly know. The focus of the book is not on the “Irishness” of the characters.⁷

On the other hand, most critics consider Edna O’Brien’s work to be very political and she confirms that the background of one of her trilogies is composed of “three themes

³ Caitriona Moloney and Helen Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 68.

⁴ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 55.

⁵ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 55.

⁶ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 68.

⁷ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 68-69.

important to Ireland and to me: politics, sex, and land.”⁸ It is the last of these themes, the land, that will be discussed in the following subchapter as it is a relevant feature of the political background in question and of its relation to the authors.

2.1.1 Post-colonization

There are many ways one can approach the theme of land in Irish politics. Whether it be the north against the south, Ireland against Britain or the case of migration, the land is seen as a part of the identity the Irish have had to fight for. Such identity could be expected to be reflected in the writing. Enright admits in her interview with Moloney that Irish prose is clinging to the “world in an underconfident way”⁹.

During the colonisation in the seventeenth century, England’s political aim was to assimilate the local people through the Settlement of Ireland Acts. However, apart from a new language and new politics, the government tried to impose a new religion as well, which it did by means of different penalties. The result of this act was far from assimilation as Weekes comments:

Ironically the acts, by impoverishing, disenfranchising and reducing the Gaelic-Irish to ignorance, succeeded only in making visible the previously invisible religious difference, and thus the acts ultimately buttressed differences rather than promoted assimilation. By 1800 Ireland was a country with an English-speaking, Protestant government and was served by a minority of English-speaking professional, religious, and landed gentry. The minority of Irish citizens, however, spoke Gaelic, attended furtive Roman Catholic services, and were prohibited from voting, being educated, practicing professions, and owning sizeable estates.¹⁰

This sense of inadequacy, which was a dominant feeling until recently, is a common feature observed by many Irish female writers.¹¹ The blame is collectively assigned to Ireland’s colonial past. Éilís Ní Dhuibne, a contemporary Irish writer known for her

⁸ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 201.

⁹ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 55.

¹⁰ Weekes, *Irish Women Writers*, 11.

¹¹ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 122.

works in Irish, observes that some of the restrictive characteristics of Irish society as its being “rigidly Catholic, censorial and punitive” could be in fact an extreme reaction to its traumatic past: “Irish nationalism constitutes a backlash against everything that’s British.”¹² The cited characteristics in Dhuibne’s accusation could be regarded particularly from a female perspective, since, as it will be further discussed in the following subchapter, it was mainly women who were harmed by such society and spent generations trying to be liberated from its control.

The common struggle of the country and the women for liberation from their oppressors is symbolically united in the old imagery of Ireland as a female. Anne Weekes points out the image of Ireland as a stretchmarked female body and England as the imperially male I in Seamus Heaney’s poem where England’s 1800 act of union is seen as rape, “Act of Union” being the title of the poem. Weekes observes the tendency in the eighteenth century poetry to see Ireland as a wronged woman. She further presents typical imagery of Irish poets who saw their enslaved country as a poor old woman, harridan, crone or the old sow who eats her farrow.¹³ O’Brien articulates a similar image in the memoir of her life as well as of her country, “Ireland had always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare.”¹⁴ Furthermore, O’Brien indicates the connection of land and the female body in her novels, where she treats a pregnant woman who is denied abortion as a land that others want to possess.¹⁵ The imagery of motherhood and pregnancy is thus very important in the study of Irish female writers, as it is an image associated with the Irish identity and a role assigned by others by force at the same time. The trauma from colonization and the female experience merge at some point.

After Ireland’s history with Britain, it is rather surprising to see that Irish writers who do not receive critical attention in their own country turn to England where they are claimed and appreciated. Such is the case with Anne Enright, who, based on the interview in *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, finds more audience in what used to be their colonizer. She admits that for her and for a lot of people in Ireland, England is an alternative space. Although she finds England lonely and antisocial,¹⁶ she compares the kind of reception she receives in the press. In England, she had a proper review by a

¹² Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 115.

¹³ Weekes, *Irish Women Writers*, 14.

¹⁴ Edna O’Brien, *Mother Ireland* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), 13.

¹⁵ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 201.

¹⁶ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 201.

Booker Prize-winning author, while she felt patronized and quite disregarded upon reading the review of her book written by an unknown author in the *Irish Times*. “You get a fresh look with no baggage. So why not go where you are liked?”¹⁷ Enright is not the only one rising above the colonial conflict. Jennifer Johnston, currently located in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, spent years living in London equally as Enright.¹⁸ While O’Brien’s migration to London in 1960 is considered as “an act of rebellion against the insular culture that Ireland was at that time.”¹⁹ O’Brien considers leaving Ireland her victory, which she recollects in her memoir *Country Girl*

But I had got away. That was my victory. The real quarrel with Ireland began to burgeon in me then; I had thought of how it had warped me, and those around me, and their parents before them, all stooped by a variety of fears – fear of church, fear of geombeenism, fear of phantoms, fear of ridicule, fear of hunger, fear of annihilation, and fear of their own deeply ingrained aggression that can only strike a blow at each other, not having the innate authority to strike at those who are higher. Pity arose too, pity for a land so often denuded, pity for a people reluctant to admit that there is anything wrong. That is why we leave. Because we beg to differ.²⁰

It was the culture of fear that O’Brien tried to escape, the same fear that she conveys in the main female characters in her fictional writing, as will be seen in the analysis of *The Country Girls*. It seems that the fear was part of the environment that limited her as a writer, as she further comments that it was in London that she “would find both the freedom and the incentive to write.”²¹

The tradition of seeking audience in England is not just a contemporary feature. Ann Weekes’s research argues that “Irish writers (male and female) from Maria Edgeworth in 1780 to Molly Keane in 1980 have also been forced, initially by culture,

¹⁷ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 62.

¹⁸ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 66.

¹⁹ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 140.

²⁰ O’Brien, *Mother Ireland*, 87.

²¹ Edna O’Brien, *Country Girl: A Memoir* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013), part 2, chap. 2, Ebook edition.

language, and economics and latterly by economics alone, to address their work to a foreign, imperially male, English audience.”²² Weekes further comments that this necessity caused bitterness for some of the writers, and manifested itself in their comments or caricatures of English characters in their books.

2.2 Mothers Assigned by the Church

A strong foundation of the identity of Irish women has been laid by the Catholic church. While its restrictive attitude could be partly regarded as a reaction to British protestantism, the politics of the church reflects a clear gender based attitude. Valerie Miner, one of the Irish women writers interviewed in Moloney and Thompson’s work, affirms that it is impossible to claim a relationship to Ireland without addressing the subject of the Catholic church: “These icons of femininity—Mother Ireland and the Blessed Virgin—derive from the conflation of nationalism and Catholicism to shape Irish identity, particularly for its female citizens.” The role the church plays in Irish politics and the whole national identity has been dominantly demonstrated in the female role and the viewpoint Irish women have consequently gained of the role they had been assigned. Perhaps the most prominent concept of this issue which is relevant for this thesis is the role of motherhood.

The cause of the conflicting views of motherhood is founded on the laws of abortion, birth control and divorce springing from the Catholic politics. It was not until 1979 that married Irish women in the Republic were legally entitled to fertility control, while divorce was illegal until 1996.²³ Some of the women writers see the prohibition of the mentioned issues as a demonstration of clerical hostility to women’s sexuality.²⁴ The outrage these laws created was not merely because they assigned the role of the whole female gender without giving them a choice, in addition, they allowed of various kinds of abuse to be committed on them. Edna O’Brien based one of her storylines on the case of a young Irish girl seeking an abortion in Britain after being raped.²⁵ Not only were women easily abused without the benefit of protection from the government, a pregnancy out of marriage could have furthermore subjected the mother to be put in a

²² Weekes, *Irish Women Writers*, 17.

²³ Louise DeSalvo, Kathleen Walsh D’Arcy and Katherine Hogan, ed., *Territories of the Voice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), xix.

²⁴ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 14-15.

²⁵ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 143.

mental institution. O'Brien herself recollects such threat when her parents came 'to put her away' after an anonymous letter had notified them that she had been staying with a married man: "The 'putting away' meant nothing other than a lunatic asylum."²⁶

Moloney sees this reality as "the ironies of traditional Catholicism, prohibiting sexuality for women while mandating motherhood."²⁷

Such strong repression of gender is bound to lead to some revolt. It was thanks to the effort of the woman's movement in the 1970s that some reforms of the laws were eventually accomplished, which brought "an enormous amount of control over our lives,"²⁸ comments the writer Catherine Sunne. However, the traditional motherhood has been identified with the repressive laws for so long that it should not be surprising that some of the writers' themes subsequently intentionally seek images of sterilization, lesbian relationships or a generally very open sexuality and are often censored. As a reaction to the foundations of Irish culture, some O'Brien's texts explore "lesbian sexuality as either an explicit refusal of motherhood and marriage or as a way of maintaining emotional health."²⁹ Motherhood has been associated with the burdensome history of Irish female generations and whether this nature of womanhood will be reflected also in the fictional works of the writers, and namely in the portrayal of the mother characters they created, will be studied in chapter four.

3. Female Writers Controversy

3.1. Publishing Industry

Another issue stemming from the years of repression is the occupational equality of women, which is especially relevant with regard to the writers selected for this thesis and their journey towards publication and readership. While many contemporary critics confirm that the female voice has been silenced for generations, it does not mean that there have not been female writers trying to be heard.³⁰ A common problem addressed by all of the writers under study is the different treatment, both by publishing industry and academia, of books written by male and female writers. Enright

²⁶ Edna O'Brien, *Country Girl*, 194.

²⁷ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 14.

²⁸ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 8.

²⁹ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 198.

³⁰ Suzann Bick, Review of *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition*, by Ann Owens Weekes, *The Antioch Review* 49, no. 3, Summer, 1991.

sees this reality as very apparent: “You find it even in the bookshops, that they don’t sustain the women’s list. They will have books of variable quality by any number of male writers and they will keep them. They will keep Jennifer Johnston, but they won’t keep Clare Boylan.”³¹ Furthermore, O’Brien, whose early work was originally banned by the Irish government, thinks that it is from both male and female critics that women writers find it harder to establish their credentials: “I think it is no secret that men in an age-old solidarity stand by each other. Women do not always show the same consideration or admiration for the woman artist.”³² Although the situation in publishing might be slightly changing in the recent years, Moloney argues that the situation in academia, literary criticism and journalism is still paralyzed and Irish women are not anthologized or reviewed with the same attention as men are and that they are separated from the “Real” literature because of gender.³³

After the long journey of emancipation, the current situation of female unrecognition in their own country is a source of a lot of anger. Enright, as most of the female writers interviewed in *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, is both passionate and irritated by this issue: “It’s just so oppressive, so overwhelming, if you start thinking about it; I have seen people deteriorate under that kind of strain. There’s nothing worse than the emotion that this is not fair.”³⁴ It is this feeling of unfairness that has led many authors abroad where they have found critical recognition, as was already noted in the previous subchapter regarding the land. The true reality of the issue was demonstrated along the publication of various critical collections of Irish literature that made the male dominance in their selection of writers extremely clear. The most discussed one is *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*, which created a lot of controversy around its publication and has been a sensitive issue in the writers’ interviews.

3.2 The Field Day Controversy

The subject of *The Field day Anthology of Irish Literature* produces very strong reactions in contemporary female writers. The reason of the controversy and resentment around its publication is that the three massive volumes covering periods from the

³¹ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 55.

³² Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 199.

³³ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 4.

³⁴ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 56.

medieval to the postmodern Irish literature include very few female authors. What some authors consider as further marginalization of female authors is the eventual publication of another two volumes focused solely on women's writing, which was regarded as an afterthought and was consequently completely boycotted by some female writers.³⁵ Further frustration was caused by the difficulty to find a publisher and the delayed publication of these additional volumes, which took almost ten years.³⁶

Moloney argues that "the immediacy of this story (volumes 4 and 5 released in 2002) indicates that the problem is not yet safely in the past."³⁷ And the feelings of the authors testify to that. Although Enright agreed to include her writing in the new edition, her reaction to the topic appears rather irritated: "That's all bullocks; that has no credibility. *The Field Day Anthology* got it so spectacularly wrong that anyone would know they had no credibility; therefore it doesn't matter."³⁸ The greatness of the problem is in the reality it reflects. The apparent disregard of female writers in its publication just awoke the frustration that had been going on for years. The controversy is emblematic of the general struggle of women trying to be recognized as writers.³⁹ Such a humiliating incident as *The Field Day Anthology* just manages to reveal the true perspective of the critics. Ní Aonghusa thinks the reason is not because men such as Seamus Deane, the dean of Irish Literary criticism, disregarded women writers, but because "they just never saw them or considered them."⁴⁰ Such conclusion makes the struggle much more severe and upsetting. Dermont Bolger addresses this feeling of anger in the introduction to his own anthology of Irish writing:

It is the sheer impressive quality of women's writing, despite their difficulties, over the period which explains women's genuine anger at being more or less written out of some recent anthologies, like sections of that massive and laudible undertaking *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature* – which the general editor, to his credit, has offered to make amends for, or Thomas Kinsella's *Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (without a single woman), which the editor has not.⁴¹

³⁵ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 5-6.

³⁶ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 5.

³⁷ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 5.

³⁸ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 5.

³⁹ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 5.

⁴⁰ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 99-100.

⁴¹ Dermont Bolger, ed., *The Vintage Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), Xxi-xxii.

As Bolger argues, it is not because of the inadequate value of women's writing that they have been so apparently ignored, but despite of it. Moloney sees origin of the problem in the patriarchal literary tradition "that only acknowledges male writers as having significance or even as having existed at all."⁴² It appears that despite the victorious achievement of liberation from the laws disregarding women's independent existence, the struggle for acknowledgement goes on and even today successful Man Booker Prize winning women⁴³ can feel invisible in their own motherland.

While Anne Weekes regards the difference in male and female experience as a commonplace fact, she argues that it is due to the impossibility to "recognize the value of this difference" that women's work is ignored. She further blames the way critics approach literature with expectations about valueable subjects and techniques and her argument is confirmed by Frank O'Connor's 1963 criticism of Irish fiction claiming that politics and war is the "stuff of literature," which was written by men. "In such a climate, a woman must act like the Girl at the Gaol Gale; that is, she must bring food to, or serve, the men actively engaged in the fight,"⁴⁴ Weekes concludes. The general difference in male and female perspective and the inequality connected to their value is specific in Irish context where the female experience has been a result of this ongoing domination not just in publishing, but in the whole political and religious treatment of women, as has been demonstrated in the political background. Moloney confirms the tendency of the Irish women's writing to express common themes based on their specifically female experience, which puts them in contrast with the male experience: "Women have been oppressed by the Irish state and the church in ways that separate their experience from men's."⁴⁵ In other words, the themes presented in works written by Irish female writers can be expected to reflect the historical tradition they have been part of.

Another reason for the female silence is a rather pragmatic result of the traditional roles assigned by the Irish society and is therefore connected to motherhood and the internal conflict of women who wanted to pursue their ambition in writing as well as fulfilling the expectations of the role of a mother and a housewife. Such was the case with Jennifer Johnston and the reason behind her late literary appearance. "I was

⁴² Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 4.

⁴³ Anne Enright won the Man Booker Prize for *The Gathering* in 2007.

⁴⁴ Weekes, *Irish Women Writers*, 4.

⁴⁵ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 4.

living in London. I was thirty-five; I had two children and suddenly one day I said, if I get run over by a tram, it will be as if I's never been here. . . . After I published my first book, I realized that was what I had been put on this earth to do."⁴⁶ Motherhood has indeed been seen in connection to the invisibility of Irish female voices in literature as will be discussed further in the related chapter.

3.3. Feminism

After the long discussion on inequality of gender, it is necessary to establish the attitude of the studied writers towards feminism. Jennifer Johnston does not see herself as a feminist.⁴⁷ She explained her neutral position as follows: "I am a feminist in that I like women and I admire them and I understand the problems facing women and I try to explore them in my work. I think the militant feminists have made a terrible mistake. They have gone too far, and they want too much. They are responsible for many of the problems women have today . . . I am not a 'feminist' as such; I feel it is most important that we all liberate each other."⁴⁸ The redactor of the interview argues that the different attitudes of the writers could be related to the years and place in which the authors grew up. Jennifer Johnston was born to a well established family which enabled her to have college education. Both of her parents were successful artists, her father a playwright and her mother an actress. On the other hand, Edna O'Brien was born in the rural west of Ireland, in which, she argues, "guilt, shame and sin still dominate"⁴⁹ the culture. Anne Enright calls her "the great, the wonderful mistake in all of that scheme of things"⁵⁰ for the fact that she managed to have her writing recognized despite her background, contrary to writers as Johnston, who thanks to their famous fathers, "were somebody before they even tried to be somebody."⁵¹

Enright herself does not have a problem with calling herself a feminist, although she does not find it to her advantage either: "As a writer, I don't want to use language that has become ideological because there's a deadener for a writer of

⁴⁶ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 66-69.

⁴⁷ Weekes, *Irish Women Writers*, 30.

⁴⁸ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 73.

⁴⁹ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 204.

⁵⁰ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 55.

⁵¹ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 55.

fiction.”⁵² Nonetheless, she is interested in the silence of women as a feminist aesthetic: “When women have been silent so long, you have to read the silences really urgently.”⁵³ What can be regarded as her feminist intention in her works is uncovering the significance behind the silence of women and giving them voice.

4. Mothers

4.1. Motherhood

The Irish identity of the role of a mother has been very much assigned by the state and church as it was presented in the historical chapter. The aim of this chapter is to explore characteristics of this identity even further. Who is the traditional Irish mother? What are the expectations of her function? How is this traditional identity changing? The cultural study of the traditional mother role will be consequently compared with the portrayal of mothers in the selected novels. A related subject of study will be the kind of reaction to the traditional role these mother characters reflect.

Jenny Beale published a significant comparative study of the transition between the older rural and the modern urban generation of women. A great part of her work is made of testimonies of mothers and daughters in one family relating the different social conditions in their lives. The study contains an important section concerning motherhood, which has served as the reference to the factual information in this chapter. The essential contrast Beale makes with regard to the traditional Irish mothers is the tendency to stay at home as housewives as opposed to working outside of home even after getting married. Beale comments that even though the first feminist movements were born before the independence of the Republic, the reality that remained even after the separation was that “only one in fifteen married women worked outside the home and women’s traditional roles as family-based wives and mothers were more firmly established,”⁵⁴ as opposed to Britain where women formed a greater part of the labour force.

The tendency of women staying at home after the wedding was not always a free choice. The traditional role of women was associated with the domestic work through an intentional politic strategy of the state. After the independence of the Republic, the

⁵² Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 63.

⁵³ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 64.

⁵⁴ Jenny Beale, *Women in Ireland: Voices of Change* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 5.

state tried to protect and establish their own identity, which had a substantial influence on the female role in the society:

The ideology adopted by the new State as a symbol of national unity was Catholic and nationalist. It was an ideology that glorified rural Irish life and romanticised the Catholic family. The problem for women was that this family was rigidly defined and patriarchal. The only roles for women were as wives and mothers; women were denied economic independence, were discouraged from taking employment and had very limited rights.⁵⁵

The way that the state discouraged women from taking an employment was unbelievably by including it in the constitution in 1937 under the pretext that the support women give to the state by staying at home could not be achieved any other way and therefore, the state would ensure that mothers will not be required to work.⁵⁶ Jenny Beale points out that in the two relevant passages of the Article 41. 2. 1. of the constitution, the terms “woman” and “mother” are used interchangeably,⁵⁷ which reflects the perspective of the political leaders not only of the role of women but of their identity in general. In this way, the traditional female role of a home-based mother was directly assigned by the politics.

It is true that the constitution did not ban women from work outside of home, but the state made it very difficult for them to find one by introducing marriage bars into many occupations, which forced women to give up their jobs after getting married.⁵⁸ Beale’s research is full of testimonies of women from that generation, such as Maura’s mother, who came from a small rural village to Dublin, where she got into the Civil Service, but when she married she lost her job. She eventually had five children and never took a job again.⁵⁹ The state worked together with the church and therefore made this pre-defined role of a married woman appear as the moral and religious model as well. The general ideology coming from the leading positions of both the state and the church was that women’s vocation to fulfill their place in the society was submitting the the specific role of housewives and mothers, on which depended the

⁵⁵ Beale, *Women in Ireland*, 5-6.

⁵⁶ Beale, *Women in Ireland*, 7.

⁵⁷ Beale, *Women in Ireland*, 4.

⁵⁸ Beale, *Women in Ireland*, 4.

⁵⁹ Beale, *Women in Ireland*, 2.

future of their country.⁶⁰ Implanting such message in the Irish society made it almost impossible for common women to live in a different way. It is not surprising that many of them felt as if they had not been given a choice: “To say that women are tied to a situation when men aren’t doesn’t make any sense to me. . . . No woman was ever asked what she wanted,”⁶¹ commented one of the interviewed mothers.

Jenny Beale mentions a powerful phenomenon that worked along the politic strategy to keep women to their assigned roles, and that was the power of guilt. It is obvious that this concept intermingles the politics and the religion and it is clearly a way the church misused its power to control the political situation.

Guilt if you go out to work, guilt if you buy yourself a new pair of shoes when the children need clothes, guilt when you feel inadequate as a mother, guilt if your unmarried daughter becomes pregnant. Guilt is the private, hidden legacy of Catholicism even in women who have long since relinquished their faith.⁶²

As much as many women might have enjoyed the typical duties of a mother and a housewife, the fact that they had no freedom of a choice and others had decided for them might have easily made the experience of motherhood bitter as well as filled with feelings of shame on any occasion of a slight self-indulgence.

The general struggle of women between the idealised home-based motherhood and a professional career has equally made its mark on the female writers. Dermot Bolger recognized the tendency of Irish female writers to have later débuts or silent breaks in their careers as an accompanying phenomenon to their motherhood: “The role of women in Irish family life in the past has to be a factor in the relatively late débuts”⁶³ of female writers. He does not blame motherhood itself as the cause of the silence, but the role of women in Irish society and it is important to recognize this difference. Motherhood and career do not necessarily exclude each other. Some famous examples of this tendency include Mary Beckett who had abandoned writing for twenty years after moving south while she raised her children. Other writers underwent a similar silence while rearing their families, including Jennifer Johnston, whose own commentary on the matter and the late début at forty-two corresponds with Bolger’s

⁶⁰ Beale, *Women in Ireland*, 50.

⁶¹ Beale, *Women in Ireland*, 50.

⁶² Beale, *Women in Ireland*, 52.

⁶³ Bolger, ed., *The Vintage Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction*, xxi.

theory. Anne Enright, as the youngest of the writers, provides a good contrast to this tendency. She started writing at twenty-eight,⁶⁴ and even as she became pregnant almost ten years later, she continued writing, making pregnancy even the topic of her essay *My Milk*, which she says she typed while breastfeeding.⁶⁵ Enright's openness could be compared to the taboo of the previous generation, which she observes in her own mother: "I notice even now that my mother doesn't really talk about my pregnancy because she's not comfortable talking about these things; she is quite comfortable with the facts of it all—she loved being pregnant, she loved having babies, but is not comfortable with the speech that might accompany that."⁶⁶ Despite already being a mother, twenty-eight happened to be also the age of appearance of Edna O'Brien, who has been however called a mistake in the scheme by Enright⁶⁷ and her early *début* is considered rather extraordinary.

4.2 Mothers of Daughters

After providing a quite thorough introduction to the stereotype role of motherhood in Ireland and its accompanying sentiments, the aim of the following section is to introduce the mother characters of the studied novels and analyze any relevant connection of these characters to the Irish cultural background as well as the writers' views of the historical female role and position in the Irish society.

A reader approaching the given novels with a simple binary perspective of old-fashioned homebased mothers and emancipated daughters will soon discover that the portrayal crafted by the given authors is much more complex than such simple classification. Instead of trying to prove that all of the authors would automatically associate the mother generation with the infamous history of Irish female oppression and do so in equal stereotype patterns, the analysis rather intends to look for individual hints and connections and analyze their potential interpretation in the context of the previous chapters of the Irish female tradition.

⁶⁴ Bolger, ed., *The Vintage Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction*, xxi.

⁶⁵ Anne Enright, "My Milk," *London Review of Books* 22, no. 19 (October 5, 2000): 34.

⁶⁶ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 60.

⁶⁷ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 55.

4.2.1 Joan (*The Forgotten Waltz*)

Joan is the mother character in Anne Enright's novel *The Forgotten Waltz*. The first time the reader learns her name is because her daughter Gina, who is the narrator, refers to her by it. Since the beginning, she is not named by her familial relation to her daughter, the mother, but by her own name. At the same time, such introduction to her character suggests that she will not be quite the stereotypical mother based on the general Irish ideal. Although the story does not provide too much description of Joan, there are several features of her character, which appear frequently and which come out rather stressed compared to her general silence and lack of psychological description.

One of the most important characteristics of Joan, as seen through her daughter's narrative, is her care for external beauty. The first sentence that even mentions her existence comments on her forswearing a row of shoes, calling them granny boots.⁶⁸ A few pages further, she explicitly says that her "mother was a great beauty, in her day," and that "appearances were important to her."⁶⁹ Her daughter later mentions her feeling embarrassed by her mother: "It used to embarrass me, the way she sat in the kitchen with our friends after school, getting all their chat and letting the ash topple on the tiled floor. It wasn't as though she didn't have an ashtray. I found one in the fridge once – which wasn't a surprise; the contents of the fridge were often a little arbitrary."⁷⁰ It is interesting to remark that the portrayal the daughter pointed out as embarrassing, a fashionable smoking mother who does not waste time cooking meals, could be actually considered as the opposite of the roles traditionally assigned to women, whose main vocation was to be selfless and take care of the family and household.

Many times the story records an actual conversation between Joan and her daughter, it is based on "diets, obviously; the fact that when you get older the weight shifts around to the front. I think we also talked about separates versus dresses, old boyfriends . . . my stubborn aversion to pastels. The usual."⁷¹ Even as the narrator admits that her mother had been ill and depressed without the family paying attention to it, she says that "it never occurred to her, or to any of us, to do anything about it except mope and talk on the phone about kitten heels and peppermint lotion and the various

⁶⁸ Anne Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz* (London: Vintage, 2012), 30.

⁶⁹ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 38.

⁷⁰ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 75.

⁷¹ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 76.

shades in which you might get support tights.”⁷² Fashion and beauty constitute the main subject of almost all the speech Joan directs at her daughter, or at least of the speech selected to be recorded through the daughter’s perspective, and it is the language in which the daughter tries to communicate back to her mother. It is obvious that Gina sees her mother’s identity in her beauty and obsession with style, which is seen in most of the descriptions she makes about her. “My mother was already dressed in a raspberry cashmere twinset and tweed skirt, her make-up done – just a few crow’s feet, she really had remarkable skin. She gave out to me for my cheap tights, sent me upstairs for a new packet of stockings from her drawer: ‘Mother, I am thirty-two years old.’”⁷³ As much as Gina could find her mother’s style annoying, she seems to admire her for it as well. “I used to be jealous of those strangers, who looked at my mother and loved her for half an hour at a time. Sometimes, it seemed as though we only got the downside: the despair in front of the open wardrobe door, the loneliness when there was no one to admire.”⁷⁴ Gina sees all the attention her mother gives to beauty and at the same time she seems to feel as if she will never fulfill these expectations herself. The tone in which Gina comments her mother makes it appear as if beauty were the point of separation in their relationship, or at least the pretext for it. Perhaps the real reproach behind the ridiculing tone is the fact that Joan had not been the traditional mother everyone expected her to be. There is a remarkable shift from the assigned roles analyzed at the beginning of this chapter. Joan’s identity as a mother is not based on her housekeeping and parenting skills. Yet it is necessary to point out that although her identity may go contrary to the stereotype, it still achieves to create expectations for the next generation, expectations that are a potential source of detachment.

A crucial moment in the story is Joan’s death, which divides the book structurally as well as thematically. When Gina looks at her mother’s body, she concludes that she looks beautiful,⁷⁵ as if that was the most important matter at that moment. While Joan is dying in the hospital room, her daughters are waiting in the corridor. The effect this situation has on Gina as she is processing the whole event is by returning to the old pattern of trying to meet the mothers’ beauty standards: “How are you supposed to sit, when your mother is dying; when your mother is, effectively, already dead? I sat the way Joan taught me to: shoulders straight, hands loosely laced in my lap, legs crossed

⁷² Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 30.

⁷³ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 77.

⁷⁴ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 38.

⁷⁵ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 116.

and angled slightly, to maximize the length of thigh. Like an air hostess. This is the way I sat, while my mother died.”⁷⁶ Not only does this instance show some of the foundation of the relationship between Joan and Gina, furthermore, by putting her effort to meet the ideal of the right sitting position, she is in a way acting as if her mother had been there to approve of her. Such trivial gesture suggests her unwillingness to accept the absence of her mother in her life. This absence, however, appears to be the key motif conveyed by the mother in this novel and is very relevant in the context of the background history of Irish women presented in the first part of this thesis.

4.2.1.1 Silent Mothers

The character of Joan has a very peculiar presence in the narrative of *The Forgotten Waltz*, which could at first glance appear to be a romantic history of Gina and her lover Sean. Structurally, the story breaks after Joan’s death and a whole new part follows, the narration starting about twenty months after the death. Consequently, the whole book could be divided by this crucial point. The essential point worth observing, however, is that Joan is equally present or perhaps even more present in the second part than in the first one.

Anne Enright believes there is a whole tradition of silent mother characters in the Irish literature, as she mentioned in an interview: “I am very interested in the iconized mother figure in Irish literature, because the men can’t actually write them. They are very often dead or left out of the narrative. The mother gets half a sentence and there is an awful lot about fathers.”⁷⁷ In the case of *The Forgotten Waltz*, the mother truly is dead through half of the story, but she is not left out of the narrative. Paradoxically, while in the first part, the presence and the whole concept of the mother is more peripheral, she becomes more central to the story after her death. It is through her absence that the mother has finally drawn attention. Enright observes a recurring stereotype of “the omnipresent dead mother in Irish fiction, never explained, never made manifest or real,” and it seems the portrayal of the dead mother in *The Forgotten Waltz* could be related to this notion. One could expect Anne Enright to intentionally make her mother characters alive, yet it is all the more remarkable for her to continue in the tradition of silent mothers and allow them to speak through their silence. It appears

⁷⁶ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 115.

⁷⁷ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 61.

that such silence could be a part of Enright's creative strategy. It is an intentional gap in the narrative, which she explains in an interview: "I'm really interested in the gap, but I see it as part of a feminist aesthetic. When women have been silent so long, you have to read the silences really urgently. The silences and also the illusions and the slippages."⁷⁸ In the context of these words, the division of the narrative by Joan's death does not seem at all accidental and although the reader might not find much direct speech coming from Joan, her presence is dominant in the gaps and penetrates through the narrative.

Joan is an ordinary secondary character in the first part of the book. She is just a detail in the background behind Gina's love affair, which takes most of the attention. Nonetheless, there are traces announcing that something unexpected will happen eventually. After Gina introduces her mother to the reader, she admits that Joan had been sick for a long time without the family realizing it and paying attention to her. Before the reader comes to the point in the plot when Joan dies, there are already various comments of this kind, coming not from the chronological storytelling, but from some relatively objective future. "Hindsight is a wonderful thing. With hindsight it was clear there was something wrong with Joan long before my hotel encounter, that she hadn't been entirely right for some time. But there were so many reasons we could not see it, not least of which was that she did not want us to."⁷⁹ Interestingly enough, Gina connects her inability to tend to her mother's needs to her birth control use: "I just think that if I hadn't been on the pill things would have gone differently; I might have been able to listen to my mother on the phone, or think better . . ."⁸⁰ It is not clear what would go differently or whether it could actually save her mother. The pill caused various consequences which will be further commented in the section dedicated to the daughters, but it could be assumed that Gina's refusal to become a mother herself has disabled her to approach her own mother as well. In a similar instance, it is clear that the existence of Joan before her death had been rather like that of a ghost already:

There are dates I can be sure of, certainly, but they are not the important ones. I can't remember the day – the hour – when Joan's 'poor form' became 'depression', for example, or when the depression turned into something

⁷⁸ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 61.

⁷⁹ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 38.

⁸⁰ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 30.

physical and harder to name. There must have been a moment, or an accumulation of moments, when we stopped listening to the words she said, and started listening to the way she said them. There must have been a day when we stopped listening to her at all – one single split second, when she changed from being our mother, *Oh Joan, would you ever . . .* and turned into the harmless object of our concern . . . I was busy of course – I mean, we were all busy – but if I had recognised that moment then things might have been different. If I had been able to see her, instead of being surrounded her, my beautiful mother, then she might still be alive.⁸¹

It is the last sentence that conveys the aspect of Joan's existence in her own family before her death. She was not seen, she merely surrounded everyone as part of their environment. This overlooked nature seems to bring back the crowd of generations of unseen and silent women in the Irish history

As it has been already mentioned, the presence of Joan becomes more dominant after her death. One of the direct ways that Joan repeatedly reenters the narrative is by the explicit remark referring to “the dead mother”. This direct reference keeps reoccurring throughout the rest of the book, often in surprising situations. Once Gina describes an argument she had with her sister about her love affair and afterwards she concludes: “Our mother stayed dead through all this. Amazingly. She was dead during every tantrum and silence. And she was still dead, when we awoke the next day and remembered what had been said.”⁸² At other times, she interrupts her description of an ordinary day by a reminder that her “mother is still dead”⁸³. After the For Sale sign has been tethered to the gate of the house for seventeen months, as a comment and a kind of apology, Gina says: “*It is what it is*. Our mother died in May 2007. She was dead all day. She would be dead for the rest of that week. And the week after that, she would be dead too. It was no longer, for Joan, a question of timing.”⁸⁴ The mother is brought to attention by various kinds of reference indicated by the daughter.

Apart from the direct formulation of the reality that she is dead, it is the setting that plays an important role in recollecting Joan's presence. The centre of this suggestive setting is obviously her own house where her daughter eventually ends up living herself.

⁸¹ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 47.

⁸² Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 143.

⁸³ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 158.

⁸⁴ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 130.

As she tries to live in one room of the house without getting in touch with the at first intact order of things left after her mother, Gina cannot escape the confrontation with her mother's presence. It is not to be considered any supernatural presence. Joan is on her mind as she goes through an ordinary day in the house. Joan's presence on her daughter's mind is, however, equally her presence in the second part of the narrative, and it cannot go unnoticed by the reader. The longer Gina stays in the house and becomes familiar with the objects inside, the more of her mother she discovers, until she gradually identifies with her. This process of uncovering the presence of the mother that had been unnoticed could be perhaps related to Anne Enright's ideas on women recovering a lost history.

It's all buried under the wallpaper. We are living in it; it's in bits, it's half-mad, the wallpaper and all the historical bits and scraps which are all something new to happen. In this new book, the mother finally speaks in it, as the nearly last thing, and so another woman's story is uncovered.⁸⁵

There are different ways the mother character can be given a voice. It is through the literal uncovering and digging that the mother in *The Forgotten Waltz* seems to be finally speaking. Uncovering a wallpaper can be taken both metaphorically and literally in the context of Joan's house and her daughter living in it after her mother's death.

The second part of the book starts twenty-one months after Joan's death. It must be remembered that the way her memory is brought back on different occasions is not the case of melancholy experienced shortly after the death of a close person, but almost two years later. Gina confesses that she is back in the house where she grew up but that there are still rooms she can barely bring herself to open.⁸⁶ The house is left intact for a long time without losing its essence: "You would think the rooms might have faded, but all her things were just as she liked them."⁸⁷ Gina refers to Joan on various occasions, stumbling over random objects of the house. She is merely walking down the staircase with a laundry basket when she finds herself back in her childhood:

⁸⁵ Moloney and Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*, 64.

⁸⁶ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 122.

⁸⁷ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 136.

Halfway down, I step over some version of myself; a girl of four or six, idling or playing in the place most likely to trip people up. . . . This is where they go vague and start to dream. *Oh for God's sake*. My mother's shoes are some posh color that is hard to name; sable, or taupe. Her arms are full of clean clothes.⁸⁸

While she is holding the laundry basket herself, Gina sees her mother on the same errand and continues identifying with this image. "Downstairs, in the kitchen, I go about on her familiar track and I find it all comforting and sad."⁸⁹ Other time, Gina starts the description of a whole new day by: "I catch my mother's trail around the kitchen, this morning of snow, and I am grateful for it."⁹⁰

As has been said before, one of the means Joan is kept present in the narrative is through objects. While Gina is concerned about her personal love life, her mother is still part of the story as can be seen in the description of her romantic phone calls: "The third time I rang as soon as I got in the door, and we had these dreamy, walking chats, where he led me, through this and that, to his troublesome daughter, and I moved through my mother's rooms, and touched the objects she had left behind."⁹¹ Even while the centre of the plot is Gina's affair, her mother's absence is very present in it. There is a story of Joan's behind every detail of the house. The washing machine and how Joan found it hard to build up a full load because many of her clothes required dry cleaning. The walls in shades of northern colours, which she had painted herself so that the lines were not quite true. Even though Gina and her sister cannot manage to sort out Joan's things for the first months after her death, they finally do divide them and put them away. Nonetheless, Gina still comes across objects that bring her mother back. A photograph of her parents fallen down the back of a chest of drawers or a brown cloth bag full of empty perfume bottles:

I opened the Tweed and put the cold glass under my nose, trying to conjure her out of there. Joan was old-fashioned about these things; it was the last thing she put on, after her jewellery and before her coat, so the scent of perfume will

⁸⁸ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 127.

⁸⁹ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 128.

⁹⁰ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 131.

⁹¹ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 138.

always be the smell of my mother leaving; the mystery of her bending to kiss me, or straightening back up.⁹²

The mother is present despite her absence through the unwrapping that her daughter actively participates on. In the context of the larger female acknowledgment, in case of Joan, it is through the daughter generation that the mother lives. Gina uncovers her mother's presence through random little things, a morning habit, a picture, a scent. She is uncovering the mysterious identity of her mother as she is getting to know her in a new perspective.

The story of Joan as a mother could be characterized by silence. There are several instances when the silence becomes almost explicit. Gina compares the quiet life in the house now that she is living in it herself, and the way she remembers it back from her mother's times: "No one came to visit. It was strange, because this has always been an open kind of house – my mother used to complain about it, the way people would drop in almost unannounced. But no one dropped in on the fornicators, the love-birds and homewreckers in No.4. The phone stayed mute: we did not even rent the line."⁹³ The phone is literally mute. As is has been mentioned, sometimes you must desperately read the silence. It is finally in the silence that Gina pays attention to her mother and who she was after not being able to really see her before. A similar occasion can be seen in Gina's descriptions of Christmas Eve. At the beginning of the book she does not care much about her plans for the day and spends it with her parents-in-law. A year later, after she had left her husband, her lover is with his family and her mother is dead, she spends the day alone in her mother's house. She looks back on the previous Christmas: "This was a Christmas I could have been with my own mother, but which I spent instead in the middle of a scrummage down in Youghal, with forty people whose names I did not know."⁹⁴ It is in the silence that the mother's absence is seen and experienced, not numbed by other people's presence.

⁹² Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 132-133.

⁹³ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 160.

⁹⁴ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 31.

4.2.2 Caithleen's Mother (*The Country Girls*)

The novel *The Country Girls*, which is the first volume of the trilogy of the same title, is told through the perspective of the daughter character. Caithleen begins her narration as a fourteen-year-old girl and the trilogy traces her journey as she is growing up to be a married woman.

The mother figure in Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* shares several features with the portrayal of Joan in *The Forgotten Waltz*, while at the same time her role could be considered quite contrary to that of Joan's. The reader does not learn much about Caithleen's mother, as was the case with Joan, but the features that are described and provided are very traditional. Caithleen's mother resembles the stereotypical Irish mother in many ways. She lives on a farm in a small rural village. Her full-time job is to be a housewife and a farmer.

The way the daughter repeatedly describes her mother reveals her prudence that refrains her from indulging in any extravagance. "In our house things were either broken or not used at all. Mama had new clippers and several coils of rope in a wardrobe upstairs; she said they'd only get broken or stolen if she brought them down."⁹⁵ Her tendency to live unnecessarily modestly could be perhaps related to Jenny Beale's observation of the element of guilt women experienced for tending to their own needs as contrary to the sacrificial lifestyle that was expected of them.⁹⁶ One of the first references Caithleen makes to her mother is after describing how cold her feet felt on the linoleum floor: "I owned slippers but Mama made me save them for when I was visiting my aunts and cousins; and we had rugs but they were rolled up and kept in drawers until visitors came in the summer-time from Dublin."⁹⁷

Caithleen's mother might have possessed several valuable things that apart from practical were also esthetically appealing, yet they were not to be touched. Caithleen describes a row of Doulton plates neatly placed on the dresser: "They were a wedding present, but we never used them in case they'd get broken."⁹⁸ The way Edna O'Brien describes her own mother in her memoir *Country Girl* seems very close to the portrayal

⁹⁵ Edna O'Brien, *The Country Girls* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1981), 7.

⁹⁶ Beale, *Women in Ireland*, 52.

⁹⁷ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 5.

⁹⁸ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 10

in the novel. O'Brien describes the obsession her mother had about a little silver spoon from a set she had had since her honeymoon:

They were kept in a velvet-lined case, the velvet faded and milky, and they were once loaned to the vocational school when dignitaries were coming for a function. However, when the case was returned there was one spoon missing, and my mother got on her bicycle and went in high dudgeon to the school. It was a thorough search, in drawers, in cupboards, under tables, in the pantry, in two bins and in the turf shed. Enquiries were sent all over the village but somehow my mother knew in her bones that she would never see that spoon again and she never forgave it.⁹⁹

As O'Brien's own mother, the one in the novel is fundamentally connected to her house. In other example, Caithleen describes her mother as "house proud"¹⁰⁰.

Apart from the stereotypical role connected to housework, Caithleen's mother shows other traditional motherly features. She is described as a worrier. Out of the few interactions between her and her daughter that are captured in the narration, the mother is worried about something. She seems to be too concerned with Caithleen's health, making her wear a hat and gloves as "she insisted, gently, reminding me again that I had a bad chest."¹⁰¹ Even after her mother had been dead for more than three years, Caithleen lives with her friend in Dublin and is about to ask for a drink when the image of her mother comes to her mind: "I asked, and distantly somewhere in my head I heard my mother's voice accusing me, and I saw her shake her finger at me. There were tears in her eyes. Tears of reproach."¹⁰² While alcohol was a symbol of the family's misfortunes as will be further studied in the chapter 6, the identity of the mother portrayed through the eyes of her daughter is as a housewife, a prude and a worrier. The character of Caithleen's mother can be easily seen in the general description of Irish mothers that O'Brien formulated in *Mother England*: "Mothers worked and worried and sacrificed and had the smallest amount on their places when the family sat down to eat,

⁹⁹ O'Brien, *Country Girl*, Part 1, chap. 8.

¹⁰⁰ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 32.

¹⁰¹ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 10.

¹⁰² O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 171.

mothers wore aprons and slaved . . . ”¹⁰³ The portrayal in the novel matches this stereotype perfectly.

One of the essential features reflected in the way Caithleen’s mother involved in the story is, however, very similar to the portrayal of Joan. It is again the pattern of silent mothers that can be identified in this novel equally as in *The Forgotten Waltz*. First of all, Caithleen’s mother unexpectedly dies at the beginning of the story. The reader does not come to know her name since she is always referred to as Mama. While she is physically absent from the rest of the story, she seems rather absent even in the short part that captures her presence. This absence was apparent to her daughter: “She was staring directly ahead at something only she could see, at fate and at the future . . . Yes . . . Mama said absently . . . Her mind was far away.”¹⁰⁴ The cause of the mother’s disposition seems to be the threat of her husband coming home drunk and acting unpredictably. If it was not for him, it could be questioned whether she would be more present. The fact that her marriage was the main source of her suffering is quite clear. Caithleen remembers her mother asking her whether she would become a nun. “She would have liked me to be a nun, it was better than marrying. Anything was, she thought,”¹⁰⁵ since her experience of marriage was that of a fear filled silent submission. O’Brien does not try to hide the fact that the trilogy is strongly autobiographical as she comments on its production: “The novel’s opening paragraph centered on the fear of my father . . . but it was my mother who filled the canvas and who infused the first book.”¹⁰⁶ While the mother could be present in the background, she disappears from the plot right at the beginning. The last memory Caithleen has of her mother as she was leaving for school is that of a woman that is barely alive, not knowing that she was going to drown in a lake a few hours later:

She stood on the flag to look after me. She was waving. In her brown dress she looked sad, the farther I went the sadder she looked. Like a sparrow in the snow, brown and anxious and lonesome. It was hard to think that she got married one sunny morning in a lace dress and a floppy buttercup hat, and that her eyes were moist with pleasure when now they were watery with tears.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ O’Brien, *Mother Ireland*, 50.

¹⁰⁴ O’Brien, *The Country Girls*, 8-9.

¹⁰⁵ O’Brien, *The Country Girls*, 67.

¹⁰⁶ O’Brien, *Country Girl*, part 2, chap. 3.

¹⁰⁷ O’Brien, *The Country Girls*, 12.

The way Caithleen sees her mother while she is alive is as someone who does not dare to speak up, someone who lives in fear and hides her emotions inside. After the mother dies, the story barely brings her back, contrary to the case in *The Forgotten Waltz*. She is literally silent and absent from the narrative. Her absence is even emphasized by Caithleen's conclusion upon hearing the details of her mother's death: "She came up and told me that they had dragged the great Shannon lake but they hadn't found them; she didn't say that they had given up but I knew they had, and I knew that Mama would never have a grave for me to put flowers on. Somehow she was more dead than anyone I had ever heard of."¹⁰⁸ She has disappeared from their lives as well as from the narrative, without leaving a token of her presence behind.

The character of Caithleen's mother can be easily contrasted with that of Martha, the mother of Caithleen's friend Baba, who becomes the closest thing Caithleen has to a mother after having lost her own. Martha is very far from the ideal of the traditional Irish mother. Her own children call her by her first name. She is known for her beauty and is very aware of it. The way Caithleen describes Martha makes her sound very self-aware and sophisticated: "She was wearing red velvet shoes with little crusts of silver on the front of them, and her room smelt of perfume and wine and grown-upness. She was drinking a red wine."¹⁰⁹ The way Caithleen sees Martha is certainly quite distinct from the way she sees her own self-denying mother. The first encounter the reader has with Martha establishes this difference very strongly. Martha and the children are secretly eating chicken in the nursery, hiding the leftovers in the wardrobe and washing their teeth so that Martha's husband does not find out when she tells him the dog had eaten the chicken and lets him eat old food that did not look very appealing. Caithleen witnesses this situation and as she sees Martha and her children secretly enjoying a trifle, she is reminded of "the days when we had trifle at home. I could see Mama piling it on our plates, my father's, my own, and Hickey's, and leaving only a spoonful for herself in the bottom of the bowl."¹¹⁰ While Martha hides the best pieces from her husband, Caithleen's mother reserves the first portion for the father, leaving almost nothing for herself.

¹⁰⁸ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 52.

¹⁰⁹ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 36.

¹¹⁰ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 37.

Contrary to Caithleen's mother's thriftiness, Martha "took pride and vengeance in spending"¹¹¹ her husband's money. She does not show much sentiment towards her children in a way that Caithleen does not even expect any motherly sympathy from her: "Not that Martha was motherly. She was too beautiful and cold for that."¹¹² Being of greater wealth than Caithleen's mother, Martha could afford a maid, and her daily activities were not too concerned with housework.

Martha was what the villagers called fast. Most nights she went down to the Greyhound Hotel, dressed in a tight black suit with nothing under the jacket only a brassière, and with a chiffon scarf knotted at her throat. Strangers and commercial travellers admired her. Pale face, painted nails, blue-black pile of hair, madonna face, perched on a high stool in the lounge bar of the Greyhound Hotel, they thought she looked sad. But Martha was never sad, unless being bored is a form of sadness. She wanted two things in life and she got them - drink and admiration.¹¹³

A married mother of two little children is certainly not expected to spend her nights drinking alone in a hotel lounge in a revealing dress. While her lifestyle could be considered revolutionary to the traditional mother role, her portrayal does not show her content either. She is absent in her own way. She is bored in her life of a housewife and drinks and expensive clothes could not change that. She dreams of her glorious youth when she was a ballet dancer with many admirers until she was forced to give up her career for marriage. Perhaps her unwillingness and disappointment in accepting the passive role of a housewife is the source of her coldness towards her husband and children. Martha is at the same time resigned and yet not ready to surrender completely. This unwillingness is seen in a moment when Caithleen's father lights two cigarettes and offers one to Martha's husband completely ignoring Martha's presence, so she "lit one of her own, out of spite"¹¹⁴.

Although they are so contrary at first glance, Martha and Caithleen's mother both represent the tradition of absent mothers and silenced women in Irish Literature. While one is literally dead, the other is living a secret life in the dreams of her past,

¹¹¹ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 37.

¹¹² O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 37.

¹¹³ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 37.

¹¹⁴ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 66.

passing through her every day reality in a resigned mood. Both of them have been neglected and pushed to a situation where circumstances forbid them from embracing their potential individual identity while they are forced to adapt silently to the role assigned to each of them.

4.2.3. Clara's Mother (*The Gingerbread Woman*)

The mother in *The Gingerbread Woman* is the most stereotypical housewife out of the mother characters studied in this chapter. Her presence forms the slightly distracting background to the main story of her daughter Clara, the protagonist. The mother is again seen through the point of view of her daughter, in this case an independent yet vulnerable sarcastic thirty-five-year-old university lecturer. The perspective is therefore determined by the annoyance the daughter often experiences through her mother's behavior and attitude.

The first page of the book introduces the mother's identity as that of a jam maker:

My mother makes jam. Seasonal jam. Raspberry, blackberry and apple, loganberry, marrow and ginger, golden crab-apple jelly and, of course, marmelade . . . There is no one left in the house now for whom to make jam, her four children, mark the seasons, winter, spring, summer, autumn, by our dogged and grateful acceptance of the jewel-coloured jars that she packs neatly into cardboard boxes and hands to us as we leave her house after our brief familial visits.¹¹⁵

The mother is presented as the traditional woman, who spends all her time providing food for her family. While it might have been her function for many years, it is apparent that she is not willing or able to give up this role even though it is no longer required or even desired of her. The daughter frequently refers back to the identity of a jam maker throughout the narrative. Every time the jam is mentioned, it is colored by a sarcastic tone. When Clara describes her house overcrowded with souvenirs she has brought from her travels and imagines that one day she might not be able to open the door, she

¹¹⁵ Jennifer Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2001), 1.

thinks of the reaction her mother would have on such an occasion: “Too much rubbish in there, dear. . . There’s not even room for a pound of jam.”¹¹⁶ Other time she stops to ponder the possibility that her mother could actually need her more than she needs her herself: “Maybe she is afraid, lonely, without a purpose in life, except for making jam.”¹¹⁷ The daughter seems to occasionally genuinely mock her mother’s traditional housewife identity. It is apparent on one occasion when the mother calls expecting to find out news about a man her daughter had had a lunch with while Clara pretends not to see this curiosity: “I can hear the wheels in her mind turning. I am not going to help her out. I remain silent. I even try not to breathe; perhaps she will forget that I am here and go make some jam.”¹¹⁸ Clara even refers to jam and her mother interchangeably when she explains that she travels great deal because she likes to “get out of this cage away from the jam and the familial duties.”¹¹⁹ On the other hand, it is the place or the person to come back to: “Then I come here to lick my wound and eat my mother’s jam, take big deep breaths and get ready to go away again.”¹²⁰ Although Clara takes every opportunity to sarcastically point out the exaggeratedly obsessive part of her mother’s identity, the same identity as well as her mother’s presence embody the constant foundation of Clara’s life.

It is not just jam that the mother makes. She keeps calling Clara every day, trying to feed her or make sure she is well taken care of. Clara does not seem to appreciate this concern, rather she tries to tolerate it at best.

The mother is very old fashioned. Her whole personality is separated from the independent free thinker her daughter has become to such an extent that Clara cannot even imagine her being someone else than the jam lady.

I often wonder if my mother was ever young. I have no recollections of girlishness in her at all, no giggles or flirtatiousness, no petulance; her passions have always seemed to be for order, harmony and a sort of family loyalty that from time to time makes me want to throw up. Her face and body have become lined and wrinkled. . . but her personality does not seem to have

¹¹⁶ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 6.

¹¹⁷ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 22.

¹¹⁸ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 142.

¹¹⁹ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 3.

¹²⁰ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 5.

changed at all in all the years that I have known her. But then perhaps I have never really known her, just someone called mother.¹²¹

The novel does not provide any insight into the mother's past, but it could be expected that she has been the same lady who makes jam and is concerned about the properness of her family since she got married. Although she lives alone in her big house full of empty rooms, which she refuses to sell, she continues in the same pattern of roles even though there is no one to assign them to her anymore. Her life attitude is represented in her advice: "It is my view that we have to keep ourselves reasonably fit and well in order to fulfil our obligations to the rest of the world . . . to the people who love us, if not to society."¹²² Such opinion represents the stereotype attitude in the tradition of Irish women whose life presented a service to the society led by a few men in the political and religious leadership as was demonstrated in the introductory chapters.

If the mother represents the stereotype tradition of Irish femininity, the gap between her and her daughter is particularly caused by the mother's controlling nature. This supervision begins with the details, such as nutrition. As it has been mentioned, the mother makes constant effort to feed her thirty-five-year-old daughter. She calls Clara every morning, checking if she has already woken up.

Although Clara does not allow her mother enough power to intervene in her life, she describes her as "fully in control of her life and, she thinks, of ours."¹²³ When Clara defends the distance she tries to keep between them, she blames the fact that her mother knows her too well. She is overprotective of her daughter, fearing that someone might murder her if she keeps her bedroom window open at night. "This fear, I think, sums up her attitude to modern life,"¹²⁴ concludes Clara. Much of the controlling attempts are motivated by fear of the unknown. While Clara manages to become a successful woman living completely outside of the traditional housewife pattern, her mother tries to tame her back to her childhood house. It is out of fear that she is said to discourage thinking "She thinks it's bad for your blood pressure."¹²⁵ The mother's controlling nature comes to the edge of manipulation when she employs other people to interfere in Clara's life, which she does not understand and does not approve of. After she finds out that a

¹²¹ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 21.

¹²² Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 123.

¹²³ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 2.

¹²⁴ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 21.

¹²⁵ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 39.

strange man is staying in her daughter's house, the family doctor unexpectedly calls and visits Clara only to advise her visitor to leave as soon as possible.

The character of Clara's mother could represent the long history of Irish women embracing their individual place in society. While the mother prefers to stay in the familiar patterns, however redundant her continual effort might be, and although she occasionally tries to hinder the next generation from moving forward, she is also the foundation and the tradition that is part of the story her daughter lives and departs from.

5. Daughters

The previous chapter provided an analysis of the portrayal of mothers in the studied novels. This portrayal will serve as the background and a point of reference to the analysis of the daughter generation in this chapter. As it has been stated, one feature that will be explored is a manifestation of revolt to the traditional female patterns found in the mothers as in the Irish history in general. As it could be expected, all of the daughters will demonstrate some kind of revolt in their particular way, either in their career, social independence or in their relationship principles. What could be perhaps less expected is the way the daughters uncounsciously follow the patterns of their mothers despite their progressive attitudes. All three storylines follow the journeys of young women whose female identity and personal worth are at some point challenged and controlled by the male characters around them.

5.1 Kate (*The Country Girls*)

Caithleen or Kate, as she is called in the last two parts of O'Brien's trilogy, *Girl with Green Eyes* and *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, is generally perceived as weak by people around her as well as herself. Out of the three daughters studied in this chapter, she is the one who most continues in the tradition of submission and dependent identity of Irish women. She continues in the tracks left by her own mother, whom she called "a self-appointed martyr"¹²⁶ as she looked back on her legacy in the midst of her own marital problems.

¹²⁶ Edna O'Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), 123.

The third part of the trilogy continues the story of Kate and her friend Baba as they both move to London and find husbands. The title is very ironic, as it is everything but bliss that the girls discover in their married lives, which they began more out of necessity and resignation than love. They find themselves settled in their new lives, “bemoaning the fact that nothing would ever improve, that we’d die the way we were - enough to eat, married, dissatisfied.”¹²⁷ Although they had achieved the lives they saw their mothers have, this dissatisfaction made them dream about leaving their husbands, just as once they “had planned that they would meet and marry rich men and live in houses with bottles of booze opened, and unopened, on silver trays”¹²⁸. They have husbands, houses, servants that work for them, but they are bored. Their attitude to the married life they had just recently attained is well reflected in a scene when Katy is walking in the park with her little son and she contemplates her situation as she reads for him the kinds of fish that can be found in a pond: “. . . , carp, bleak, bream.’ They did not sound like the names of fish at all but like a litany of moods that any woman might feel any Monday morning after she’d hung out her washing and caught a glimpse of a ravishing man going somewhere in a motor-car.”¹²⁹

Despite her traditional role of a housewife, there could be perceived a slight suggestion of revolt in Kate’s behavior. It is quite obvious that Kate is dissatisfied with her position as the wife of her husband, or a housewife in general. Her situation seems to reflect the feelings Edna O’Brien expressed herself in a letter to her mother shortly after settling down with her husband: “If I think ahead, to say ten or fifteen years, I cannot see this life going on in this way. I make jam when the medlars and the damsons are in fruit. He likes it when I make jam, it establishes me as the housewife.”¹³⁰ Similarly, Kate is not ready to identify herself with the stereotype women she sees around her. Kate says she does not like their neighborhood and hardly ever talks to her neighbours. “No wonder. They were mostly housewives who waved their husbands goodbye in the mornings, shopped around eleven, collected plastic tulips with the packets of fust-blue detergent, and wrote to the Country Council about having the trees chopped down.”¹³¹ She lives on the same street, is a housewife herself, but does not want to be identified with the same destiny. Furthermore, compared with the strict Irish

¹²⁷ O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 7.

¹²⁸ O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 19.

¹²⁹ O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 17.

¹³⁰ O’Brien, *Country Girl*, part 2, chap. 2.

¹³¹ O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 23.

society, Kate's pregnancy before wedding and her later secret affair are quite revolutionary.

Despite her non-conservative conduct, Kate's actions seem to be deeply motivated by her clinging identity. Her existence depends on male presence and care. Despite being unhappy in her marriage, Kate's sudden liberation does not bring her relief. The reality of not belonging to any man is so terrifying and unknown to her that she immediately comes begging her husband to take her back. "She knew danger as she had never known it; the danger of being out in the world alone, having lost the girlish appeal that might entice some other man to father her."¹³² Kate herself used the term "to father her" when desperately recognizing her independence. It could be observed that Kate shows a tendency to look for father figures in her lovers. Back in the first part of the trilogy when Kate was only fourteen years old, her first love was an older married man who appreciated her, caressed her and treated her for meals while her own father beat her and lost all the family property to drink.

Kate tries to find happiness in relationships with men, constantly adjusting to their terms. Her search for happiness causes her to meet secretly with another man behind her husband's back. She is intentionally acting on her dissatisfied situation, yet her affair does not liberate her, rather it proves how dependent she is on the presence of men in her life. She did not seem to love her husband, yet when her boring settled life is put at risk, her world and her whole identity seem to fall apart. She is only twenty-five years old, yet the reality of being on her own in the world terrifies her. Apart from the men she belonged to, she has no identity of her own. As she is struggling to live her independent life, she tries to find relief with a random man she meets at a party: "She had had some wild notion that he might fall in love, heal her, provide new thought, new happiness, banish the old ugly images . . . She honestly believed that this man, or some man, was going to do all this for her."¹³³ The character of Kate appears to reflect the woman who has never known freedom to choose who she is, either in her life or in the examples given to her by the previous generation. Her identity has always depended on the one to whom she belonged and what he decided about who she was. These patterns are so rooted in her that even as circumstances cause her to lose these obligations, she automatically chooses to continue in them, since it is the only way she knows.

¹³² O'Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 98.

¹³³ O'Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 150.

The portrayal of Kate in her married “bliss” is as someone who is assigned her role by others. Various instances in the novel reveal that it was her husband Eugene who “had been the one to urge marriage and child on her.”¹³⁴ At first, Kate seemed to appreciate the calm married life in the countryside after her wedding. Nonetheless, she eventually begins to return frequently back to London to see her friend Baba, because her husband “wanted her to stay indoors all the time and nurse his haemorrhoids.”¹³⁵ They eventually move to London with the whole family. On the outside, Kate has settled in the role of a housewife as is seen in the descriptions of her ordinary days. One particular instance sums up the arrangement in their family. The family and their maid Maura having finished eating dinner, Kate asks her husband if he’ll have tea or coffee to which he responds tea, and the narration accurately concludes that “she and Maura automatically had the same.”¹³⁶ It may be an ordinary detail, but it corresponds with the general attitude in the family. She automatically adjusts to the expectations of her husband. Feeling guilty of her secret meetings, Kate is planning a way to save her marriage: “She would expiate all by sinking into domesticity. She would buy buttons, and spools of thread other than just black and white; she would scrape marrow from the bone and mix it with savoury Marmite to put on their bread. . . .”¹³⁷ Kate’s concept of the perfect woman that would please her husband is probably based on the images her surroundings and he himself pressed on her. Her submissive personality is the accurate combination to such environment, as she herself observed, “his little dictatorship demanded a woman like her – weak, apologetic, agreeable.”¹³⁸

One of the major roles Kate has automatically been put into is that of a mother. As much as she loves her son Cash, she says it was her husband who urged a child on her. When Kate’s secret affair is discovered, it is the identity of a mother that he attacks. After Kate’s efforts of reconciliation fail, she asks about her son. “I might let you see him on humanitarian grounds, but of course your morals make you unfit to be a mother.”¹³⁹ Kate used to play with her son in the park to the point that a guard had to ask her to retire from the swing if she was over sixteen years old. After her husband pronounces doubts on her identity as a mother, Kate does not play anymore. Her son asks her to chase him in the park as she used to, but she remains seated. “Other mothers

¹³⁴ O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 35.

¹³⁵ O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 14.

¹³⁶ O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 21.

¹³⁷ O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 31.

¹³⁸ O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 97.

¹³⁹ O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 37.

had arrived. The mothers were supposed to sit and watch children play.”¹⁴⁰ The concept of what is supposed to is very strong.

After years of adjusting to the role expected of her, not only did she lose her role as a wife, yet her husband fundamentally questions her as a mother. He has been the main assigner of her domestic identity, which he has now dismantled with his own words. He prepared a four-page letter enumerating all her faults:

He outlined her faults, did it so thoroughly, so intelligently, that half the time she found herself nodding, agreeing with him, the words scratched out with care, with cruelty, indisputable, final words – “Vain, immoral, mean-minded, hard-hearted, weak, self-destructive, unmaternal. It is too late. You should have planned your full-time mother career a little earlier.”¹⁴¹

As much as she had adjusted to the role built for her, he now managed to convince her of her own incapability to exercise it. It being the only identity she had known, Kate is left empty. As she is about to pick up her son from school one day, Kate is informed that the husband had moved with the son and the maid to Fiji five days before. When she helplessly inquires from the social officer, how it could have been possible to do so without her knowledge, he informs her that to issue her son’s passport, “mother’s signature was not necessary”¹⁴². The combination of the conviction of her inadequacy as a mother and the loss of her son lead Kate to take extreme measures.

When Kate had herself sterilized, “all the expected responses were missing, the guilt and doubt and sadness, she was looking at someone of whom too much had been cut away, some important region that they both knew nothing about.”¹⁴³ Kate’s revolt to the traditional roles that had been pushed on her results in hurting her own self the most. As she did not have the freedom to choose the identity of a mother out of her own will, yet was subjected to it by others, Kate’s reaction is a complete rejection of this part of her.

¹⁴⁰ O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 92.

¹⁴¹ O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 156.

¹⁴² O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 155.

¹⁴³ O’Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss*, 159.

5.2 Clara (*The Gingerbread Woman*)

Clara is the daughter character and the protagonist in *The Gingerbread Woman*. She and her mother represent the greatest gap between the two generations with regard to the traditional female roles. Her mother is described in the previous chapter as the woman who keeps making jam and living in a big house although it is empty. Clara, on the other hand, is clear example of the contemporary woman not ready to adjust to the traditional housewife role. She is thirty-five years old and she had already lived all around the world, occasionally coming back to her small Irish hometown. She is considered “the cosmopolitan one in the family”¹⁴⁴. She has a creative job. Apart from writing, she is a lecturer of Irish literature at important universities all over the world. Part of her specialty is to teach about Irish female writers such as Edna O’Brien and Elisabeth Bowen. Far from denying her roots, by embracing both her Irish female identity and her professional capacity, she has been able to become an independent and appreciated individual.

Contrary to the status just described, the beginning of the story finds Clara in a depreciated state. She is living back in her village, just across the street from her mother, who sees her as helpless child and keeps calling her twice a day to check on her. Although it is not explicitly named until the end of the book, the plot centers around the consequences of an unknown accident Clara had undergone as a result of her relationship with a man she met during her internship in New York. The unknown accident turns out to be a hysterectomy that Clara was forced to undergo months after breaking up with her lover. Not yet knowing that the ultimate damage he had caused her was to deprive her of her own womb, she abandoned the relationship upon discovering that her boyfriend concealed his wife and children from her by constant lying.

Clara did not look for love. James, her lover, addressed her at a party and expected her to immediately leave with him and have a private dinner. She had already forgotten her name when he waited in front of her apartment a few days later. He pursued her with an obvious intention. He did not give Clara any contact information, saying he did not use a mobile phone. He never stayed overnight, blaming his sick mother who he took care of and he never wanted to meet outside of Clara’s apartment until the day when she finally persuaded him to go to the cinema, where he was

¹⁴⁴ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 2.

recognized by a family acquaintance and asked about his wife and kids. Her emotional confusion was topped by months of back pain following, which eventually led to surgery. As the story begins, Clara is recovering from her physical and mental loss in a confused and resigned way.

The way Clara talks about herself and how others seem to perceive her is as a ghost version of herself. A stranger noticed her standing on the cliff where she used to go every day: “He had noticed how thin she was, and pale like a ghost. Maybe she was a ghost. Maybe she could fly. Her eyes were fixed each time he had seen her on the horizon, but he knew that they weren’t seeing the landscape there in front of her.”¹⁴⁵ He thought she was about to commit suicide, while she was just taking a deep breath in her miserable situation. She frequently names her status as post-operative, even upon being asked if she was married: “No. Just post-operative.”¹⁴⁶ This medical term appears to cover her physical weak state as well as the complex identity crisis she is going through. The reader will notice the frequent use of lower-case ‘I’s in her monologues, which she eventually explains as relating to her own mental state: “i am digressing . . . by the way, you may have noticed that I am having problems with some of the upper-case Is. I’m sorry about this. It has happened to me since my operation and I think it has something to do with loss of self-esteem.”¹⁴⁷

Clara did not seem to be a motherly kind of woman. She had an ambitious career and dreams of traveling, she tried to keep distance from her own mother, and yet this incident has the power to steal the worth she has in her own eyes. Her womb as her ability to have children is identified with her identity and value as a woman. “I’ve had all my insides out. All the important bits, I mean. I am no longer to all intents and purposes a woman. Just a thing walking round the world. A useless empty bah of some sort.”¹⁴⁸ The devastation seems to be even stronger because of the cause of the loss. Instead of choosing not to be a mother, she was deprived of such freedom by a man who misused her intimacy. She sees herself as the “barren woman that he made me”¹⁴⁹. She kept an expensive watch he had given her, yet his true “gift to me was not a million-dollar watch, it was the emptiness of my future”¹⁵⁰. Her scar is a constant reminder of that empty future and it is frequently pointed at in the story. When a phone rings, as it

¹⁴⁵ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 12.

¹⁴⁶ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 57.

¹⁴⁷ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 4.

¹⁴⁸ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 42.

¹⁴⁹ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 45.

¹⁵⁰ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 45.

does all the time, she still wonders for a moment if it is coming from New York: “How can I forget New York when every time I strip off and see my scarred belly, run my finger along the still tender flash, I want to scream?”¹⁵¹ The scar could be contrasted with the animate life she witnesses on her daily walk to the Killiney Hill cliff where she stands watching “mothers with prams and the toddlers running over the grass.”¹⁵²

I could stand here with my eyes shut for a long time, if it weren't for the east wind. It carves through my clothes and presses its knife edge against the scars, the visible signs of my mutilation. I pull my coat around me. I listen to the sounds of normal life behind me; the calls of mothers to their children . . .¹⁵³

She keeps returning to this place and she stays paralyzed in her state of empty future. The physical pain and scars have caused an unexpected obstruction Clara's life, yet they are just a hint of the scars left “not just on my body, but on my heart and mind as well.”¹⁵⁴

Clara indicates that she is a cautious person. While she allowed herself to trust this man, she generally describes herself as someone running away from privacy, which was a way she protected her “upper-case” identity. “I kept running like the Gingerbread Man, away, away. You can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man. You will never catch me. I, upper-case, am the Gingerbread Woman.”¹⁵⁵ The title *The Gingerbread Woman* is also the title of a book Clara starts to write about her experience with her lover. The name refers to a rhyme her mother would tell her grandchildren about the gingerbread man running away from the fox, only the predator in Clara's story was “dressed slyly in the clothes of a New York stockbroker”¹⁵⁶. It is by embracing the fear of privacy, by confronting her pain and specifically by writing that Clara initiates her journey towards the recovery of her lost identity. She starts writing a book about what happened to her, although it is the last thing she would like to do in her resigned self-pitying state of mind. “I have little choice. I must now try to create my children on the endless page, or live barren. I will not be barren.”¹⁵⁷ Although her biological ability to be a mother has

¹⁵¹ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 29.

¹⁵² Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 4.

¹⁵³ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 6.

¹⁵⁴ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 83.

¹⁵⁵ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 83.

¹⁵⁶ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 69.

¹⁵⁷ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 68.

been taken away from her, Clara sees creative writing as a way of leaving her mark and creating her future. Clara is the perfect example of the woman whose identity has been abused by others, yet who confronts her situation by intentionally though painfully letting her voice be heard. Clara's particular way of embracing her lost womanhood is by writing which seems to be an adequate parallelism to the situation Irish female writers. When she has only started writing, she imagines the way she will feel once she finishes her book: "I will feel astonished by my persistence and by the probability that I will have come to terms once more with the upper case I. I do hope so. I really don't want to spend the rest of my life relegated in my own mind to the lower case."¹⁵⁸ The creative process of conveying her experience into writing is at the same time a process of recovering her self-esteem as a woman. Clara herself identifies her writing as a way of healing her heart and soul:

I think it is probably pulp nonsense that I am writing, but I will finish it through . . . so that I can look with a certain coolness at how I allowed myself to be duped and then ... and then . . . what word should I use? The one that springs to mind is "destroyed", but that is way over the top. "Damaged" would be more accurate . . . I want to cure myself – not just the bodily wounds, but those in my heart and soul. My belly will always carry a scar, but I see no reason why I should tolerate them in any other part of my being.¹⁵⁹

The way Clara handles her situation is perhaps even more representative of the woman raising her voice against inequality and oppression than her educational and professional status. While her future existence was taking away from her without asking, she could resign and follow the pattern of oppressed women who surrendered to their externally appointed circumstances. Clara might be wearing a painful mark on her body for the rest of her life, but she decides not to tolerate the overwhelming force trying to render her defenceless and resigned.

It is important to note that as much as motherhood might be associated with the traditional roles in the context of Irish feminism, the fact that this independent successful modern woman would be deprived of its possibility without her own will is considered equally harmful to the identity of her female independence and worth. It is

¹⁵⁸ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 82.

¹⁵⁹ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 128.

not so much by the traditional roles that this novel reflects the ideas of female justice as by the freedom of one's own choice. Whether she decides to be a housewife and have a house full of children or whether she decides to never marry and focus on her career, it is having her own choice that allows the woman to embrace her identity as a woman and a worthy human being.

The author concludes the book as Clara concludes writing her own story as well as her her healing process: "I think I am my own person. I realise now that I will have to invent my own immortality. Perhaps I will take to making jam. Perhaps I will do something to please my mother . . . Perhaps it is time to become a non-fugitive."¹⁶⁰

After spending the whole novel running away from privacy, from her mother's care and from the fear of becoming like her mother, at last Clara has grasped the freedom to do out of her own will what she might have been expected to do by others before. She becomes the author of her identity.

5.3 Gina (*The Forgotten Waltz*)

Gina, the daughter of Joan and the protagonist of *The Forgotten Waltz*, is a successful independent businesswoman working in IT. Despite the contrast in her mother's fashion obsession and good looks, which she claims not to have inherited, she is generally described as attractive, funny and intelligent. Her view of the world is filtered through a sarcastic and harsh perspective. Living in the 2000s, Gina is far from the traditional stereotype of the Irish housewife.

In spite of her surface independence and emotional detachment, Gina's life turns upside down by the time she finishes narrating the story centred around her love affair with Sean. While still married, she meets Sean at a party in his own house and as they secretly kiss in an empty room, they are witnessed by his daughter who merely giggles at this situation. They eventually become colleagues and their relationship appears to be quite serious. Sean is planning on leaving his family, yet he is always postponing his ultimate withdrawal until Gina finds out that his wife probably does not even know about her.

The way Gina's life changes as a consequence of the affair is often explicitly related to her use of the pill. While she started using it because of her affair with Sean, it

¹⁶⁰ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 212.

is by finding the pill that Gina's husband finds out about her infidelity. Her husband dreamed about having children with her, so the proof of her pregnancy prevention is at the same time the accuser of her affair. As she packs her clothes and leaves him, she imagines the potential children her decision is taking away from them: "I took my bag, and the suitcase of clothes, and I took the thing he wanted most – a little boy, maybe, as yet unmade; a sturdy little runaround fella, for sitting on his shoulders, and video games down the arcade, and football in the park."¹⁶¹ She admits that she likes children, but she excuses her actions by calculating the high financial cost of having them, which seems as if she was trying very hard not to feel bad about what she had abandoned.

Another consequence Gina blames on the pill is her inability to see her mother in her suffering: "I just think that if I hadn't been on the pill things would have gone differently; I might have been able to listen to my mother on the phone, or think better."¹⁶² As she retrospectively looks at the months preceding her mother's death, Gina appears to regret the distance that arose from her dedication to her lover. She might have made her independent decision to love Sean, disregarding any assigned female tradition, yet she might not have been aware of the sacrifice that decision brought along. By following Sean, Gina unconsciously gave up her potential children and the presence of her mother, who she consequently kept recalling after her death.

After losing her mother, her husband and even her sister, who stops speaking to her because of the affair, Gina finds herself in a completely different place in life. She is living in her dead mother's house. Instead of being the independent impulsive woman from the beginning of the story, she spends her days waiting dependently on a phone call from Sean, who still lives in between places. The loneliness and silence Gina finds in her life, and which is demonstrated symbolically in the house, in fact allows her to be closer to her mother. It was Christmas and Gina was alone because Sean was spending it with his family and her sister was angry at her, saying that she "was glad – as she said, *glad* – our mother was dead, so she wouldn't have to witness the way I was carrying on. She was wrong about that, by the way. My mother would have understood. My mother with her handsome, infuriating husband; she would have kissed the top of my sad head."¹⁶³ The closer Gina gets to the identity of the silent depending woman, the more she is able to understand her own mother, whose silence had been overlooked for

¹⁶¹ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 147.

¹⁶² Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 30.

¹⁶³ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 173.

so long. As Gina says, her mother would have understood because of her own husband, and it is specifically in the tradition of silent subordination to the male partner that Gina quietly continues in her increasing surrender to Sean's self-realization in her own life.

After she abandons everything that her life had to do with motherhood, her imaginary children and partly the relationship with her mother, she paradoxically ends up adjusting her life to Sean's own daughter. After being jealous of Sean's wife, Gina eventually realizes that the source of his absence and distance was his daughter: "Then he walked out of the kitchen and did not come back for three days. I had been so stupid. It wasn't about Aileen – this anguish I had to live with, and avoid, and constantly tend. It was about Evie."¹⁶⁴ Evie invades Gina's life. Not only is she the excuse of most of Sean's absence, Evie gradually becomes the main topic of all their conversations. They buy new furniture to make the house of Gina's mother nicer for her visits. When Evie stays over for the night, Sean sleeps in her room with her. All the while, it is assumed that Gina would not intervene in Evie's life or make her presence much acknowledged. "The craziest thing, I think, is the way I can't speak to them in person, to Aileen or to Evie. I am a grown woman with a job and a salary, and I am not allowed talk to the people, who at a whim, make or ruin my Saturdays. I can not even lift the phone."¹⁶⁵ Although Gina does not feel content about her situation, she silently adjusts to the role of the invisible lover of someone's father, feeling some unspoken guilt of her first kiss with Sean witnessed by little Evie.

Gina eventually begins to feel jealous of Evie: "I listen to the ease of his tone with her and I think, *He does not speak that way to me . . .*"¹⁶⁶ Gina's jealousy is addressed to Sean as well as to her own father who never treated her the way Sean does her daughter. After taking second place to Sean's wife, she feels she is now taking second place to his daughter, which he confirms by saying that Gina was "most ideally suited to a secondary role."¹⁶⁷ Evie is living in Gina's house without acknowledging her presence, not merely looking at her. In a way, Gina finds herself in the tracks of her own mother. She lives in her house, overlooked, waiting in her secondary place for the man to notice her. The man who turned out to be quite used to having love affairs. Although Gina might have felt so different and a little superior to her mother at the beginning of the story, keeping her distance, the narration traces her journey to the same

¹⁶⁴ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 162.

¹⁶⁵ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 206.

¹⁶⁶ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 210.

¹⁶⁷ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 219.

spot where her mother once had been. It is in the abandoned silence that she comes to know her mother most and manages to genuinely identify with her. While the pill and its consequences originally seemed as Gina's independent choice, making her give up her potential children and her mother, it actually lead her to the situation when she becomes the secondary and silent mother of someone else's child, tracing the footsteps of her once neglected mother.

The daughter characters have started their narratives in a way that could be considered revolutionary when compared to their mothers. Each of them can be associated with the emancipated female generation, either because of their career, independence or social status. However, despite the progress they reflect, the stories of Gina, Clara and Kate reveal a strong tendency to maintain the deeply rooted legacy of their subdued and silent mothers. As it has been demonstrated, it is by while making what seem as independent decisions that they eventually find themselves in roles they had never chosen for themselves. The paradox that has been observed is the opposite form that the same tradition takes in this new context. What was once the involuntarily assigned role of motherhood becomes the female right that is taken away as a result of the same dominant power. The pattern unifying the two generations goes therefore beyond the question of stereotypical housewives to the basic right to choose one's own identity whether it be to be a mother or not.

6. Fathers and Lovers

Although this study is focused on female characters in the novels, their identity is strongly related to the presence of male characters, as it has been demonstrated in the previous analysis. One of the common features reflected in the lives of mothers and daughters portrayed in the studied novels is the reality that the male characters seem to participate in the repression of the female voice. As they have been used merely as a reference in the previous chapters, this chapter aims to provide an intentional presentation of the main male characters in the novels, specifically the fathers and the lovers of the protagonists. The way these characters are portrayed is very relevant for the whole picture of the female situation presented by the authors. The focus of this chapter, apart from mere presentation, is to study any common features engaged in the portrayal of the male identity that would be indicative of the general ideas

communicated in the introductory chapters, including the authors' personal experience and historical background.

6.1. Fathers

The fact that the fathers have been significantly absent from the previous analysis was not so much a deliberate move, as it has been caused by the genuine absence of fathers in the novels. They are not around and when they are, it is not always a nice experience. Moreover, they are usually drunk up to the point of aggression so the emotions they evoke in their wives and daughters are often fear and shame.

The very beginning of *The Country Girls* presents Kate as she wakes up nervous because her father had not come home, which could be interpreted from basic signs, as the place where the dog had slept: "He usually slept in the turf-house, but last night he had stayed in the rabbit-hole under the hedge. He always slept there to be on the watch-out when Dada went away. I need not ask, my father had not come home."¹⁶⁸ The whole household is kept in a terrified tension. It is the father's absence and the potential consequences of his return that result in the mother's mental absence:

She was thinking. Thinking where was he? Would he come home in an ambulance, or a hackney car, hired in Belfast three days ago and not paid for? Would he stumble up the stone steps at the back door waving a bottle of whiskey? Would he shout, struggle, kill her, or apologize? Would he fall in the hall door with some drunken fool and say: "Mother, meet my best friend Harry . . ." All this had happened so many times that it was foolish to expect that my father might come home sober. He had gone, three days before, with sixty pounds in his pocket, to pay the rates.¹⁶⁹

To see her mother in such a stressed disposition makes Kate tremble at her father's approach. She feels a need to protect her mother and hates to leave her presence even if just to go to school: "There were tears in my eyes. I was always afraid that my mother would die while I was at school."¹⁷⁰ And so a fourteen-year-old girl spends her

¹⁶⁸ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 6.

¹⁶⁹ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 9.

¹⁷⁰ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 12.

mornings afraid for her mother's life. Kate mentions that the day when her father was taken to the hospital, and so was safely not to be expected at home, "was one of the few times I saw Mama happy"¹⁷¹. The father's destructive presence seems to be presented as the controlling tool in the female weakening.

The greatest fear seemed to spring from the possibility of being beaten up. Kate has been scared to face her drunk father from the first page of the book and her terror appears to be justified when a few pages later, her first encounter with the father is that of his beating her up for no reason: "He came over and gave me a punch under the chin so that my two rows of teeth chattered together and with his wild lunatic eyes he stared at me."¹⁷² Some instances from O'Brien's memoir show a parallel between her own father and the portrayal in the novel. While she mentions that "those lulls while he was away were the happiest times in our house,"¹⁷³ she also tells about the time when her father threatened her mother with a loaded revolver.

My mother and I once narrowly escaped death . . . In there, he vowed havoc and slaughter on all of us and on families along the road who had refused him drink, and eventually the sergeant was called and went in to reason with him. After a while, when they had obviously been arguing fiercely, the sergeant came out and said the only person he would give the gun to was my mother, and I went in with her to be her protector.¹⁷⁴

As O'Brien, Kate grew up with the need to protect herself and her mother from the aggressive male. Her concept of marriage learnt from the childhood appears to be that of necessary fear and the only way to explore her identity is in secret in the male absence. This paralyzing influence of the father can be seen in the epitaph O'Brien wrote to her parents: "I hate him because he murdered me, in each and all of my tiniest inclinations, so that I walked with a stoop, thought with a shudder, and spoke the utmost untruthful, placating drivel."¹⁷⁵ The terror Kate grew up has had a defining influence over her lifelong search for a protector she could belong to.

¹⁷¹ O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 12.

¹⁷² O'Brien, *The Country Girls*, 33.

¹⁷³ O'Brien, *Country Girl*, part 1, chap. 3.

¹⁷⁴ O'Brien, *Country Girl*, part 1, chap. 3.

¹⁷⁵ O'Brien, *Country Girl*, part 2, chap 3.

The father in *The Forgotten Waltz* is not very present in the narrative, as he is already dead. His character can be reconstituted based on several recollections of the daughter. He is basically presented as someone who had the potential to ruin the day and whose presence takes all the attention: “There was drama all day when my father was around, and it was as big as it needed to be. He fought with my mother, he loved my mother. He went missing. He came home and was shaggy and large with us.”¹⁷⁶ Moreover, he continues in the same tradition of drunk fathers as Kate’s father did:

I just hated, as I got older the look of him when he had taken a drink: the way he swivelled his face around to find you, and the chosen, careful nonsense that came out of his mouth when he did. I hated the way he sat there, benignly absent, or horribly possessed by some slow creature, who rolled, across the distance between you.¹⁷⁷

Not only was he mentally absent because of drinks, but as Gina recollects, “by the time we were teenagers, he wasn’t around all that much. He always kept Sundays at home, but even on a Sunday he was in bed till eleven, and went out around five.”¹⁷⁸

To conclude the tradition of absent fathers, the father in *The Gingerbread Woman* is not only dead, but he is almost completely absent from the narrative with the exception of few references that do not provide any insight to his character traits.

6.2 Lovers

After coming from the environment of absent oppressive fathers, the daughters in the novels tend to choose their lovers on promises of some romantic ideal. The quality that helps the men seduce the protagonists of the novels appears to be in their visual appeal, material provision, romantic gesture and rhetorical skills. When Clara recounts her first encounter with James, she remembers his clothes as the first thing she noticed about him: “It was the suit that caught my eye first; a lanky jacket with patch pockets and narrow trousers in mouse-brown wool that looked as soft as

¹⁷⁶ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 169.

¹⁷⁷ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 169-170.

¹⁷⁸ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 170.

velvet.”¹⁷⁹ Gina remembers the tanned body and long hair of Sean as well as the way he “stirred us up. Everything he said was funny, and everything seemed to do you down.”¹⁸⁰ Language turned out to be the main tool that James used to deceive his mistress in *The Gingerbread Woman*. Apart from consistently lying about his wife, James keeps using cliché romantic remarks such as: “I thought my memory was playing games with me, but it wasn’t. You’re just as beautiful as I thought you were.”¹⁸¹ Despite Clara’s sarcastic filter wondering “who had written his script,”¹⁸² she allows his romantic gestures to conquer her. As for Eugene, his initial romantic appeal is combined with his fatherly attention, which is so comforting to Kate’s parentless soul: “Eugene guarded me like a child, taught me things, gave me books to read, and gave pleasure to my body at night.”¹⁸³ It is Eugene who protects Kate from her own aggressive father when he comes to take her back home.

Despite their attractive allure, the lovers gradually become extensively controlling over the women’s lives and decisions. James decides the terms of the relationship with Clara. Although she would like to do something normal, meet each other’s friends, he always keeps their meetings in her apartment, yet he never stays overnight. In her effort to do something normal she asks him to go to the cinema, which he dismisses on the ground that since he cannot stay late to return to his mother, going to the cinema would not leave them enough time to have sex. The whole conversation is manipulatively turned against Clara by his asking her: “Have you stopped loving me?”¹⁸⁴ Moreover, James does not provide her with any of his personal information and thus protects his privacy while completely controlling hers.

Eugene equally assumes control over the future of the family in *Girls in Their Married Bliss* when he takes Kate’s son and moves him to the other side of the world without even letting her know. Gina from *The Forgotten Waltz* remembers the way her affair with Sean started and the way he slightly pushed her into it. They were in a hotel corridor on their business trip when they started kissing: “I resisted going in the door and he turned back to persuade me. My memory skips the beginning of it. . . . as I continued to leave and he continued to keep me, the kiss was a sweet argument and

¹⁷⁹ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 70.

¹⁸⁰ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 29.

¹⁸¹ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 114.

¹⁸² Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 115.

¹⁸³ Edna O’Brien, *The Country Girls Trilogy* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 323.

¹⁸⁴ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 188.

pursuit.”¹⁸⁵ The romantic tension Gina could have appreciated at the beginning gradually turned to her having to redecorate her dead mother’s house for it to match his daughter’s taste, all the while being left out of any intervention in Sean’s marital decisions.

The greatest power these men possess is the potential to form the identity of their partners. Such power has the potential to either build them up or take them down. In respect to the tendency already discussed in the historical context and the publishing industry to diminish the value and independence of the female voice, the same inclination can be perceived in the portrayal of the lovers in the studied novels.

James diminished Clara at first by lying to her about his wife and children. When she discovered she had been just his secret mistress for the whole time they were dating, her self-esteem was challenged even more by the detail that his wife’s name, Carla, resembled that of her own: “If you just shove the letters round a bit you get Clara. Carla’s a bit more glamorous really. Clara’s rather old-fashioned, lumpy.”¹⁸⁶ It does not help when James accidentally calls her by the wrong name. The ultimate influence James has on Clara’s identity is when she loses her womb because of him and is consequently fundamentally doubting herself as a woman.

The identity assigner in Kate’s story is her husband Eugene. This influence begins subtly by changing her name: “He called me Kate, as he said Caithleen was too ‘Kiltartan’ for his liking—whatever that meant.”¹⁸⁷ And so the Caithleen from the first part of the trilogy is referred to as Kate for the rest of her story. Kate tries to meet Eugene’s standards from the beginning of their relationship, as she feels an inadequate companion to him and his company of friends: “‘I’ll try and get sophisticated,’ I said. I would cut my hair, buy tights and a corset. ‘I don’t want you sophisticated,’ he said, ‘I just want to give you nice babies.’”¹⁸⁸ Eugene has a clear idea of who Kate is supposed to be – a housewife. The story of Kate and Eugene comes alive in the story O’Brien’s own marriage recorded in her autobiography. Her husband seems to have seen O’Brien’s literary ambition come into conflict with her role as a housewife. His reaction after Edna managed to write her first book testifies to that: “He had read it. Yes, he had to concede that despite everything, I had done it, and then he said something that was the death knell of the already ailing marriage – ‘*You can write and I will never forgive*

¹⁸⁵ Enright, *The Forgotten Waltz*, 34.

¹⁸⁶ Johnston, *The Gingerbread Woman*, 193.

¹⁸⁷ O’Brien, *The Country Girls Trilogy*, 202.

¹⁸⁸ O’Brien, *The Country Girls Trilogy*, 317.

you.”¹⁸⁹ After their separation, Edna found his secret journal and read the following description of a woman her husband was seeing: “She was, as he put it, a kind, intelligent, thoughtful human being, free of insanity and literary ambition.”¹⁹⁰ O’Brien’s husband’s need of a housewife and mother seems to be conveyed in Eugene’s character. It is Eugene who defines the standards of the value of his wife in terms of his own expectations of domesticity and it is he who accuses Kate of her inability to fulfill these standards by writing a four-page list of her defects. Eugene pronounces Kate’s inadequacy over her, making her believe her inability as a mother, which gradually leads her to surrender this ability altogether and let herself be sterilized.

While Sean’s influence over Gina’s identity might not be so strong and definite, his behaviour as well as words claim her to be in a secondary role. Gina, who started as a self-confident independent woman, can be observed to gradually adjust to the secondary role her lover had put her to. She identifies with the abandoned and silent woman waiting for the man’s attention as a result of the identity Sean decided for her.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was an analysis of the main female characters in the works of Edna O’Brien, Jennifer Johnston and Anne Enright in the context of the cultural background connected to the female situation in Ireland. The chapters relating this background demonstrated that the image of female identity, even in contemporary Ireland, is a complex combination of the political, historical and religious heritage of the previous generations and the country itself. It was clearly indicated that the role of motherhood has been deeply rooted in the value system of the people and that its revered value has not been a product of a natural tendency of the women as much as it was intentionally assigned by the male authorities. The vocation of a mother has been presented in its social consequences manifested in the marriage bars and prohibition of divorce, abortion or birth control.

The last part of the background study focused on the particular situation of contemporary Irish female writers and their reception in their own country. Testimonies from the studied authors revealed ongoing feelings of disregard associated to the long

¹⁸⁹ O’Brien, *Country Girl*, Part 2, chap. 3.

¹⁹⁰ O’Brien, *Country Girl*, Part 2, chap. 3.

tradition of generally silenced female voices. The obvious neglect manifested in the lack of Irish female authors and indifference to their works in various Irish anthologies, in the academic research or in the publishing industry has caused many writers to turn to foreign audience where they feel more appreciated.

The analysis of the complex situation of Irish women, especially as seen through the testimony of the studied writers, has served as an intentional perspective in the following analysis of the female characters in their selected works. The aim of the analysis was to find common patterns in the portrayal of mother-daughter relationship and to prove whether the daughter characters would be systematically associated with the themes of female emancipation and whether they would be identified with the authors themselves. The mother characters in *The Gingerbread Woman* and *The Country Girls* very obviously represent the stereotypical roles of Irish homebased sacrificial worried mothers, the latter so identified with the role of a housewife that she continues in the same jam making lifestyle although she lives in an empty house, and the former obsessed with thriftiness and paralyzed by her fear-driven submission to her husband. On the other hand, Joan in *The Forgotten Waltz* deviated from this tradition, as she was mainly associated to her obsession with external beauty, which was seen in a strong contrast to the traditional feelings of guilt associated to self-indulgence. The pattern that was established in the character of Joan was, however, the portrayal of a silenced mother. While the mother in *The Country Girls* is presented as a ghostlike figure and she literally dies at the beginning of the story, Joan's death divides the book structurally and thematically. It has been demonstrated that despite her absence, the mother is given a voice even in her silence.

The analysis of the daughter characters demonstrated a common pattern in the general emancipation of the women. While Gina in *The Forgotten Waltz* is an attractive successful businesswoman and Clara in *The Gingerbread Woman* is a world traveling lecturer and writer, Kate in *The Country Girls* struggles in her emancipation in more subtle ways by not conforming to the pattern of housewives in her surroundings or by revolting towards her controlling husband.

Further intention was to analyze the ways in which the daughters rose from the situation of their mothers and, on the contrary, the ways they followed in the female tradition. The study has revealed that despite the great progress the daughters reflect in their social status, all of them follow a tendency that at last identifies them with their silenced mothers. Even though they act seemingly independently and in a revolt, their

identity is at last dominated by their male partners. In contrast to the traditional mothers who had been assigned the role of motherhood, the daughter in *The Forgotten Waltz* gave up the dream of having children with her husband only to end up involuntarily adjusting her whole life to the teenage daughter of her lover. More relevantly, the daughters in *The Country Girls* and *The Gingerbread Woman* end up barren as a result of their traumatic relationships. The same male dominion that previously assigned the role of motherhood is thus demonstrated in the inability to embrace this part of female identity at all. What appeared to be a great generation difference was proved as being unified in the inability of the women to decide their own identity. The participation of the male characters in this identity deconstruction and their direct relation to the portrayal of motherhood has been demonstrated in the common patterns of absent drunk fathers and controlling lovers.

Resumé

Cieľom tejto diplomovej práce je analýza hlavných ženských postáv vo vybraných dielach Edny O'Brien, Jennifer Johnston a Anne Enright v kontexte kultúrneho pozadia spojeného so situáciou žien v Írsku. Kapitoly týkajúce sa tohoto pozadia prezentujú, že obraz ženskej identity, a to aj v súčasnom Írsku, je produktom komplexnej kombinácie politického, historického a náboženského dedičstva minulých generácií a krajiny ako takej. Práca sa snaží ukázať ako je rola materstva hlboko zakorenená v hodnotovom systéme Írov a že jej uctievaná hodnota má pôvod viac v jej zámernom povýšení mužskými vodcami ako v prirodzenej tendencii žien. Práca prezentuje rolu materstva v írskom kontexte v rámci jej sociálnych následkov prejavujúcich sa v diskriminačných manželských zákonoch, zákaze rozvodu, potratu alebo antikoncepcie.

Dôležitá časť kontextuálnej analýzy je zameraná konkrétne na situáciu súčasných ženských írskych autoriek a ich uznanie vo vlastnej krajine. Komentáre spomenutých autoriek ukazujú na pretrvávajúce prehliadanie spojené so všeobecnou tradíciou utíšených ženských hlasov. Toto očividné zanedbanie sa prejavuje v nedostatku ženských írskych autoriek v rôznych antológiách a v nezaujme voči ich dielam v akademickom výskume ako aj vo vydavateľskom odvetví.

Analýza situácie írskych žien a perspektíva daných autoriek poslúži ako základ na literárnu analýzu ženských postáv v daných dielach. Zámerom tejto analýzy je nájsť spoločné znaky v zobrazení vzťahu medzi matkami a dcérami a overiť, či budú postavy dcér systematicky reprezentovať myšlienky ženskej emancipácie a do akej miery budú totožné s postojom daných autoriek. Postavy matiek v *The Gingerbread Woman* a *The Country Girls* veľmi zreteľne reprezentujú stereotypné role írskych sebaobetavých a ustarostených žien v domácnosti. Matka v *The Forgotten Waltz* sa však z tejto tradície odkloňuje prehnanou starostlivosťou o svoj vzhľad, čo ju stavia do silného kontrastu s tradičným pocitom viny spojeným s podobnými návykmi. Hlavné spojenie v zobrazení postav matiek sa prejavuje v obraze utíšenej matky. Zatiaľ čo matka v *The Country Girls* zomrie hneď na začiatku príbehu, smrť matky v *The Forgotten Waltz* rozdeľuje román štruktúralne ako aj tématicky. Práca poukazuje na spoločný znak prehliadnutej tichej matky, ktorá prehovorí napriek svojej neprítomnosti.

Analýza postáv dcier poukazuje na spoločný znak v emancipácii týchto žien. Všetky postavy sú prezentované ako zástupkyne novej nezávislej generácie žien, či už

ako atraktívna úspešná obchodníčka, spisovateľka cestujúca po celom svete alebo manželka, ktorá sa vzbúri voči svojmu autoritatívnemu manželovi.

Práca sa zaoberá zobrazením odklonenia dcér od spôsobu života ich matiek ako aj skúma oblasti, v ktorých tieto postavy pokračujú v tejto tradícii. Analýza daných postáv sa snaží ukázať, že napriek zdanlivej nezávislosti a pokroku, všetky postavy dcér zdieľajú tendenciu, ktorá ich napriek všetkému stotožňuje so svojimi utíšenými matkami tým, že nechajú svojich partnerov rozhodovať o ich identite. Zatiaľ čo tradičné matky boli postavené do materstva bez slobody vlastného rozhodnutia, dve z analyzovaných dcér sa nakoniec stanú neplodné následkom traumatických vzťahov s ich partnermi. Práca poukazuje na paralelu medzi dvomi generáciami, v ktorých tá istá mužská zvrchovanosť spôsobuje raz vynútenú rolu materstva a druhý raz úplnú neschopnosť podieľať sa na tejto stránke ženskej identity. Účasť mužských postáv na tejto dekonštrukcii ženskej identity a ich priame spojenie so zobrazením materstva prezentovaného v daných románoch sú ukázané na opakujúcich sa črtách otcov, ktorí sú prezentovaní ako neprítomní alkoholici, a milencov, ktorí ovládajú svoje partnerky.

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Annotation

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Faculty: Philosophical Faculty of Palacký University in Olomouc

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Title of the Diploma Thesis: Rising from the Tracks of Their Mothers: Analysis of Female Characters in the Selected Works of Jennifer Johnston, Anne Enright and Edna O'Brien

Supervisor: PhDr. Matthew Sweney, Ph.D.

Number of Pages: 63

Number of appendices: CD

Key words: Jennifer Johnston, Anne Enright, Edna O'Brien, Irish, female, The Gingerbread Woman, The Forgotten Waltz, The Country Girls, motherhood, mothers, daughters, Ireland, feminism, identity, emancipation, female characters, pregnancy

The aim of this thesis is to study common patterns related to the role of motherhood in the analysis of the main female characters in the selected works of Jennifer Johnston, Anne Enright and Edna O'Brien and their relation to the cultural female situation in Ireland. The first part of the thesis presents a study of the political, historical and religious background related to the contemporary role of Irish women. The contextual study includes topics relevant for the further literary analysis, such as the political assignment of the role of motherhood through marriage bars or the prohibition of birth control, divorce and abortion, equally as the current situation of Irish female writers and their journey towards acknowledgement. The second part of the thesis approaches the novels, *The Gingerbread Woman*, *The Country Girls* and *The Forgotten Waltz*, in the perspective of the previous context. The aim of the analysis is to reveal common patterns of silence and stereotype roles among the mother characters and compare them with the generation of daughters. The thesis furthermore intends to prove the tendency of the daughter characters to deviate from the legacy of their mothers as well as to examine the ways in which they maintain their tradition, especially in the context of motherhood. The identity of the female characters is studied with regard to the male influence of the father and lover characters.

Anotace

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Název diplomové práce: Vykročení z ciest našich matiek: Analýza ženských postáv vo vybraných dielach Jennifer Johnston, Anne Enright a Edny O'Brien

Vedoucí: PhDr. Matthew Sweney, Ph.D.

Počet stran: 63

Počet príloh: CD

Klíčová slova: Jennifer Johnston, Anne Enright, Edna O'Brien, Irsko, mateřství, matka, dcera, Ireland, feminismus, identita, emancipace, ženské postavy, těhotenství

Cieľom tejto diplomovej práce je skúmať spoločné charakteristické znaky role materstva na hlavných ženských postavách vo vybraných dielach Jennifer Johnston, Anne Enright a Edny O'Brien a ich spojenie s kultúrnou situáciou žien v Írsku. Prvá časť práce predstavuje výskum politického, historického a náboženského pozadia spojeného so súčasnou rolou írskych žien. Tento kontextuálny výskum obsahuje témy relevantné pre nasledujúcu literárnu analýzu. Týmito témami sú politické imperatívy ohľadom role materstva cez manželské zákony alebo zákazy antikoncepcie, potratov či rozvodu, rovnako ako téma súčasnej situácie írskych ženských autoriek a ich cesty k rozpoznaní. Druhá časť práce pristupuje k daným románom, *The Gingerbread Woman*, *The Country Girls* a *The Forgotten Waltz*, v rámci perspektívy predchádzajúceho kontextu. Cieľom tejto analýzy je ukázať spoločné znaky utíšenia a stereotypných rolí medzi postavami matiek a porovnať ich s generáciou dcier. Zámerom práce je dokázať tendenciu dcier odkloniť sa od dedičnej identity svojich matiek, ako aj skúmať prípady, v ktorých túto tradíciu nasledujú, hlavne čo sa týka kontextu materstva. Identita ženských postáv je analyzovaná s ohľadom na vplyv postáv otcov a milencov.