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Title: From the Encoded to the Explicit in the 20th Century Irish Romance: A Study of Elizabeth Bowen’s The Last September and Edna O’Brien’s The Country Girls Trilogy.

Abstract approved:

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Neil R. Davison

This thesis uses both feminist and new historic theories to argue that the women’s romance novels The Last September (1929) by Elizabeth Bowen and The Country Girl’s Trilogy (1960, 1962, 1964) by Edna O’Brien are tragic bildungsroman that subvert and challenge the Irish patriarchal marriage expectations of their respective time periods. Both Bowen and O’Brien in their own very different class and cultural idioms render such expectations as unrealistic, gender-biased, and detrimental to their heroine’s sense of independent identity. Additionally, the difference between the pre-independence time period of The Last September and the post colonial, nation-building time period of The Country Girl’s Trilogy provides a contrast between an Irish woman’s social position before and after Ireland’s Home Rule. Both novels make lasting contributions to the history and politics regarding the private sphere of domesticity during a time when Irish women were constrained socially and politically from creating for themselves a fulfilling life in whatever sphere they may have chosen.
From the Encoded to the Explicit in the 20th Century Irish Romance: A Study of Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September* and Edna O’Brien’s *The Country Girls Trilogy*

by

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

__________________________________________
Shobana L. Breeden, Author
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to recognize the Professors, both past and present, both those of Oregon State University and Western Oregon University, for opening not only their own minds of knowledge to me, but the minds of the countless other literary geniuses from around the world as well. I would not exchange the experience it has been.

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DEDICATION

In this world full of contributors, I recognize that without the following people I would have been greatly in need: Grandmother Myrna Coon, Grandfather George L. Coon, Mother Barbara G. Breeden, Father David D. Breeden, Ryan K. Brown, Son Liam N. Berkey, God-daughter Lorelei R. Berkey, Amanda N. Nixon, and Jonny A. Berkey, may he rest in peace.

“Time could have begun here, in this wash of the Earth. This is where That comes loose. This is where it drains.” (Shobana Breeden, 2004)
In researching for this thesis, I have felt the compulsion to catch up to my Irish contemporary, ask her to download into my mind all of those little nuances of memory and knowledge that she may take for granted: how her mother first told her the stories of Cú Culaind or the labour pains of the Ulaid, how her father used to carry her on his shoulders along the mounds when she was a child, how the school melodies could only match those songs played at the pub now that she’s grown, how Parnell was unseated by his love for Kitty O’Shea, how deValera founded the Fianna Fail, and how Mary Robinson was elected president. Cultural and political nuance seem so intertwined in Ireland. But alas it’s not possible for me, as an American woman, to experience complete immersion in the Irish culture without dedicating myself to years of living abroad, although I entertain the idea. I must admit to my enculturated viewpoint from the very beginning; and, I realize the responsibility this position incurs. Nationalism is an influence prevalent in my experience as well; and, as the writer of this thesis, I realize I bring to this forum many ethnocentricities of my own. However, it is my hope that my outside perspective will only encourage the Irish literary conversation. Consequently, I tried to proceed with the utmost caution, respect, and consideration of the Irish people. And to tell the truth, I have more than respect for the Irish people, I have probably romanticized their culture and definitely fallen in love with their literature.

My first experience with Irish literature began where I think a lot of readers begin, with James Joyce and *Dubliners*. The modernism he uses to portray Gabriel’s
consciousness in “The Dead” introduced me to the sensation of the epiphany, something I will never forget—escalating towards the epiphany, marking the deeper meaning, and then breathtakingly reaching the other side in awe. My appreciation only deepened when I studied the ancient Irish myths and sagas. Here was a gateway to Ireland’s past. Here was where I could imagine joining the Túatha Dé Danand in crossing over into the “other world.” My study of Saint Patrick, Saint Columba, and Saint Columbanus; the ancient manuscripts, and the contribution of monastic scribes to saving the literatures of the world during the dark ages made a deep impression as well. Our present times may have indeed been different without their dedication to preservation.

The intrigue continued as I began to delve into the contemporary works, the poetry of Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and Seamus Heaney; the fiction of Evelyn Conlon, Roddy Doyle, and Ann Enright. An essay I wrote about Seamus Deane’s first fictional book, *Alone in the Dark*, placed me at the Northwest Undergraduate Conference on Literature at the University of Portland. Another essay I wrote, “The Conflict Between Patriarchy and Unwedded Pregnancy,” analyzing Edna O'Brien's short story "A Scandalous Woman" along with Bernard MacLaverty's novel *Grace Notes*, helped me receive the Meyer Prize for Excellence in Literature (2005) from Western Oregon University. Decidedly, after researching Edna O’Brien, her works, and biographies, I immediately locked on to her as a favorite author. O’Brien’s *The Country Girls Trilogy* was exactly what I wanted for my graduate thesis, raw realism that raises the consciousness about the subjugation of women in Ireland during the 1940s and 50s. With this criterion in mind, I also discovered the
realism of Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September*, which shows similar limitations affecting Irish women during the 1920s.

While some theorists may see more in the differences between these two novels (indeed, the novels have not been studied together before in my knowledge), I recognize the similarities that tailor them for a literary pairing. From a feminist perspective, these novels seem to cry out for the acknowledgment of the oppressed Irish women of the past that Bowen and O’Brien’s heroines represent. It seems not enough scholarly writing has discussed the conditions of Irish women living during the feminist abeyance period (1922—1969); although, such a scholarly study is only destined to reveal great insight into present gender and social structures in Ireland. Additionally, on an international level, Bowen and O’Brien’s novels laying bare the restrictions the patriarchal marriage superstructure assumes for any woman’s life, and the authors’ revelations of that superstructure’s effect on women is a first step in confrontation. Likewise, from the perspective of New Historicism, these novels provide the difference in context between Bowen’s era of Ireland’s war for independence and O’Brien’s era of post colonial nation building. Their comparison reveals that both history and the future are not always progressive and certainly not linear, but rather are highly interpretable, mutable, and transformable towards either positive or negative outcomes. In other words, history is altogether the work of subjective and constant revision, and the future is altogether unpredictable and changeable. Moreover, when history finally includes the full contexts of women’s lives such as Elizabeth Bowen, Edna O’Brien, and their characters, both history and the future will be much changed. And this is the present position I share with them.
Introduction

Elizabeth Bowen and Edna O’Brien entered the literary world from very different cultural places within what is now the Republic of Ireland. Bowen is known for chronicling the decline of the Anglo-Irish, big house Protestant culture in both *Bowen’s Court*, a non-fiction work based on her family’s genealogy, and her novel *The Last September*. O’Brien, oppositely, wrote her cultural memoir *Mother Ireland* and *The Country Girls Trilogy* from the perspective of her Catholic, working-class background. The differing perspectives of the authors affords an encompassing gender study of Ireland’s twentieth-century transition from the British common laws that supported the Protestant ruling-class to Ireland’s post-independence reformation dominated by Catholic nationalist beliefs. Together, the cultural differences at the heart of each woman’s work reveal the Irish woman’s struggle to adjust to the shift from one form of patriarchal rule to another. While religious and class differences place each author worlds apart in the same society, the similarities within their novels also unites their voices in a response to the heightened patriarchal movement of the post-independence period in Ireland.

Irish feminist Linda Connolly classifies the post-independence period between 1922 and 1969 as the abeyance period, a less active era between the first wave and second wave of Irish feminism (71). In *The Irish Women’s Movement: From*
*Revolution to Devolution*, Connolly documents three distinct phases of Irish feminism: the first phase, the suffragette wave of feminism (1860—1921), advanced education for women, began the married women’s right to property, and won the right to vote; the second phase, the post-independence abeyance period (1922—1969), gained the married women’s right to property (1957), urged the address of women’s employment rights, yet showed a decline in political gain and organized activism; and the third phase, the second wave of Irish feminism (1970—present), joined the international uprising for women’s equality and gained numerous achievements. Connolly strongly emphasizes that the abeyance period’s decline was not a total decline in activism, but rather a time period when “Inter-organizational dynamics were dominated by the persistent need to maintain cohesion in an environment hostile to feminism and the women’s movement” (75). Abeyance period activism slowed in response to a multiplicity of pressures after independence. First, the whole of Ireland felt the strain of initiating changes beyond their English colonizers’ previous rule. While both the women and men of Ireland concentrated on building a newly independent nation on a private level, on a public level the newly independent government sought to reinstate their long-oppressed Catholic heritage by formally melding Catholic beliefs into Ireland’s constitutions. The direct institutionalization of religious moral principles into government policies, in particular in the 1937 Constitution, afforded no separation of church and state, which consequently delivered women into a legalized state of patriarchal rule (66-68).
Connolly also maintains that alongside this political upheaval and reformation towards conservatism, the women’s movement struggled internally with both political and religious preferences. Connolly notes that the feminists of the first wave were largely comprised of middle-to-upper class Protestant unionists, while after independence there was an increase in the number of working-class, Catholic nationalists in the abeyance-period movement that followed (60). Connolly asserts that Irish women’s divided political sympathies frustrated unification and disenfranchised some organizations such as the Irish Countrywomen’s Association (ICA) and the Irish Housewife’s Association (IHA); such organizations furthermore formed “a parallel network of women’s groups, mainly engaged in production and social services, mobiliz[ing] in this period, which is a neglected aspect of the history” (58-59, 73-83). In summation, the effort to build a New Ireland and the divided political and religious affinities of Irish women compromised a centralized organization for the women’s movement after independence, creating a period of feminist abeyance.

Along these lines, it’s important to notice the timeliness of the novels in this study. Bowen’s *The Last September* (1929) begins the abeyance period and O’Brien’s *The Country Girls Trilogy* (1960, 1962, 1964) ends it. By looking to these novels, an understanding of Ireland’s transformation from a colony to an independent nation can be understood as a gendered and classed study of a nation as well. More so, a woman’s reaction to the cultural, social, religious, and political turmoil during the period can be retrieved. Specifically, both authors write semi-autobiographical novels that reveal the ways an institutionalized patriarchal force can pose limitations on the
cultural dynamics of courtship and marriage for women. Both authors’ realist novels represent tragic bildungsroman that follow their heroines into endings not personally chosen but socially designed; moreover, those designs are not formed around individual freedoms and choices in partnering, but rather around devastating cultural restraints.

Curiously enough, Bowen’s message about women in *The Last September* is often overshadowed by reviewers captivated with the novel’s historical and political attributes, while O’Brien’s *The Country Girls Trilogy* is oppositely criticized for not including a historical and political plotline. However, I argue here that the women’s stories in both novels are historical representations of women’s issues, and in light of the tendency for historians to omit or exclude a woman’s story from *his-story*, women’s literature can be referenced in part as a salvageable archive. The semi-autobiographical status of Bowen’s *The Last September* and O’Brien’s *The Country Girls Trilogy* further reveals that these novels register the adaptations women can make under a patriarchal marriage ideology.

Bowen wrote her bildungsroman on the cusp of Ireland’s independence; she published *The Last September* in 1929, eight years after Ireland gained dominion status for the Southern counties from England at the end of 1921. Her novel, however, is a retrospective account taking place in 1920, during Ireland’s fight for independence in the Anglo-Irish War. The war brought English soldiers to the Southern counties—soldiers who, from an imperial perspective, were there first to protect English colonial interests, and secondly, to protect the Protestant, Anglo-Irish citizens of Ireland who
were besieged by the violent revolutionary efforts of Sinn Fein. During the war, Bowen lived intermittently near Dublin in her family’s big house, Bowen’s Court, where she spent her summers, and alternately in Italy and London, where she attended a boarding school at Downe House, Kent, and later, spent two terms studying art at the Central School of Arts and Crafts (Craig 9, 51). The main character in *The Last September*, Lois Farquar, shares the same social position as Bowen; she too lives in a big house, the fictitious *Danielstown*, and contemplates art school abroad. Lois is clearly modeled on a younger Bowen, and the critics show that many of the author’s qualities and circumstances are the same. Patricia Craig discloses that as an adolescent, Bowen fell in love with an English soldier stationed in Ireland, just before Ireland’s independence, which is the main plotline of the novel. Additionally, matching Lois’ situation, the judgment of an aunt put an end to Bowen’s romance (Craig 47-48). Maud Ellmann regards Bowen’s engagement to Lieutenant John Anderson as “an episode memorialized in Lois’ short-lived engagement to a British subaltern [soldier] in *The Last September*” (xii, 30).

Although the author doesn’t affiliate herself with the women’s movement and is hesitant to discuss personal accounts (she leaves her brief engagement to Anderson unaddressed in *Bowen’s Court*), Bowen does write about the relationship between an author and her characters in her 1948 essay “Why Do I Write”:

> You make a society each time you write a story. In fact, you are in closer relation to the characters in the story than you will ever be to anyone in real life. It is this ideal relationship of intimacy and power which is to fascinate those who read. Fascinate, and delude. They expect this capacity for relationship to be extended outside the written page, to them. To, as they put it, to society as a whole. (Bourke 5.1096)
Bowen implies her work has influence and power in society, and clearly, her publishing success meant her stories reached a broad audience; yet, absent from her schema is the idea that society has an influence on her work as well, as both her biography and her novel’s plot suggest. A 1920’s, Anglo-Irish society provides a broad field of contexts for Bowen’s character Lois. Lois may enjoy some of the privileges that come with an Ascendancy status, but this same status designs her choices and simultaneously constrains her. Even though Lois sometimes thinks “I must marry Gerald” (her British suitor), her Aunt Myra insists, “Oh, naturally we should never consider a marriage like that for Lois!” (Bowen LS 125, 179). Aunt Myra can’t allow Lois to marry Gerald in part because as an English soldier he is a colonizing outsider, but more blatantly because he has no money (Bowen LS 180). By reducing the matter to economic terms, Aunt Myra is negotiating a price for Lois that Gerald simply cannot afford as far as she is concerned. Underlying Aunt Myra’s negotiation however, are the foundational social dynamics that regulate Lois’s dilemma.

If Lois is to marry within her culture and station as Aunt Myra desires, she is left with very few prospective suitors. In the 1920’s, the once affluent and ruling Anglo-Irish, Big house community was a dwindling minority population in Ireland. Historian and scholar Elizabeth Grubgeld finds a conglomeration of catastrophes behind the decline of the Anglo-Irish, including emigration during the famine of the 1840’s and the loss of heirs to World War I (xx). Grubgeld quotes Dennis Kennedy’s 1980 study: “The census of 1911 and that of 1926 indicate a 33.5 percent decline in
the Protestant population of the 26 counties” (xx). Grubgeld furthermore describes a “Protestant exodus” from Ireland initiated by “land reform and nationalist agitation” after independence that continued on into the 1940’s and 50’s (xx). Lois’ prospects for marriage were further limited by the Anglo-Irish culture’s adherence to an economic, religious, and social exclusivity, which at one time preserved them as colonizers, but which later grew into an ethics of Anglo-Irish tradition that resides somewhere between the English colonizer’s and the native Irish. Aunt Myra clings to the foundations of her Ascendancy upbringing, and Lois faces the knowledge that she may only have one chance to marry. Additionally, compounding this one chance is the patriarchal pressure facilitated by Ireland’s marriage laws as defined by pre-independence, British common law. Lois would be well informed of the implications Mary Cullen shows were already in place before independence: “in Ireland, when a woman married her legal identity merged into that of her husband. Her property, whether earned or inherited, passed under his control to dispose of as he pleased and the law gave him full authority over her and their children” (16). This law would not be changed until The Married Women’s Status Act passed much later in 1957 (Connolly 238). Unless they wished to risk everything they held dear, divorce was nearly an impossible option for women in Ireland under English common law before Ireland’s independence.

In *The Last September*, Bowen portrays the dynamics of Anglo-Irish courtship and marriage before the post-independence constitutional reformations began. Thereafter, the limitations both Bowen and her character Lois experienced would
progressively tighten for those in the feminist abeyance period that followed independence. If divorce was nearly impossible for women under British common law, divorce became illegal for women after the Dáil motion of 1925, which was further defined in Ireland’s 1937 Constitution, Article 41.3.2. Divorce was not legalized again until after the Family Law Act of 1996 according to Connolly and Tina O’Toole (96). O’Brien’s Catholic, working-class heroines, just a couple of decades after Bowen, would especially show a reaction to Ireland’s increasingly restrictive social practices. Although O’Brien wrote *The Country Girls Trilogy* in the 1960’s at the end of the abeyance period, the chronicle of her heroines’ lives takes place in the 1940s and 50s, an era strongly impacted by the sanctions of the 1937 constitution. O’Brien, like Bowen before her, thus offered a tragic retrospection of the decades just prior to her work’s publishing dates (the 1960s). O’Brien’s *Trilogy* dared to bring women’s issues out of the blanketed neglect of secrecy so that reparations could find a beginning in the later era of second wave feminism.

Looking back on her writing of the *Trilogy* in her *New York Times* essay of 1985, “Why Irish Heroines Don’t Have to Be Good Anymore,” O’Brien maps a pattern she finds for heroines in Ireland’s literary history. O’Brien notes the strength of Irish heroines characterized in the late 18th and early 19th century poetry written before the 1840’s potato famine, but then notes a striking contrast in 19th century novels following the famine. She describes the late 19th century romantic convention of the Irish heroine: “A plethora of such heroines with hazel eyes, auburn hair, all either ruined or reaching the brink and rescued by a man,” and as epitomized by the
“novel ‘The Collegians’ (1829) by Gerald Griffin” (O’Brien “Why”). Subsequent to the 19th century conventional heroine, O’Brien offers two examples of an unconventional Irish heroine that emerged out of the turn-of-the-20th-century revival period shortly before Ireland’s independence: the brazenly patriotic Maude Gonne commemorated in William Butler Yeats’ poetry, and the scandalous Pegeen Mike of J. M. Synge's "Playboy of the Western World.” O’Brien marks the literary fluctuation between portrayals of a vulnerable and typified heroine, and a strong, even dangerously independent heroine, which she sees as a repeating pattern characteristic in Irish literature (O’Brien “Why”). O’Brien’s pattern, however, makes the implication that the characterization of the Irish woman returned once again to vulnerability in the abeyance period after independence.

Consequently, she chose both types of heroines to showcase in *The Country Girls Trilogy* during her writing process in the 1960’s:

I decided to have two, one who would conform to both my own and my country's view of what an Irish woman should be and one who would undermine every piece of protocol and religion and hypocrisy that there was. As well as that, their rather meager lives would be made bearable by the company of each other. (O’Brien “Why”)

O’Brien seems to offer half of her conscience to her more reserved character Kate Brady, and the other half of herself to her willful and independent character Baba Brennan. With this in mind, O’Brien reasons, “Baba came to me partly through an impatience with my own character [Kate] and partly in acknowledgment of that long line of daring and invincible heroines” (“Why”). In their juxtaposition, her choice to include both types of heroines first illuminates the strengths and weaknesses of both
characterizations, and secondly, suggests their co-dependence. O’Brien’s feelings of dual, and even conflicting, identities may in part be indicative of a transitional, 1960s historical period for women in Ireland.

O’Brien, like Bowen before her, also wrote on the cusp of a new era, one that would move Ireland from post-independence towards modernization and the second wave of feminism. Yet, while writing from her intermediary position in the 1960s, she also felt tethered to the more traditional, post-independence era she uses as the setting for her novels, the 1940s and 50s. O’Brien admits “The novel is autobiographical insofar I was born and bred in the west of Ireland, educated at a convent, and was full of romantic yearnings, coupled with a sense of outrage,” although the details of the plot are promoted as fictitious (Trapido). The dual bildungsromans of O’Brien’s Kate and Baba relate all of the personal events that were normally kept secret during the height of the abeyance period. From being expelled by a Catholic convent boarding school, to experiencing sex for the first time outside of marriage, to marital separation, to adultery, to trying to induce a homeopathic abortion, O’Brien holds nothing back from the kind of disclosure her work intends.

The country’s broader Catholic sensibilities, however, found the content of the three novels unspeakable, let alone writeable. All three books were subject to the Irish laws of the 1889 Indecent Advertisements Act and the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act, which when combined, allowed the ban on any work, literature or otherwise, that appeared indecent, or encouraged the use of contraception (Connelly 5.321). The ban on contraception itself was written into an amendment of the
Constitution of Ireland as the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1935 (Connelly 5.322). After her first book of the trilogy *The Country Girls* was banned, Edna O’Brien found herself protesting in defense of her statements and her characters by attempting to smuggle her book back into Ireland (Carlson 4.1051).

The widely reported account of the ban on *The Country Girls*, the first installment of the *Trilogy* published in 1960, shows how Ireland’s censorship laws had dramatic consequences for O’Brien’s personal life, in particular for the relationship she had with her mother, Dilly O’Brien, and her hometown community, Twamgraney in County Clare. Sources agree that O’Brien moved with her husband, Carlo Gébler, to London where she felt freer to write her controversial first novel and that although the novel received both British and American acclaim, a majority of Ireland found the book most shocking and nearly pornographic. Correspondingly, her hometown Twamgraney had the most demonstrative reaction to their native author’s expression: a parish priest burned the book on holy grounds. The clearest description of the events is recounted in a CBS radio interview with O’Brien, which is referenced in *The Irish Times*:

Speaking of the reception of *The Country Girls*, [O’Brien] said: "Three copies of the book. . .infiltrated the village. The parish priest rounded them up, plus their owners, and plus some other people, and they burned these three copies in the garden or grounds of the church, and my mother reported to me two vital factors: that several of the women fainted and that the opinion was that I should be kicked naked through the town. I love the word naked, when the whole of chastity is at stake." (O’Brien qtd. in “Did the *Country Girls* Go Up in Flames”)

Her mother shared her community’s disappointment and condemnations, which while it didn’t end their relationship, greatly strained it. Leslie Garis in the *New York Times*
Breeden reports “After her mother died, Ms. O’Brien said, she found her book wrapped in a
sheet in an outhouse. Her mother had ‘gone through it with black ink, the ink of Hades
as I called it, and crossed, erased, any word that offended her. I both wept and
screamed’” (O’Brien qtd. in Garis). The matter may have played a part in O’Brien’s
decision never to live in Ireland again; however, O’Brien still maintained a deep
affinity for her home country and continued to visit, which included making the effort
to smuggle her book back across the border for what she saw as the sake of Irish
readers. O’Brien’s heartfelt decision to live in self-imposed exile is reminiscent of the
lives of other great Irish writers like Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce,
and Samuel Beckett. Speaking about the forces that seem to influence such choices,
O’Brien concludes, “Ignorance and darkness and bigotry only lead to psychic
sickness” (Carlson 4.1051). O’Brien’s battle with censorship proved to be long-lived
as Barbara Trapido observes in The Independent, “Because of the graphic sexual
content of the story, the whole trilogy, and six of the author's subsequent works, were
banned in Ireland” over the years.

By all accounts, O’Brien’s characters Kate and Baba were not living up to the
moral standards of Ireland at the time the Trilogy was published. The issues Kate and
Baba raised in their bildungsromans sorely exasperated a controversy not easily
remedied or discussed. Ireland had managed the laws concerning women’s rights
during the abeyance period; marriage, divorce, and contraception statutes and
definitions were neatly bundled inside the Constitution and its amendments, the latter
two entirely condemned, and yet, O’Brien’s semi-autobiographical, realist novel
denied the feasibility of those practices in everyday life. Whereas Bowen’s character Lois finds herself with relatively few choices, O’Brien’s abeyance period characters Kate and Baba contend with an enforced patriarchal idealism they cannot practically fulfill or keep from breeching. Differing social classes and the renaissance of Catholic culture in response to the revolutionary spirit after independence decides the degree of difference between Bowen’s novel and O’Brien’s. Whereas Bowen’s colonial Lois has to live up to the idealism of her Aunt Myra, O’Brien’s Kate and Baba are expected to live up to the iconography that the worship of Mary held in place for them under the post-colonial, Irish, Roman-Catholic patriarchy.

Corresponding to the pattern O’Brien suggests alternates between the vulnerable and the independent heroines represented in Irish literary history, the Catholic women of Ireland are offered the conflicting icons of the Virgin Mary and the pagan Mother Ireland as part of their social inheritance. As much as the cult of the Virgin Mary anticipates an Irish femininity gartered by chastity, piousness, and the immaculate conception, so too does Mother Ireland, according to O’Brien’s book of the same name, anticipate the opposite: “Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot” for whom England “set down the particulars of her rape” (MI 1, 12). Lisa Colletta and Maureen O’Connor point out the conspicuous binary in O’Brien’s work: “O’Brien’s articulation of the problems of the female postcolonial subject begins in the context of the family. Taught by mothers to submit to men and warned by the church to remain chaste, O’Brien’s women soon find themselves rejected by lovers and humiliated by husbands” either way (9). In
“Mapping Out a Landscape of Female Suffering: Edna O’Brien’s Demythologizing Novels,” Eileen Morgan recognizes O’Brien’s repeated return to the tensions between the binary representations of femininity as a “conscious demythologizing project,” which is most particularly evident in The Country Girl’s Trilogy and her later novels, House of Splendid Isolation (1994) and Down by the River (1997).

Part of what separates Bowen’s novel from O’Brien’s is that as Protestants, Bowen and her character Lois did not contend with the degree of social duality that O’Brien and her characters developed from conflicting influences on femininity, which O’Brien later felt she had to expose. In joining Bowen’s The Last September and O’Brien’s The Country Girl’s Trilogy, it is this difference, in part, distinguishes between two patriarchal social orders and further allows the study to be brought down to the very practical level of both Protestant and Catholic women’s lives. Combining the works in a literary pairing affords a study of the transition from the Protestant, British common law patriarchy to the Catholic patriarchy that followed independence. The tensions between these hierarchal orders and the authors’ characters relate the interplay between marriage ideologies and the individual. On a larger scale, Ireland’s institution of marriage from a literary-minded perspective designs a specific marriage plot for women’s lives, which culminates in a kind of normative marriage narrative that prevails in society as an imposing superstructure. An individual’s adherence to, or challenge of, this enforced marriage narrative shapes both social standing and self-perception. Both Bowen and O’Brien offer stern criticism of a long-established
institution of marriage that has little regard for women’s identities either before or after Ireland’s independence.

In “The Improvisation of Power,” Stephen J. Greenblatt theorizes that lives can be written just like narratives; sometimes the narrative is a conception the individual perceives about their own life, and sometimes the narrative can be improvised on by an outside agent. Greenblatt maintains that the act of improvisation “is a characteristically (though not exclusively) Western mode, present to varying degrees in the classical and medieval world and greatly strengthened from the Renaissance onward” (50). In his study, Greenblatt notices a gendered difference between the narratives women and men have written for their lives:

It is, of course, characteristic of early modern culture that male submission to narrative is conceived as active, entailing the fashioning of one’s own story (albeit within the prevailing conventions), and female submission as passive, entailing the entrance into marriage […] most women must have entered marriage, like Desdamona, directly from paternal domination. (60)

Although Greenblatt writes about the Renaissance, he presents the concept as “less a manifestation of some atavistic ‘blackness’ specific to Othello than a manifestation of the colonial power of Christian doctrine over sexuality,” or in other words, as a power traceable to the present (63). While Greenblatt studies the act of improvisation between groups and individuals, he also touches on the unequal, gendered narrative structure used by the Western patriarchal institution of marriage to empower an ideology; under such an ideology, a woman may expect a certain storyline to her life, a narrative that suggests a paternally dominated childhood and courtship, and a patriarchal spouse-dominated marriage and maternity. In this way, a patriarchal
institution of marriage can become the main writer of a woman’s narrative, while a man’s narrative is ghost-written by a number of other cultural institutions. In Bowen’s *The Last September*, Lois is centered on whether or not she should marry her love-interest Gerald, while her male cousin of the same age, Lawrence, has no such expectations placed on him. In O’Brien’s *Trilogy*, characters Kate and Baba are overwhelmed with the feelings necessitating marriage and finding a suitable match.

So what does it mean for Bowen to present a heroine who is denied the possibility of marriage because an aunt regards her prospective husband to be too poor and from the wrong country? What does it mean for O’Brien to present two opposite heroines: one that is suspected of committing suicide over the breakdown of her marriage, and another who chooses an abusive marriage for the sake of material comforts? Bowen and O’Brien upset the patriarchal marriage narrative to show that the patriarchal marriage ideology is ineffective, marginalizing, and oppressive.

Through the semi-autobiographical, tragic bildungsromans of their characters, both authors issue a criticism of the ideology promoting a singular, patriarchal model for courtship and marriage. Indeed they criticize the ideology that does not allow for any choice outside the heterosexual marriage contract. In order to understand the personal pressure of the patriarchal marriage narrative, and the ways in which it can write the lives of its female subjects, the common structure of the institution of marriage has to be reduced to its base level; the patriarchal marriage contract has to be understood as a choice among other models of marriage agreements.
Careful to avoid ethnocentricities as much as possible, anthropologist William A. Haviland describes the base of the marriage structure as the formation of an agreement between parties over reciprocal sexual access; cultures around the world then apply customs and power structures to that base model. Interestingly, Haviland provides a model of marriage far different from the Western patriarchal model in order to make a comparison. As noted in the customs of the Nayar people of India, the marriage contract does not involve cohabitation, monogamy, or bond of longevity. A Nayar man gives a woman gifts three times a year in order to acquire sexual access, which may mean forming a relationship with the woman alongside other husbands and sometimes only in brevity (Haviland 212). Any marriage contract relies on an economics system at this fundamental level because the contract, in the very least, establishes sexuality as a commodity to be legally agreed on. Other familiar additions of economic trade include rings, dowries, and the rights to inheritance and affluence. In *Cultural Anthropology*, the Western patriarchal model dominant in Western European culture and the US is explained:

Having defined marriage in terms of sexual access, [...] The distinction between marriage and mating may be seen by looking, briefly, at practices in North American society, in which monogamy—the taking of a single spouse—is the only legally recognized form of marriage. Not only are other forms not legally sanctioned, but systems of inheritance, by which property and wealth are transferred from one generation to the next, are predicated upon the institution of monogamous marriage.” (Haviland 216-217)

Prominently, the link between the access to inheritable wealth and marriage has complicated and limited a woman’s legal status in Western societies including Ireland. The patriarchal institution of marriage expresses its power by equating legalized
unions as the means to intrinsic access to economics and representation in the legal system. This power continues to legitimate women’s subjectivity to the marriage narrative that the patriarchal institution of marriage writes for women’s lives.

The Western patriarchal design of the institution of marriage additionally presupposes a cultural normative that promotes marriage as ideal and compulsory, and that marriage thus follows a heterosexual model. Subsequently, the success of the unit to be mutually beneficial then falls under the sanctions of the patriarch, from which the woman hopes for benevolence rather than malevolence. O’Brien’s Baba, unfortunately, is an example of a woman who lives under the terms of the latter, malevolent model, when she endures an abusive relationship for the sake of retaining her status. Under the normative structure of the Western patriarchal marriage, a woman has few overt influences in shaping her outcome: she can abstain from marriage, or retain the choice of whether or not to marry a suitor, that is, if the choice is not taken out of her control by family members or other interested parties, as is the case of Bowen’s Lois. The patriarchal marriage narrative then glorifies the age of courtship for the woman and largely society, which promotes this one moment of choice for women as desirable. At this point, the societal glorification of the age of courtship crosses over into popular culture and literary ideology as a prominent structure of influence on society, raising the status of youths over the aged.

Both novels studied here center on their heroines’ choices, or lack of choices, about marriage. In The Last September, the upper-class, Anglo-Irish family of Lois (in particular her aunt Myra) encourages Lois to hold onto her choice strategically and
as long as possible; the instruction being that she should select a man wealthier and of the same culture to marry rather than the poor, English Gerald. In the Trilogy, Kate doesn’t know what to make of a failing marriage, and the feeling that she may have chosen wrong equates to failure and the eventual ending of her life. Baba, functioning from a different perspective, chooses wealth over love and forfeits her identity to an abusive patriarch. However, glorifying the age of courtship and limiting the choices of women in order to enforce a particular outcome is not the only cultural option.

Michel Foucault indeed explores the ancient Greek and Roman model of marriage in The History of Sexuality: Volume 3 towards the assertion that marriage hasn’t always been devised in the same way, or that the present system is not a “natural” system, but a manmade and constructed system. Foucault observes that marriage underwent an “evolution” in Greek society and later in Roman society (73). Marriage was at first a private agreement between individuals and then became public and institutionalized when the larger community and the legal system became involved in documenting the event. When marriage became public and politicized with the advent of the official marriage contract, Foucault suggests a kind of self-consciousness also emerged: “One seeks to make oneself as adequate as possible to one’s own status by means of a set of signs and marks pertaining to physical bearing, clothing and accommodations, gestures of generosity and munificence, spending behavior, and so on” (85). This heightened sense of matrimony’s importance empowers an institution of marriage to design a successful lifestyle, especially for women. If a woman does not in fact sign, or buy into, the marriage contract, she is
consequently marginalized by society, even if her revolt is as simple as not being able to acquire a suitor, a condition sometimes associated with spinsterhood and attributable with all of spinsterhood’s ignominious connotations; likewise, a heterosexual design for marriage is assumed to be compulsory, which further marginalizes a segment of the population.

In Ireland, marriage dynamics were especially strained since the beginning of the potato famine as Mary E. Daly documents in the *Encyclopedia of Irish History and Culture*:

The Irish population fell by almost half between 1841 and 1911, but in Northern Ireland the fall in population was reversed in 1891. In the Irish Free State the population continued to fall until 1961, because of a continuing high rate of emigration, which reached a twentieth-century peak during the 1950s when more than 400,000 people left the state. […] By 1911 the Irish marriage rate was the lowest in Europe; one adult in four never married, and although the marriage rate was higher in Northern Ireland, it was also exceptionally low by international standards. Irish couples married at a later age than elsewhere, too, […] This was attributed to sexual repression or other psychological pathologies, or to the power of the Catholic Church, but marriage statistics from Northern Ireland were not dramatically different. (663)

Daly explains that late marriages became dominant among Ireland’s majority agrarian society because individuals often had to wait for a transfer of property, an inheritance, or a dowry, which often were granted only after a parents’ death and may have been limited to the first-born sons and daughters. However, urban households, “were much the same,” according to Daly; parents in both economic settings often exercised, “an effective veto over their child's choice of partner” (663). For those whose circumstances did not provide them the means to marriage, alternatives had to be chosen: sometimes they found themselves remaining in their parents’ households until
the end of their lives, or they enlisted into the servitude of a more prosperous household or the Church rather than marry. Over a century of mass emigration ensured there was a lack of prospective marriage matches in Ireland, and patrilineal inheritance guaranteed a waiting period in the very least and may have meant very little control in selecting a marriage partner.

Specific to the abeyance period when Bowen and O’Brien were writing their novels, women experienced a hyper-manifested, patriarchal system of marriage, which was based in part on the incorporation of Catholic premises written into Ireland’s Constitution. A post-independence Ireland (after 1921) separated itself as much as possible from their Protestant, English colonizers in order to reinstate Catholicism and assert an independent nationhood. Although both Protestants and Catholics respect the same biblical doctrine designing a patriarchal family structure (see Ephesians 5:21-32), differences between the two religions were expressed during the forming of Ireland as an independent nation separate from England. The previous British rule was regarded as too liberal by the Catholic majority coming into power. Marjorie Howes, one of the editors of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions*, summarizes the historical events:

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Free State established censorship of films, books and magazines, outlawed contraception, established stricter regulations for dance halls, banned married women from a number of jobs and produced a constitution that prohibited divorce and designated the home and motherhood as a woman’s true place and mission in society. (4.924)

Howes writes about the constitution Eamon de Valera and the political party Fianna Fail wrote in 1937 in order to return Ireland to a Catholic conservatism.
Historian Richard Killeen observes that Eamon de Valera’s “vision” of returning Ireland to *Irishness* and autonomy was a vision that included a return to rural communities, the revival of Gaelic as the national language, and the reacquisition of Northern Ireland. However, de Valera’s reformations constituted a traditionalist era heavily influenced “by an intensely conservative Catholic Church” that began under the first government formed by William Cosgrave after independence and would remain strong until de Valera’s retirement in 1959 (66). Basil Chubb’s *The Politics of the Irish Constitution*, published by the Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, agrees:

In the ideal world of de Valera, the constitution of his country would have been unequivocally republican; it would have applied to the whole island; and it would have been Catholic and Gaelic. It would have also attempted to foster the rural, peasant population of a mythical Irish ‘golden age’ which sometimes he appeared to believe had actually existed. […] He consulted a number of senior clergy including the Papal Nuncio, (Paschal Robinson), and the Cardinal Archbishop of Armagh (Cardinal MacRory). The Pope himself was secretly shown a draft of the whole Constitution. (21-22, 28)

With the Catholic Church’s doctrine in the forefront of his mind during the drafting of his 1937 Constitution, de Valera significantly removed an important qualifying statement from Article 40.1 as noted by Yvonne Scannell; the rights of Irish citizens to “be held equal before the law” no longer included the words “without distinction of sex,” and without this “distinction” a married woman’s place in society was consigned legally, constitutionally, and largely spiritually to the domestic household (71).

Scannell holds up Article 41.2 as additional constitutional evidence:

1* In particular the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
2* The State shall therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. [Emphasis added.] (72)

The new “Emphasis added” to the 1937 Constitution formally mounted into law a political power erected against married women working outside the home and any organized feminist reaction (Scannell 72). This institutionalization of a patriarchal belief system continued on potently through the early 1970s with the additions of amendments that further disallowed women’s participation in jury duty and kept married women from running for political office (72). Mary Clancy holds that “by 1937, the Irish Free State was placed on a black list at Geneva for its conduct in respect of women workers” (68). Margaret Ward additionally marks the consequences:

During the fifty years from 1922 to 1972, the average Dáil [the parliament] contained only four women, three per cent of deputies. While women remained active on many other fronts, no woman politician followed [Countess Constance] Markievicz into cabinet office until the appointment of Máire Geoghegan-Quinn in 1979. (191)

Markievics entered the Cabinet shortly after first wave feminists won the right to vote, and the feat would not be accomplished again until the abeyance period was over and the second wave was well underway in 1979.

The consideration of de Valera’s repeal on women’s constitutional and political rights makes a feminist abeyance period understandable, although ironic for Ireland’s proclaimed constitutional democracy. Any feminist criticism would strain under the anticipation of a lengthy legal, and constitutional, battle over women’s rights during the abeyance period. In part, protest in Ireland would have to be demonstrated
from the margins, from the liminal spaces left to a woman’s identity, such as authorship, or as subsidized by organizations like the Irish Countrywomen’s Association (ICA) and the Irish Housewife’s Association (IHA). From a literary and social sphere, the dismissed courtship of Bowen’s character Lois and the failed marriages of O’Brien’s characters Kate and Baba directly communicate with de Valera’s constitutional consignment of women to domesticity and his prohibition on divorce. In a time period when popular consensus largely agreed with de Valera’s priorities on a spiritual level, Bowen in 1929 and O’Brien in the 1960s were making claims of opposition by revealing the tragic nature of their characters’ bildungsromans during such a restrictive era. Ireland’s patriarchal institution of marriage thus provides a significant part of the contextualization for Bowen and O’Brien’s marriage plots; and, their use of the Romance genre for social commentary is notable as a beginning entrance into the subversive elements of their respective fiction.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis offers a motivation that may be behind the use of a Romance genre under circumstances such as Ireland’s: “Romance as a mode may be historically activated: when middle-class women lose economic power in the transition from precapitalist economies and are dispossessed of certain functions, the romance script may be a compensatory social and narrative practice” (2). The Romance genre may evolve out of the desire to enact power in an otherwise disempowering era. What follows this concept in DuPlessis’ book Writing Beyond the Ending is a study of how twentieth-century women writers expand on the conventional marriage or death endings of nineteenth-century women writers, which is also
pertinent to Bowen and O’Brien’s novels. DuPlessis sees a nineteenth-century tendency for women writers to end female bildungsromans with either a marriage, as a celebration of successful conformity to social norms, or with a death, as a “betrayal by male authority and aggression” (4). Duplessis goes on to explain that female bildungsromans written later in the twentieth-century consciously avoided these limited endings:

When women as a social group question, and have the economic, political, and legal power to sustain and return to questions of marriage law, divorce, the ‘couverte’ status, and their access to vocation, then the relation of narrative middles to resolutions will destabilize culturally, and novelists will begin to ‘write beyond’ the romantic ending. (4)

What’s interesting in the context of Bowen and O’Brien’s novels is that in part, their novels fulfill both the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century patterns that DuPlessis describes. Responding to DuPlessis’ descriptions, Bowen and O’Briens’ novels would maintain a kind of hybridity between two centuries, which seems fitting considering the overt return to traditionalism in Ireland during the post-independence, abeyance period. Bowen and O’Brien present the nineteenth-century marriage or death endings upheld as choices during the nineteenth-century, but also yearn to “have the economic, political, and legal power to sustain and return to questions of marriage law, divorce, the ‘couverte’ status, and their access to vocation” that should be theirs in the twentieth-century (DuPlessis 4). While Bowen’s character Lois is denied the opportunity to fully protest her aunt’s mandate not to marry Gerald because Gerald’s death prematurely ends Lois’ conflict with her Aunt Myra over the matter of marriage, Lois also repeatedly protests her Aunt Myra’s resolution that she should instead
become an artist because it is an acceptable vocation for women, and further emigrates at the end of the novel. Likewise, while O’Brien’s character Kate is suspected of committing suicide (the event is not textually spelled out in the novel), and Baba’s resignation to a marriage without love is symbolically the death of her hope, both meeting DuPlessis’ nineteenth-century death ending, at the same time, O’Brien’s trilogy depicts a plethora of social issues that constitute public defiance in relationship to the Catholic Church, and the banning of her books underscores O’Brien’s questioning of the ideological powers of Ireland. Bowen and O’Brien may have grappled with a social structure during the Irish feminist abeyance period that was even more intent on writing a patriarchal narrative for women’s lives than was present in other Western patriarchal cultures during the same twentieth-century time period, which effected a hybrid stage of writing specific to Ireland’s Romance genre, a mixture of both the marriage or death endings of the nineteenth-century and the more provocative endings characteristic of the twentieth. Ireland’s pursuit of independence and separation from England may have constructed it; with more certainty, Ireland’s patriarchal institution of marriage and a constitution influenced by Catholicism compelled it.

Consequently, the gendered difference designed by a patriarchal Institution of Marriage finds a correlation in the literary canon; the difference between a woman’s interest in protesting the patriarchal marriage narrative and a man’s less-personal interest in taking up this recourse crosses over into the choices writers make about genres. The view that the Romance genre is a sentimentalized genre has been
superficially reflected in the criticisms representative of the literary canons of many countries. Decidedly, the writing of Bowen and O’Brien is viewed differently between the first three volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, edited by Seamus Deane, Andrew Carpenter, and Jonathan Williams, and *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions*, edited by Angela Bourke, Siobhán Kilfeather, Maria Luddy, Margaret Mac Curtain, Geraldine Meaney, Máirín Ni Dhonnchadha, Mary O’Dowd, and Clair Wills. If as DuPlessis points out, the Romance genre “may be historically activated,” then women would hold an interest in activating it, in discussing marriage, in revealing the inequalities, in revealing the tragedies as Bowen and O’Brien have done (2). More so, women would hold an interest in returning to the fundamental, social dynamics of marriage repeatedly until resolve seemed to be reachable. Yet, Ireland’s national anthology, divided by gender into separate volumes, does not register the importance of the Romance genre in the same ways between the gendered volumes.

The history of the publication of Ireland’s largest anthology to date expands the debate over the Romance genre and women’s authorship in general. According to news releases from both the University of Ulster and the National University of Ireland, Gallway, during the compilation of the original three volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (published in 1991), Seamus Deane and associate editors decidedly omitted a large portion of women writers from their selections. So many in fact that when an additional group of editors headed by Angela Bourke assembled to meet this oversight, they filled another two, oversized volumes with over
750 women writers that had been overlooked. *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions* was published a full eleven years later in 2002, and only after numerous protests by Irish women writers and their advocates. The original 3 volumes had included just 39 women writers within its pages. The *Great Irish Literary Canon War*, as some have termed the controversy over the anthology’s omissions, is one of the most notable, real-life literary dramas of the twentieth century which is still being waged intertextually today. Yet, the global community outside of Ireland may not have heard about the debate’s complexities, and are therefore missing the event’s significance.

The Field Day debate thrusts not just Ireland’s but all literary canons’ shortcomings out into the open range for feminist criticism, and clearly the oppression found canonized there cannot be obscured or relegated to simple oversight. Irish women, however, did not allow the *Anthology* the chance to acclimate in an atmosphere of complacency. Women writers and their advocates joined together and persisted until a representative group of editors completed the task of comprising the Irish women writers for the fourth and fifth volumes. However, the editors and publishers of the volumes still have not chosen to integrate the women’s writings into a unified anthology in subsequent printings; and, significant to this study, a selection of Bowen and O’Brien’s work is offered in both the original and latter volumes, making room for a further comparison of canonization while considering their novels.

Clearly, there is an entire multi-faceted gender component within Irish culture to consider through Bowen and O’Brien’s novels. From their past historical impact to
their contextualization in the present day literary canon, Bowen’s *The Last September* and O’Brien’s *The Country Girls Trilogy* continue to increase our understanding of the Irish woman’s story. Additionally, based on the kind of explication of these texts I conduct in the following pages, the capacity for these works to facilitate women’s empowerment by subverting the patriarchal marriage narrative will also persist.

* * *

Irish poet Eavan Boland, one of the women writers that protested the exclusion of women from the first three volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, sets the tone for the next chapters:

The Singers

The women who were singers in the West lived on an unforgiving coast. I want to ask was there ever one moment when all of it relented, when rain and ocean and their own sense of home were revealed to them as one and the same?

After which every day was still shaped by weather, but every night their mouths filled with Atlantic storms and clouded-over stars and exhausted birds.

And only when the danger was plain in the music could you know their true measure of rejoicing in finding a voice where they found a vision.

--Eavan Boland’s poem cited by her long-time friend, the first woman President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, in her inaugural address of 1990; later published *In a Time of Violence* in 1994.
Why, it may be asked, was Lois at her romantic age not more deeply wrought upon by the troubles round her? Partly, perhaps, out of natural self-defence; partly because she was still half awake; partly because disorder in any form obstructed her own development, therefore irked and bored her. The growing nation left cold the growing girl. Persons of her (and my) age, who had to surmount adolescence during the First World War, reacted against any excessive tax, any strain put or demand made upon feeling. To the core we were neither zealots nor rebels. “There’s been enough of that!” we felt. “Stop it: we want to live!” At the same time, the ambiance of death and danger, often of violence, seemed as elementally natural to this girl as dance music, the sweet pea in the garden, rain, or the rising moon or the setting sun. Lois’s tragedy was not that Gerald should die (what, indeed, was she to do with his life and hers?) but that he should die knowing she could not love him. Her tragedy was not Danielstown’s burning—which indeed, though violently, serve to free her. She was niece only, not the child, of that house.

I am the daughter of the house from which Danielstown was drawn. In real life the house survived; it is our new home. But so often, during the Troubled Times, did I in my agonized mind’s eye see it burn that that terrible final page of The Last September is for me, also, something I have lived through. Yes, the scene of the novel is real, and the month has its place in history. Lois derives from, but is not, myself at nineteen. All the rest of the characters are imaginary, and the story, though it could have been true, is not.

--Elizabeth Bowen: The conclusion to the preface the author added to the 1952 edition of The Last September, x-xi.

In the preface Bowen added to the 1952 edition of The Last September, one of the author’s circumstances changed over time. Unfortunately, Bowen was the last heir to reside at Bowen’s Court, the home of her ancestors since 1775 (BC 161). After Bowen’s lengthy financial battle to keep the Big house from demise, a neighbor purchased and then demolished it in 1959 (BC 459).

The preface nevertheless records the author’s views as she turns her voice
Breeden  31
towards the controversies that accumulated around the novel after its first publication in 1929. According to the preface, her protagonist Lois Farquar’s story is based partly on her own biography, clearing up any misconceptions, and notably, Bowen defines Lois’s tragedy as not being fully realized in her lover Gerald’s death as much as it was heightened by the knowledge that “he should die knowing she could not love him.” (xi). Bowen’s discernment in the preface raises the implications of Gerald’s death and compounds Lois’s tragedy beyond the loss of Gerald to the war. Not only does Gerald die, but he dies just after Aunt Myra warns him away from a relationship with Lois on the basis of his class and nationality. Aunt Myra makes the circumstances surrounding Gerald’s death atrocious and adds further injury to Lois’s grief. Moreover, Gerald’s untimely death cancels any chance Lois has to fully challenge her Aunt Myra’s culturally influenced objections and pushes Lois further towards emigration, which entails both the positive and negative aspects of self-reliance and exile. It is this more complicated conflict that Bowen points out in her preface and that renders the climax of her novel. In the preface, Bowen shifts the interpretation of The Last September away from the wholly historical novel towards Lois’s own tragic and gendered bildungsroman.

The novel’s connection to Ireland’s war for independence and the division between factions and countries is only a part of The Last September story, although the most explicated among traditionally historical-minded critics. Bowen also reveals the effects cultural dynamics and nationalistic fervor have on gender and gendering, in particular Lois’s socialization, and through Lois, the Anglo-Irish woman. What is
often overshadowed by the enticement of the historical intrigue in *The Last September* is the female identity struggle within such an encompassing series of events and a formidable 1920’s Anglo-Irish patriarchy. Although the imperial conflict in *The Last September* is readily apparent, it is ultimately the gendered perspective of Lois that drives Bowen’s ambition.

Although specific circumstances have been changed for Lois, Bowen endeavored to construct a fiction that greatly resembled the reality she knew to be her own coming-of-age experience. Indeed, at the age of nineteen, Bowen’s own Aunt Edie, who she lived with as an adolescent after her mother’s death, disavowed her engagement with English Lieutenant John Anderson and the author sadly returned the engagement ring by mail (Glendinning 48). Her memory of the affair was still on her mind close to fifteen years later when she was composing the novel. Moreover, Bowen’s subsequent marriage to Alan Cameron at the age of twenty-three (ironically also a relationship disliked by her Aunt Edie) may have not been a complete consolation for the earlier love lost, but more of a friendship for the author (Glendinning 56). Alan Cameron suffered lifelong from being gassed during his service in World War I, and Bowen later found romance outside the marriage. Biographer Patricia Craig links Bowen romantically to her Wadham College friend, Humphrey House, and additionally, finds Bowen’s love interest Goronwy Rees turning up in her novel “*The Death of the Heart*, [1938] in the character Eddie” (67, 83). Bowen’s marriage with Cameron, however, remained steadfast until his death in 1952, the same year she added her preface to *The Last September*. Given that her
marriage was arranged around friendship and outside affairs, Bowen’s earlier engagement to English Lieutenant John Anderson may have seemed a shining moment in an age of innocence for Bowen that was tragically foiled by her aunt. Writing a retrospective account of that moment must have appealed to Bowen’s sense of romantic nostalgia because *The Last September* is the only work she chose to write with a retrospective timeframe and one of only two novels taking place entirely in Ireland.

Bowen wrote *The Last September* while away at Oxford and in the anticipation of her ailing father’s death, which may have encouraged a second sense of nostalgia for her life at Bowen’s Court. Bowen’s plot poised itself as a way to connect with her Anglo-Irish family roots, and in turn, a chance to preserve a part of her declining culture, the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, and in particular, the chance to preserve an Anglo-Irish woman’s story. However, with the inclusion of her Anglo-Irish culture, another level of complexity emerged. While *The Last September* may have held a sentimental place for Bowen, on a national level, the novel additionally set up a character conflict that paralleled the Anglo-Irish struggle during Ireland’s battle for independence in the 1920’s. Joining the personal and the national in one endeavor, *The Last September* presents a clear wartime parallel in the plot: Lois is both tempted and perplexed by the idea of marrying the English soldier Gerald, while her Aunt Myra finds him plainly unsuitable; and while Gerald’s death ends the matter, it propels Lois towards independence; along similar, but political lines, the Anglo-Irish were both attracted and repelled by the security English rule seemed to promise, while
loyalty to their fellow Irish countrymen made the political match seem unsuitable. Thus the ties between the national level and the individual level clearly correspond in the novel.

This nationalistic narrative is a main reason why critics often value the novel’s political parallel over Lois’s story of gender and identity. For example, Jed Esty attributes Lois with one kind of historical feat: “Lois can be read as a brilliantly condensed figure for the broader postcolonial process: the widening gap between an imperial and enlightenment narrative of progress and an actual colonial history of broken or uneven development, of civilization splintering into incommensurable cultures” (272). However, Bowen relates a much more private account of Lois’s life, and without Lois’s perspective on her private world, the novel may have suffered instability from a grandiose sense of postcolonial politics. Furthermore, without Lois’s contextualization of her era, the gendered narrative of the Anglo-Irish woman may have vanished with the Ascendancy class; a vital record of women’s history specific to a dying culture may have disappeared. Although the aim of this thesis is to present the less studied gender and bildungsroman side of *The Last September* text here, the historical/political side to the novel certainly affects the novel’s reception both past and present.

In 1952, twenty-three years after *The Last September*’s first publication, the usually private author felt compelled to answer the criticism that the novel could have taken a more politicized stand than what the author experienced. After reading the book in 1937, her friend and editor of the politically progressive Irish literary
periodical *The Bell*, Sean O’Faolain, expressed his desire that she “write about a Danielstown House ‘that was at least aware of the Ireland outside…that, perhaps, regretted the division enough to admit it was there’. He would love, he said, a book revealing the life of the Ascendancy ‘now,’” suggesting a contemporary and politically proactive narration and novel rather than the ambivalent and retrospective romance Bowen wrote (O’Faolain qtd in Glendinning 150). Critics wondered why Bowen chose not to write a historical novel more engaged with the conflict of the Troubles—Ireland’s rise to independence no less, for the Naylor’s of Danielstown maintain their inaction for the course of the book. Bowen seems prompted to both ask and answer this criticism directly in the conclusion of her 1952 preface:

> Why, it may be asked, was Lois at her romantic age not more deeply wrought upon by the troubles round her? Partly, perhaps, out of natural self-defence; partly because she was still half awake; partly because disorder in any form obstructed her own development, therefore irked and bored her. The growing nation left cold the growing girl. (x).

The author’s interest here is squarely focused on Lois’s awareness and the creation of a bildungsroman so close to her own life, an interest counter to that of a majority of her critics. Esty suggests that Bowen’s novel was often made “vulnerable to readings that place her, with her characters, inside the bubble of Anglo-Irish privilege and willed innocence” (260). John Atkins includes a more brash description of *The Last September*: “The life described is that of the provincial aristocracy, snobbish and unaware: large facades, mounting lawns, surrounding plantations and a chauffeur. The inmates and their guests have usually traveled in Europe, or intend to, though it has done little to fracture their Irish permeability,” (66). Atkins, however, makes this
observation even though the chauffer is only visiting Danielstowne, and Lois drives
the carriage herself for Mr. Montmorency in one memorable scene (TLS 61). The
point being that the Naylor’s social life is not nearly as impersonal as the critic relates.
Nevertheless, Atkins hits on part of the atmosphere that Bowen intentionally captures
in her novel: an atmosphere doubly informed by the awareness of an Anglo-Irish
adolescent growing to adulthood and her elder’s perspective on an Anglo-Irish culture
held in place like “inmates” between two warring factions (Atkins 66). The war is
going on just outside their door, but Lois is still busy growing up, and the Naylor’s,
and the families of the Ascendancy like the Naylor’s who were a dwindling minority,
had little chance in affecting the course of the war and so tried to maintain what they
had known to be their way of life since the Cromwell Protestant land seizures in the
1650’s. Bowen’s choice to present Lois’s story from a perspective close to the
Ascendancy she herself experienced, without interjecting an outright cultural
confrontation on the grounds of Danielstown, keeps The Last September from
fabricating or designing an unreal conflict. Instead, with the use of subtle narration
and shrewd conversations, Bowen reflects the underlying tensions that would have
been met with a similar caution by Anglo-Irish families such as the Naylor’s.

Such criticism of the novel, however, is indicative of an even deeper social rift
still present in the Irish literary canon today. Bowen’s cultural heritage as an Anglo-
Irish woman carried over into further criticism of her authorship. A school of critics
would go beyond O’Faolain’s request for a different kind of novel and question the
Anglo-Irish contribution to the Irish literary canon at all. Field Day Anthology Editor
Luke Gibbons documents Daniel Corkery’s 1931 practice of an “exclusivist approach,” an approach which may have sprung from the desire to establish a national literature for Ireland, but rather worked to exclude a whole section of Anglo-Irish writers (2.1008). This approach has remained broadly influential and grew to especially influence Bowen’s placement in the Irish literary canon throughout her career because she was not just Anglo-Irish but also an Anglo-Irish woman. In hindsight, exclusionary practices like that of Corkery’s may have followed Bowen into her present day status in the same 1991, male-edited volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* that Gibbons writes his introduction for.

Even though Bowen was one of the few 39 women writers selected for the male-edited volumes, and historically relevant scenes from *The Last September* are included, she is noticeably held in a different regard than her male contemporaries in both page length and content in an introduction to “Irish Gothic and After” written by *Field Day* Editor W.J. Mc Cormack (2.831-854). In the introduction where Bowen joins male authors such as Bram Stoker, John Millington Synge, Oscar Wilde, and W.B. Yeats, Mc Cormack noticeably reduces Bowen’s segment to half the length of the standard three pages given to the other authors, which is further cut down in length when her segment is won over in its latter half by text focusing solely on Yeats’ poem “Parnell’s Funeral” (Mc Cormack 2.853-854). One reason Mc Cormack may have placed Yeats’ poem so conspicuously is that, in his own words from Bowen’s segment, it “casts a light on the question of an inherent guilt in the writer” (2.854). McCormack shapes the content about Bowen in the introduction towards an implied
sense of political guilt rather than towards her literature; he writes:

The question of guilt nevertheless requires some further consideration, even in connection with a story such as [Bowen’s] ‘The Happy Autumn Fields’, where a character’s personal responsibility is scarcely an issue, and where the ghostly element effectively is transposed into wholly structural terms. (2.853)

Bowen is held accountable for a kind of preconceived guilt, while her literature receives a mere honorable mention in proportion.

Bowen’s inclusion in the male-edited volumes of *The Field Day Anthology* additionally may have hindered her inclusion in the latter 2002, women-edited volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions* because as editor Gerardine Meaney explains in Volume 5 of the women’s Field Day,

The canonical women writers of this period, such as Somerville and Ross, Elizabeth Bowen, Kate O’Brien and Mary Lavin, are included in the corresponding sections of [the male-edited] Volumes II and III of this anthology. […] Given the volume of women’s writing in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, this survey [the women’s volumes IV and V] cannot be comprehensive or even fully representative of its diversity. (5.976).

Meaney’s disclaimer seems to justify choosing a limited selection for representing Somerville and Ross, Elizabeth Bowen, Kate O’Brien and Mary Lavin in the women-edited volumes on the pretext that they have already been included in the male-edited volumes; and yet, the coverage Bowen receives in the male-edited volumes hardly justifies this decision.iii Bowen’s own awareness of the powers pulling on her from the beginning must have figured into her forethoughts about *The Last September*. She must have foreseen that potentially lines would be drawn on all sides of an Anglo-Irish woman attempting to partner with a member of the colonizers. In *Elizabeth Bowen*
Remembered, Hubert Butler asserts,

In Elizabeth’s day the whole weight of Ireland’s long resentment against England fell upon the Anglo-Irish, the very people who, at different periods, and in different places, had eagerly awaited this mingling and worked for it. Since she was twenty she had constantly thought of the burning of Bowen’s Court. (15-16)

However, Bowen was reluctant to affiliate herself with a political cause and reticent to join the feminist movement even later in life when feminists expressed interest in her authorship, showing an ambivalence on the part of the author not uncharacteristic of the Anglo-Irish she portrays in her novel. Bowen comes closest to addressing the politics of nationalism when she pertinently writes in a *New York Times Book Review* titled “Disloyalties” that she reprinted in *Afterthoughts*, “Restrictive loyalties, with their danger, vary in their temptation to the writer according to his personal cast or temperament. The division of novelists into types is misleading;” (66). And, in *The Irish Times* as quoted by John Boland:

She herself insisted in a 1942 interview published in [O’Faolain’s] *The Bell*: ‘I regard myself as an Irish novelist. As long as I can remember I’ve been extremely conscious of being Irish . . . All my life I’ve been going backwards and forwards between Ireland and England and the Continent but that has never robbed me of any feeling of my nationality. (68)

Nevertheless, the issue of nationality continues to need defense for Bowen. Bowen is often considered an English writer, and Heather Bryant Jordan makes the literary point that “Those writers who found their loyalties confused and their allegiances tangled, such as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and later Elizabeth Bowen, went into ‘exile,’” (9). James Joyce and Edna O’Brien could certainly also be included in Jordan’s list of writers who felt strongly enough to leave Ireland, and it may be convenient for Bowen to share emigration with her character Lois; however,
Bowen might be retracted because she always, and unquestionably, considered Bowen’s Court and Ireland her home.⁴ Bowen’s own exclamation in her 1952 preface “To the core we were neither zealots nor rebels. ‘There’s been enough of that!’ we felt. ‘Stop it: we want to live!’” is understood more exactly when considering the political scrutiny *The Last September* received and the bias that sometimes mounts against her and her Anglo-Irish culture (LS xi). The considerable political deliberation that *The Last September* mustered after publication seems to explain the historical focus that developed around the novel and consistently prevailed over the other half of Bowen’s intended story, a story of Lois’s bildungsroman and gender. However it is hard to avoid Bowen’s criticism of the Anglo-Irish 1920’s outlook on gender and marriage when Lois’s tragedy is tragic precisely because she is first socialized to expect marriage as the only conclusion to her life, and then secondly, because she is expected to let her family make the final choices about her relationships, and in the end, because she has no recourse except emigration to resolve the matter. This is why, in her 1952 preface, Bowen distinguishes between the initial historical tragedy of Gerald’s death and the whole tragedy she wants to relate: Lois’s internment under patriarchal mandate, and the refusal that costs the heroine her membership in Anglo-Irish society with her emigration.

Had Bowen estimated to the full extent how much a historical criticism would follow her book before hand, during the writing process; she may not have been able to write *The Last September* in quite the same way--under such political pressure.⁵ Instead, Bowen was able to focus on the pressures of marriage concerning a young
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girl, very much like herself, and hold out a woman’s account of the Anglo-Irish
marriage narrative during the 1920’s. Indeed, Bowen sets up a confrontation between
the expectations of the Anglo-Irish marriage narrative and the individual woman when
she positions Lois against the expectations of her Aunt Myra. Aunt Myra expects Lois
to choose marriage to an Anglo-Irish husband, to remain a loyalist to her homeland
Ireland, and to become a mother to Ascendancy-class children, or at least attend art
school until she does. Lois, however, will fulfill none of these obligations in the book.
Both Lois’s initial choice in partners and her subsequent act of emigration refuses the
loyalties and norms the Anglo-Irish marriage narrative has written for her and shows
the marriage expectations of her cultural system to be dysfunctional. In upsetting the
natural order of the Anglo-Irish marriage narrative with Lois’s experience, Bowen
conversely shows what’s logical about keeping a reasonable perspective on culture,
more specifically cultural institutions, so that individuals have the ability to question
what is natural.

** * * *

Textually, natural is the keyword for Bowen in The Last September. From the
beginning, Bowen uses the word to enunciate her characters’ traits and viewpoints.
The word underscores the assumptions the characters make and the given pretexts they
take for granted in their daily lives. The term natural especially becomes equated with
the expectations mounted on Lois, and significantly, the instances of the word tend to
highlight the pattern of struggle in Lois’s bildungsroman. Consequently, all of the key
characters play a part in dismantling the superiority and privilege assumed by the term
natural as the novel unfolds. The word’s repeated usage suggests Bowen and Lois are first working out the possible variations of the word’s meaning, then dwindling the concept, until by the novel’s end, the word and the concept are abandoned in the wake of Lois’s decision to emigrate, or in other words, when Lois breaks free from what is considered natural or the norm.

Bowen’s exploration of the “natural” is recognizably parallel to what Foucault describes as a “Normalizing Judgment” in his work on “The Means to Correct Training” which leads up to his theory of “Panopticism.” The kinds of assumptions Bowen’s characters perceive as natural can be seen to operate in the ways Foucault lists for the societal judgments serving disciplinary power:

It differentiates individuals from one another, in terms of the following overall rule: that the rule be made to function as a minimal threshold, as an average to be respected, or as an optimum toward which one must move. It measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the “nature” of individuals. It introduces, through this “value-giving” measure, the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved. Lastly, it traces the limit that will define difference in relation to all other differences, the external frontier of the abnormal (the “shameful” class of the École Militaire). (195)

The rhetorical act Bowen accomplishes in Lois’s ultimate break with the natural is synonymous with breaking with what Foucault terms, “the power of the norm” which includes Lois’s defiance of both public and interfamilial relations and additionally, the self-examination and self-censorship manifest in panopticism (197). Integral to Foucault’s theory of panopticism is the individual as a powerful agent of their own surveillance. The awareness that one is being judged causes the individual to also judge themselves and act accordingly. What this means for Lois before her emigration as she grows into womanhood is that she has a heightened awareness of what appears
to be the norm or the natural.

In the novel, the gendered expectation that she naturally must marry informs Lois’s perception of what it means to be an adult of the Ascendancy. Initially, a part of Lois is both curious and optimistic: “One of the things Lois chiefly wanted to know about marriage was—how long it took one, sleeping with the same person every night, to outlive the temptation to talk well into the morning?” (Bowen *LS* 12). Lois figures “‘Naturally one is expected to be amusing,’ and further relates “She still felt a distinct pride at having grown up at all; it seemed an achievement, like marriage or fame. Having a wonderful time, she knew, meant being attractive to a number of young men” (Bowen *LS* 13, 21). Another part of Lois, however, is restless and resentful that the others seem to have already decided her fate and disposition. Mr. Hugo Montmorency “supposed that unformed, anxious to make an effort, she would marry early” (Bowen *LS* 28). And, of her matchmaking matriarchs, Aunt Myra and Mrs. Francie Montmorency, Lois thinks,

>fifty years hence she might well, if she wished, be sitting here on the steps – with or without rheumatism – having penetrated thirty years deeper ahead in Time than they could, [which] gave her a feeling of mysteriousness and destination. And she was fitted for this by being twice as complex as their generation. (Bowen *LS* 29)

Still, another part of Lois, the child that remains close to the surface, feels insecure and unsure: “She thought of herself as forcing a pass. In her life—deprived as she saw it—there was no occasion for courage, which like an unused muscle slackened and slept” (Bowen *LS* 33). Without her family’s approval “she felt profoundly lonely, suspecting once more for herself a particular doom of exclusion” (Bowen *LS* 23). Her fragmentation over the norms she perceives provides the struggle for her coming-of-
Lois wants to both live up to and defy what the others assume to be natural for her. Consequently, the struggle behind Lois’s bildungsroman rests on which aspects of adulthood she chooses to incorporate into her identity. Should she look to the traditional, almost natural, models closest to her: her mother Laura, Aunt Myra, or Francie Montmorency? Or should she listen to the non-traditional influences brought to her by circumstance: her cousin Laurence, the somewhat foreign and English Gerald, or the unexpected visitor Marda, who all inform Lois of the modes and choices beyond the natural and traditional?

The most immediate model Lois finds is that of her deceased mother Laura. Lois looks back on the memory of her mother in reverence, and the other characters freely perceive her in light of the person her mother used to be. For example, Francie Montmorency declares, “Oh, I think she’s the image of Laura—,” and Uncle Richard believes, “she was just like Laura, poor Laura’s own child in fact; she would talk and talk and you never knew where you had her” (Bowen LS 8, 81). Enigmatically, Lois imagines following her mother’s path—perhaps too closely. She contemplates an affair with the married Mr. Hugo Montmorency who once proposed to her mother. Necessity reasons that in the closed off and under-populated Danielstown community, Hugo is one of the only options for Lois (in fact Bowen offers no other) that will match her Aunt Myra’s expectations; he’s an Anglo-Irish man of her station, even if he is married to Francie. Before she sets her mind on a relationship with Gerald, Lois first seeks out the marriage narrative like her mother before her.

Lois’s feelings for Hugo are almost entirely designed around fantasy and her
memories of him with her mother, however. She tries out the relationship largely in
her mind, concealing it from the others, only disclosing to her cousin Laurence, “‘I
once rather had illusions about Mr. Montmorency—since I was ten. He came to stay
with my mother and me when we were at Leamington […] I have thought since,
anyone might have said she was rather a bad hostess. But everything she did seemed
so natural’” (Bowen LS 10--11). Lois is more interested in what comprises Hugo’s
attraction to her mother, which resides in Lois’s sense of what “natural” means at the
time (Bowen LS 11). In this case, the word marks what Lois perceives as her mother’s
ability to overcome faults with social graces such as likeability and charm. Although
understood from an outside standpoint, ‘natural’ can also be seen here as a structure of
female subservience, deference, and affability constructed originally by polite
Victorian gender roles which were passed on from the English to Anglo-Irish society.
In trying to replace her mother in a relationship with Hugo, she is also trying to claim
her mother’s natural, or Victorian, qualities for herself. However, Hugo’s indifference
to Lois makes this an impossible task, and she begins to disfavor him for it.

If Lois perceives her inclination to take her mother’s place with Hugo as a
natural thing to do, then his failure to live up to his side of her fantasy casts him
literally into an unnatural light; Hugo had “more than ever his waxen blinking look, as
though exposed unnaturally to the sunshine” because he fails to match Lois’s feelings
(Bowen LS 41). The term natural is shown to be just as easily revealing in its opposite
form because underneath Bowen’s debate about what is natural is the constancy of
what is not natural, or unnatural. On their private carriage ride home with Lois at the
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reigns, Hugo regards Lois: “Next to Laura, she was the most fidgety person from whom he had suffered. But Laura’s unrepose had been an irradiation, a quiver of personality. […] She [Lois] looked genée, dispirited; some failure, no doubt, in his company: he must be an old man to her” (Bowen LS 63). Indeed Lois’s fantasy is short-lived, contained to the first third of the novel only, and matching her mother’s decline of Mr. Montmorency’s proposal, Lois imagines turning him down too, in order to save face. The ending of Lois’s infatuation with Hugo dissolves the assumptions both Lois and the other characters make about her resemblance to her mother, and so dissolves her chances of marrying inside her culture. With no other Anglo-Irish men presenting themselves in the plot and with suitors being generally very limited, Lois’s most attractive choice is the handsome Gerald, again, in spite of his status as an English soldier.

If Lois’s desire to be marriageable is central to her motivations, then undercutting those motivations is her indifferent and even cynical cousin Laurence. Through Laurence, Bowen works out criticisms about gender, love, and marriage that she might not otherwise be able to achieve through Lois’s outlook alone. Laurence, like Mr. Montmorency, falls on the “unnatural” side of Bowen’s exploration when he counters Lois’s positive assumptions about marriage with negative assertions; Laurence broods, “‘Oh yes, Love.’ He flicked out and studied the word indifferently—coin of uncertain value” and further thinks of Mr. Montmorency, “He recalled that the man was married, had given away his integrity, had not even a bed to himself” (Bowen LS 44). Although it remains ambiguous in the novel, Laurence’s aversion to
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marriage affords at least two conclusions: either that his marriage prospects are hindered by the limiting Anglo-Irish marriage dynamics, or that as Elizabeth Cullingford suggests Laurence is a “feminized male” who’s sexuality is “unstable” (289). Both conclusions may actually mix and combine to destabilize Laurence’s sexuality and persona. Following the standards of the day from a social standpoint, until Laurence gains independence through his education at Oxford and subsequent employment, or possibly receives a late inheritance, he will remain unmarried, or risk becoming like Mr. Montmorency: a nearly bankrupt, perpetual houseguest, with a less than enviable wife he can barely support. Cullingford explains that in one sense the Anglo-Irish “position is at once privileged (they do not have to share), and deprived (their innate isolation prevents them from enjoying normal social relations)” (290).

On another level, Bowen may be signaling that Laurence is a closeted homosexual, or that Laurence feels his sexuality so constrained that it renders him sexually ambiguous or impotent. Laurence abruptly queries Mr. Montmorency, “‘Talking of being virginal, do you ever notice this country? Doesn’t sex seem irrelevant?’” (Bowen LS 42). Mr. Montmorency answers, “‘There certainly are a great many unmarried women’ […] looking doubtfully through the net at the Miss Hartigans” during the tennis party (Bowen LS 42). Lawrence adds the logical consequence of so few marriages and so little sex, “‘It applies to everything. And children seem in every sense of the word inconceivable’” (Bowen LS 43). Indeed, whereas Lois has a shortage of suitors due to the high rate of male emigration at the time, Laurence has an abundance of prospects that he either doesn’t care to or cannot engage.
Laurence would rather not spend his time waiting around, however, but he additionally feels confined to Ireland by his family’s lack of money in recent years:

“‘I was to have gone to Spain this month with a man and last year I should have gone to Italy with another man, but what do you expect me to go on? I have to eat somewhere, don’t I, and here it is simply a matter of family feeling,’” he complains to Mr. Montmorency and dares to jest “‘I should like to be here when this house burns’” (Bowen LS 44). Mr. Montmorency, flustered over the prospects of the burning of Danielstown, quickly suggests Laurence should work his way out of Ireland instead:

“‘Quite impossible; quite unthinkable. Why don’t you fish or something? . . . Nonsense!’” (Bowen LS 44). The idea of going abroad or emigrating appeals to Laurence, although it would require more than he is willing to muster. And, with marriage or going abroad excluded from his options at present, Laurence shows his desperation for things to be different. He facetiously rearranges marriages and fates from the seclusion of his bedroom:

it was Richard who married Francie, [Mrs. Montmorency] who came to him all in a bloom at his first request and made a kind of bassinette of a life for him, dim with lace. Aunt Myra enjoyed a vigorous celibacy, while Lawrence, to be acclaimed a second Weininger, blew out his brains at – say – Avila, in a fit of temporary discouragement without having heard of Danielstown. Lois, naturally was not born at all.

But this involved a certain rearrangement of Laurence’s character, for not for anything would he have put a pistol into his mouth, though he would have liked to fire a gun out of a window. (Bowen LS 106-107).

In his late night scenario, Laurence can’t seem to find a place for himself or Lois. vi

He is, however, more annoyed with her playing the gramophone too loudly in her room below than he is interested in casting her completely out of the picture. They are
as close as siblings and brought closer still by their feelings of being trapped in Danielstown. And, as with many siblings, Laurence finds ways to undercut Lois’s aspirations. His constant disassembly of the ideals of marriage is meant to continuously remind Lois, and readers, of the doubtfulness of her pursuit. However, Laurence asserts that if Lois has to get married she might as well choose the alternative to Aunt Myra’s incorrigible planning: “He wished that Lois would marry and leave Danielstown; he could perfectly see her as a very pink bride, later as a girl wife in the Tchehov tradition in a pink blouse, sucking sweets audibly, prattling of girl friends’ lovers, rustling papers endlessly. He only hoped that she might marry Gerald, who had no papers to rustle” (Bowen LS 102). However, he also realizes Aunt Myra may have a problem with such an event, which in part, pleases him.

Lois, however, is the one who has to deal with the conflict. Lois overhears her Aunt Myra adamantly denying Francie Montmorency’s approval of her blossoming relationship with Gerald:

The voices spoke of love; they were full of protest. Love, she had learnt to assume, was the mainspring of woman’s grievances. Illnesses arose from it, the having of children, the illnesses children had; servants also, since the regular practice of love involved a home; by money it was confined, propped and moulded. Lois flung off the pillows and walked round the room quickly. She was angry; she strained to hear now, she quite frankly listened. But when Mrs. Montmorency came to: ‘Lois is very—’she was afraid suddenly. She had a panic. She didn’t want to know what she was, she couldn’t bear to: knowledge of this would stop, seal, finish one. Was she now to be clapped down under an adjective, to crawl round lifelong inside some quality like a fly in a tumbler? Mrs. Montmorency should not! (Bowen LS 60)

Even though Francie plays an advocate for Lois and Gerald, Lois does not want to become the woman she thinks Francie epitomizes, for as Francie’s own thoughts have
betrayed earlier, Francie “had a delicate woman’s strong feeling for ‘naturalness’” (Bowen *LS* 14). In contrast to Lois’s view of her mother’s naturalness, Francie’s is associated with a weakness in her dispassionate marriage to Hugo, and somehow the woman has become the likeness of the “fly in the tumbler” (Bowen *LS* 60). This point becomes even more pronounced when Hugo later develops his own crush on the visiting Marda and Francie fails to confront him. Lois rejects the thought of her conformity to what Aunt Myra thinks is proper, but she also rejects whatever Francie might register about her identity because Francie’s predicament is unfavorable regardless of her good intentions. She believes all at once that Francie should both stay out of her identity and that the woman should herself break free from her own subjection. For as Francie’s earlier thoughts have concluded, she believes herself incapable of negotiating finances, working outside the home, or resolving their dilemma over emigrating to Canada (Bowen *LS* 14). And, as the novel builds, Francie is more of a mother figure to Hugo.

On Francie’s side however, she has learned to maneuver well enough under the confines of the Anglo-Irish cult-of-domesticity to at least relay her opinion about Lois and Gerald to the calloused Myra: “‘It seems to me natural that people should take an interest—they’re all so fond of her. If young Mr. Lesworth and Lois are really--,’” (Bowen *LS* 57). But Aunt Myra will hear none of this:

‘There is no question at all—you understand?—of anything between Mr. Lesworth and Lois. And of course naturally they haven’t thought of it—if they had, don’t you see, they’d be much more careful to make it appear there wasn’t. Of course I agree that Lois ought to be more careful. I was careful by instinct, which is a thing that girls nowadays seem to lack.’ (Bowen *LS* 58-59)
The differences and inconsistencies between Francie and Aunt Myra’s conception of what is natural additionally renders the term inconsistent and subjective. Francie asserts that it is natural simply to marry—with or without passionate love, while Aunt Myra is adamant that Lois and Gerald have “naturally” not even contemplated a relationship, an illusion that is sustained only by Aunt Myra’s stubbornness and upbringing (Bowen LS 59). Aunt Myra is so self-assured as to the ways things should naturally be, that she never once questions or falters in coolly setting down the reasons why she thinks Lois’s relationship with Gerald is unnatural. Of Gerald, Aunt Myra remarks,

‘One cannot trace him. His mother, he says, lives in Surrey, and of course you do know, don’t you, what Surrey is? It says nothing, absolutely; part of it is opposite the Thames Embankment. Practically, nobody who lives in Surrey ever seems to have been heard of, and if one does hear of them they have never heard of anybody else in Surrey. Really altogether, I think all English people very difficult to trace.’ (Bowen LS 58)

From the standpoint of Aunt Myra, her bias against the working class English discounts Gerald entirely and thoroughly to Francie. However, Francie is unmoved and Lois is still determined to find her own way. Bowen pairs Aunt Myra and Francie in the novel as two dysfunctional choices for Lois to seemingly decide between. On one side, Francie is weak yet well-meaning, and on the other side, Aunt Myra is dominant yet discriminating. Ultimately, both opposing characters serve to foil Lois and her desire to be modern. On the emblematic side of the plot construction, Lois faces two versions of the subjected woman she could become in both Aunt Myra and Francie, regardless of either woman’s intentions.

However, there is more at risk in looking outside her culture for romance than
Aunt Myra and Francie seem able to discuss. Concurrently, Lois faces very real consequences such as castigation, disenfranchisement, or even loss of life in choosing Gerald. Leading with a matter-of-factness characteristic of the narration, Bowen lays out the consequences through Uncle Richard:

Sir Richard, to whom the idea about Lois and Gerald percolated in time through the family conversation, declared the idea preposterous. What chiefly worried him was, might she not have mentioned to Gerald those guns in the lower plantations? He had charged her not to, but she was just like Laura, poor Laura’s own child in fact; she would talk and talk and you never knew where you had her. He announced, he had been thinking for some time subalterns should be fewer and more infrequent. He was delighted when he heard from the postman, and was able to pass on, how three young women in the Clonmore direction had had their hair cut off by masked men for walking out with the soldiers. And indeed they got no sympathy from the priest either, the postman said, for the priest knew that English soldiers were most immoral.

‘And, how would you like it,’ Sir Richard said to his niece indignantly, ‘if a thing like that were to happen to you?’

‘I should be bobbed,’ said Lois. ‘I should take it as a sign. But I have never walked an inch with anyone, not what you would call out, Uncle Richard.’ (Bowen LS 61)

Lois defends her romance with Gerald, declaring she would pay the consequences for their relationship, although she also assures her Uncle Richard she is being cautious. Lois holds out her romantic ideals in spite of the very real risks she takes, a stance partly provided by her distance from the actual conflicts of the war and partly from Gerald’s influence.

Gerald is at first uninformed about the conjecture going on about him inside the Big house. He finds no difficulty in approaching Lois, and until Aunt Myra persuades him otherwise, he considers himself a competitive suitor. However within the novel’s plot structure, Gerald is the antithesis of Aunt Myra’s expectations that would draw Lois away from the natural assumptions Aunt Myra has been so careful to
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construct for Lois’s life. Gerald’s liberalized conceptions about love and his ability to awaken Lois’s sexuality counters Aunt Myra’s determination to hold Lois to the exclusivist, Anglo-Irish values passed down through generations. Lois meanwhile is caught and confused between the polarities of Aunt Myra and Gerald’s views of what’s natural. While Gerald has every confidence that Lois will fit into his view of life, for “all the same he did like girls to have natural complexions – he was perfectly certain Lois’s was” (Bowen LS 36). However, Lois feels both enthralled by Gerald’s idea of romantic love and burdened by having to live up to his conception of their relationship because his view of her also contrasts with her own view of herself:

He did not conceive of love as a nervous interchange but as something absolute, out of the scope of thought, beyond himself, matter for a confident outward rather than anxious inner looking. He had sought and was satisfied with a few – he thought final – repositories for his emotions: his mother, country, dog, school, a friend or two, now – crowningly – Lois. Of these he asked only that they should be quiet and positive, not impinged upon, not breaking boundaries from their generous allotment. (Bowen LS 41)

Gerald’s romantic ideas are more liberated than Aunt Myra’s but also have their own limiting design. Lois would like to think of herself as acquiring a disregard for staying “quiet and positive” and “not breaking boundaries,” but as of yet she is still only subtly asserting herself (Bowen LS 41). Lois states point blankly, “’I feel certain you have illusions about me; I don’t believe you know what I’m like a bit’” (Bowen LS 45). What Lois could add as well, is that she herself is confused about her identity from being pulled in different directions.

Consequently, Lois doesn’t respond the way Gerald anticipates when he unexpectedly shows up at Danielstown for lunch and abruptly kisses her for the first
time. She receives the kiss with a split reaction divided between the propriety she has been socially conditioned towards and the new feelings Gerald inspires. Her first reaction is to respond conventionally: “I do wish you wouldn’t Gerald – I mean, be so actual. And do be natural at lunch, or I shall look such a goat. You really might have asked me, I never mind talking things over. But now the gong will go at any moment” (Bowen LS 88). But then Lois remembers what she’s learned from her best friend Livvy about the sophisticated English girls Gerald is used to: “there is almost nothing they will not let a man say and that they get kissed before they get engaged” (Bowen LS 69). She quickly adds intrigue to herself and acts as if it is not her first kiss, adding, “And how do you know I’m not in love with a married man?” (Bowen LS 88). Gerald’s reply shows he has no knowledge of Lois’s previous infatuation with Hugo: “You wouldn’t be so neurotic; I mean, like a novel. I mean: do be natural, Lois” (Bowen LS 88). Gerald too has his natural limitations regarding Lois. Gerald’s assertion that Lois can be his version of “natural,” can live up to his view and his plan without crossing boundaries dramatically, somewhat appeals to her in the moment, however, and motivates her to imagine their relationship further (Bowen LS 88).

Ironically, the moment that Lois has her first ideas about what it might actually be like to be with a man physically is also the moment Bowen uses to foreshadow Gerald’s death. Gerald swears to her “’You know I’d die for you,’” and Lois “thought of death and glanced at his body, quick, lovely, present, and yet destructible. Something passed sensation and touched her consciousness with a kind of weight and warmth; she glimpsed a quiet beyond experience, as though for many nights he had
been sleeping beside her” (Bowen *LS* 89). Gerald can extend a kind of limited, married sexual liberation to Lois. However, in Bowen’s plot design, Gerald will have to be expended in order for Lois to fulfill all that Bowen has planned for her. If, as a character, Lois were allowed to marry Gerald, Bowen would have to relinquish the alternative future she has in mind, as well as concede on some level to the patriarchal marriage narrative. In between the scenes of Gerald’s courtship of Lois, Bowen instead forms a character who will rise to the occasion of enlightening Lois beyond the limited choices the marriage narrative prescribes and that Lois has allowed herself up to this point.

Marda, perhaps the most “unnatural” of Lois’s influences describes Lois’s character best, “‘She is in such a hurry, so concentrated upon her hurry, so helpless’ [...] ‘I’ve never met any woman so determined to love well, so anxious to love soon, so certain of her ability. She really prays for somebody to be fatal; she eyes doors. And you are all disappointments’” (Bowen *LS* 82). Marda doesn’t arrive until the second section of the book yet serves to complicate Lois’s romantic life with her very presence. And, under the tutelage of Marda, Lois tries on a new outlook as easily as she tries on the woman’s fur coat when they meet (Bowen *LS* 77). As Bowen likes to narrate, Marda’s “Sophistication opened further horizons to Lois” (Bowen *LS* 79). Like a whirlwind set on disruption, Marda simultaneously ends Lois’s conflict over her drawing capabilities (a pursuit only inspired by Aunt Myra’s prodding), rallies Lois towards engagement by offering her details of her own upcoming wedding to the Anglo-Irish Leslie Lawe, and yet conversely, introduces the idea of going abroad
instead of marrying. Lois is never more perplexed in the novel, and additionally, could not be more pleased because Aunt Myra does not approve of Marda. The visitor offers Lois her outsider’s opinion of her world, and Lois is so intrigued with her honesty that for the time being Lois devotes all of her time to Marda, conspicuously neglecting her relationship with Gerald.

Lois’s first private meeting with Marda sheds light on Aunt Myra’s art school plans for Lois. Lois’s drawings have been encouraged by her Aunt Myra’s own interests in art but have always left Lois feeling un-encouraged in her own desire for the craft. Marda puts the matter to rest with one honest remark between confidantes after seeing Lois’s work: “’I think you’re cleverer than you can draw, you know’” (Bowen *LS* 98). The rapport of mutual respect Marda establishes with Lois is instant, and under Marda’s inquiry Lois feels free to debate and test her circumstances. At first, Lois thinks of Marda’s engagement and convinces herself, “’I must marry Gerald.’” (Bowen *LS* 98). Although, the next moment Lois conversely theorizes as well, “’I like to be related; to be what I am. Just to be is so intransitive, so lonely’” (Bowen *LS* 98). Marda leads off from Lois’s thoughts on loneliness and conjectures, “’Then you will like to be a wife and mother’” and “’It’s a good thing we can always be women’” (Bowen *LS* 98). Marda’s statements are more like challenges to Lois, a means to get Lois to realize the actual implications of married life. Lois’s reaction is to flip from her previous position and unnervingly admit her frustration with gendered expectations: “’I hate women. But I can’t think how to begin to be anything else.’” [...] ‘But I would hate to be a man. So much fuss about doing things. Except
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Lawrence—but he is such a hog. Ought I go to London?” (Bowen LS 99). Out of the air, Lois for the first time in the novel admits she has thought about leaving, and perhaps, one of Marda’s biggest influences is to encourage Lois in the idea. Marda justifies another possibility for Lois’s life; Lois could leave Ireland and design her own way of life. At length, Lois imagines herself in Rome, America, London, anywhere else:

She wanted to go wherever the war hadn’t. She wanted to go somewhere nonchalant where politics bored them, where bands played out of doors in the hot nights and nobody wished to sleep. […] She liked mountains, but she did not care for views. She did not want adventures, but she would like once to be nearly killed. She wanted to see something that only she would remember. Could one really float a stone in a glacier stream? She liked unmarried sorts of places. She did not want to see the Taj Mahal or the Eiffel Tower (could not one avoid it?) or to go to Switzerland or Berlin or any of the colonies. She would like to know people and go to dinner parties on terraces, and she thought it would be a pity to miss love. Could one travel alone? (Bowen LS 99).

Marda helps Lois realize that her dreams of going abroad could become a reality, and for the moment, the idea of leaving quells Lois’s ideas about marriage. Marda offers Lois the chance to cancel the Anglo-Irish marriage narrative’s hold on her life.

However, Marda is offering Lois a very speculative and conditional aspiration. Marda states provocatively in front of Lois to Lawrence: “‘If I were not going to marry I should ask her to come abroad with me. I have never been less bored’” (Bowen LS 103). Lois exclaims, “‘It would be marvellous,’” and thinks to herself, “She felt certain that Leslie would die or break off the engagement. ‘Marvellous,’ she repeated” (Bowen LS 103). Of course, what Marda offers is so conditional that not only can it only be realized if Marda’s engagement is broken, it would also mean breaking off the relationship with Gerald as well. And, underlying this aspect of the arrangement is the
implication that Marda and Lois would form a partnership instead. Marda’s scenario implies that the two women would join up and leave everything else behind.

The implied arrangement leaves room to question the nature of Lois and Marda’s relationship. Noticeably, while Marda is around, Lois is not interested in being around Gerald, and Cullingford further likens Lois to “a femme who falls for the elegantly boyish Marda Norton” (289). However, Bowen may have felt limited in exploring the theme to its end because of the era’s social apprehensions toward homosexuality. Even so, Bowen’s language does become suggestive of a sense of the erotic between the women. As the pair enters the mill on their last walk before Marda’s train will take her away to Leslie and marriage, “Marda put an arm round her waist, and in an ecstasy at this compulsion Lois entered the mill. Fear heightened her gratification; she welcomed its inrush” (Bowen LS 123-124). Marda and Lois’s entry into a place of seclusion seems rife with the possibilities of intimacy that run contrary to the heterosexual marriage narrative. However, Lois and Marda’s discovery of a Nationalist rebel hiding out in the mill abruptly puts an end to their daring: “Someone went upstairs backward, not very sensibly, not having eaten for four days. There was some plaster – the pistol went off, naturally. It was silly, really” (Bowen LS 126). A day before Marda is set to leave, a Nationalist’s bullet grazes her hand accidentally, leaving barely a scratch, yet this is the secret that the women keep between them rather than anything else. The bullet itself almost seems a phallic symbol separating the women from other possibilities. Whether Marda is Lois’s love interest or not, however, is only encoded and interpretable in Bowen’s nuanced prose. Additional
options that are presented in the context of the story are that Marda is in part surrogate mother, in part sibling, and logically, confidante, all relationships characterized by strong connections as well. However, Bowen’s use of a gun to announce the ending of Marda’s visit is also indicative of the symbolic mourning period Lois goes through after Marda leaves. As soon as Marda’s car leaves for the train, Lois becomes physically ill, and in the days after, she repeatedly returns to discussion and thoughts of her: “If only Marda could see her… It was half-past six: she had promised herself to think of Marda” (Bowen LS 140, 147).

By the time Lois next sees Gerald, Lois’s interlude with Marda has changed her, and Gerald registers the difference as a problem. At the dance just following Marda’s departure, Gerald avoids Lois well into the night. Gerald hasn’t seen Lois since he kissed her, and he suspects she thought the kiss tactless. Her failure to write him a letter also leaves him feeling neglected, “I wanted something to make things natural […] But bumping along back to the barracks, and you going in again with that girl to that topping house” (Bowen LS 152). Gerald unconsciously picks up on Marda’s influence, but remains uninformed. Lois quickly feels remorse, thinking “Might she perhaps have thought more about Gerald and wondered less” (Bowen LS 152). Her friend Livvy Thompson was after all already engaged to his friend and fellow soldier, David Armstrong. She consoles Gerald, “Marda’s gone you know,” although he will never connect the implications of her words (Bowen LS 152). However, in the absence of Marda and the perceived ending of Lois’s vision of going abroad, Lois has thought of Gerald even more so: “this morning she had written to
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Viola that she intended to marry Gerald” (Bowen LS 148). To reconcile her intentions, Lois is the one that kisses him, which is when Gerald proposes: “’My Darling –‘ He let her go, but still, above consciousness, held out one of her hands, solemnly. ‘Shall you really be able to marry me?’” (Bowen LS 154). Gerald’s proposal is fittingly one of the most loaded questions Bowen could manage to express because of the near impossibility of the event ever taking place.

In spite of foreboding feelings, Lois convinces herself “It was inevitable that she marry Gerald” and undertakes trying to sway Aunt Myra towards the idea (Bowen LS 166). But the dismissal ready on Aunt Myra’s lips insists Lois has “no conception of love” and further threatens Lois with art school, of which Lois can only meekly reply, “But I don’t think I really draw well” (Bowen LS 168). Alerted by Lois to the immediate seriousness of the situation, however, Aunt Myra is quick to arrange an even more imposing front. Matching the Irish rebel ambush that will end Gerald’s life, Aunt Myra ambushed Gerald at the Fogarty’s house the very next day. She arranges for him to meet her alone by leading Gerald to believe that she wants to get to know him better, and perhaps, “like a nephew” which greatly pleases him (Bowen LS 177). However, at their meeting, Aunt Myra immediately places Gerald in his home county, Surrey, a lowly place in England by her scale. She adds coyly, “Now you lucky people seem to have no relations at all; that must feel so independent” (Bowen LS 178). Quickly she brings up Livvy Thompson’s engagement to Gerald’s fellow soldier as the wrong thing to do: “these early marriages ruin careers, and engagements are nearly as bad. I know how Colonel Boatly feels – No, what you should do, I think
is: have a straight and sensible talk with your friend Mr. Armstrong” (Bowen *LS* 179).

Co-opting and taking control entirely of the term natural, Aunt Myra warns, “Oh, naturally we should never consider a marriage like that for Lois” (Bowen *LS* 179).

Gerald gets the picture and Aunt Myra no longer feels she has to evade her true concern: “There was this question of money – a subject the English made free with, as free with as what was below their diaphragms, but from which her whole modesty shrank [...] ‘There is money,’ she brought out at last. ‘I mean you haven’t any, have you?’” (Bowen *LS* 180). Gerald feels he has no defense to such an attack; he quite frankly knows he has no money:

> An unusual pendulum swung in him, he was ruined – resolute – ruined. He was dark with perplexed anger, from which his invincible ‘niceness’ stood, in deprecation, aside. She blasphemed, and yet he had to admire her four-square propriety, her sound sense, the price she set on his Lois. And love, meanwhile, did not so much lie bleeding as sit back stunned, bruised, a little craven from shock. (Bowen *LS* 181)

Gerald is devastated, and in their last meeting, Lois is unable to convince him that their relationship is not over even though she curses “‘Damn, damn,” and yells out “‘I do want you” (Bowen *LS* 191). But she has so little time, a few minutes only before he has to go back on duty, and he will not kiss her goodbye because of a promise made to her Aunt Myra (Bowen *LS* 182).

In her disappointment, during the last few minutes of their last meeting together, Lois makes her final telling declaration of the novel:

> It’s like a nightmare that even you should begin to talk. I thought you were a rock: I was safe with you. Gerald, really, this is all like a net; little twists of conversation knotted together. One can’t move, one doesn’t know where one is. I really can’t live at all if it has all got to be arranged. I tell you, even what I think isn’t my own, and Mrs. Montmorency comes bursting into my rooms at nights.
Even Marda – nothing we said to each other mattered, it hasn’t stayed, she goes off
to get married in a mechanical sort of way. She thinks herself so damned funny –
it’s cheap, really. All that matters is what you believe – Gerald, you’ll kill me, just
standing there. You don’t know what it’s like for a snail, being walked on…”
(Bowen _LS_ 191)

What has been constructed as natural to Lois, to marry, has been corrupted by her
Aunt Myra and turns towards a nightmarish “unnatural” because none of the
traditions, or prejudices disguised as customs, truly serves Lois at her crucial moment
when she needs to validate love. Instead Aunt Myra’s expectations make Lois feel
crushed like a snail (Bowen _LS_ 191). This is her last declaration in the novel because
after the news of Gerald’s death reaches Lois by messenger, Lois first grows silent
from grief in the days following, only reaching out to Laurence briefly, and then she
vanishes from the ending completely. We only hear from Aunt Myra, the unthinking
enforcer of her culture’s imposing restraints, that Lois has left for Tours, France to
study French (Bowen _LS_ 204). (Laurence too has gone to France, although separately
from Lois.)

It is a risky move for Bowen to deprive the reader of the character who has
been their interpreter of meaning from the beginning, but she uses it as an opportunity
to magnify the seriousness of Lois’s decision to emigrate. Lois’s silence is resolute
and translates into her resolve to completely leave behind the corrupt, and “natural,”
system that has failed her.

The strategy to end without Lois, however, may be a reason why her
immediate reaction to emigrate, is often left out, played down, or remains unresolved
in a political/historical reading of the novel. Patrick Ward writes about the Irish view
of emigration:

The version of exile created out of Catholic nationalist discourse was predicated on the widely accepted belief that England consciously and malevolently sought to drive the Irish out of Ireland. It could not admit the possibility that people wanted to go elsewhere and to the USA in particular, to escape Ireland and create an alternative way of life. (130)

Emigration was not an appreciated, and sometimes not even a tolerated, discussion, and Bowen’s novel is in part an exercise of taking everything away that holds Lois to Ireland in order to show that, with regards to mobility and the freedom of desire, it may sometimes be more painful to stay. Lois’s departure makes sense after all she endured, but her leaving is also understood as a heightened tragedy when considering the stigma of emigration. Bowen also connects the absence of Lois with the last tragic act of the novel, the burning of Danielstown, which is also the last thing to be taken from Lois. Bowen ends Lois’s bildungsroman as dramatically as she can imagine, with “the death – execution, rather – of the three houses, Danielstown, Castle Trent, Mount Isabel, [which] occurred in the same night” (Bowen LS 206). Indeed, what Bowen feared would happen to her own Bowen’s Court is multiplied by three Big houses in the ending of The Last September. Connecting Lois to the burning of Danielstown community means on one level, Lois may never return, and on a second, that Lois is rendered a guilty freedom from the place that once housed her oppressive system. In burning Danielstown, not only does Bowen question the natural Anglo-Irish order, but she also ushers on the fiery destruction of change. In the end, Bowen offers everything up, Lois, her biography, the big house, in order to purge her criticism against the Anglo-Irish marriage narrative.
The timeliness of *The Last September’s* release also plays a part in the effect of Bowen’s criticism. When Bowen released her semi-autobiographical account in 1929, the war she wrote about in the novel was over, Ireland had already won Home Rule, and Ireland’s continuing government reform was equating to the beginning of a feminist abeyance period and all that period entailed. Releasing a retrospective account meant that at the time of *The Last September’s* publication, Bowen presented readers with a contrast between the marriage customs of the preceding British common law era and the contemporary era she wrote from after Ireland’s independence, an era significantly changed by Irish Home Rule and the subsequent feminist abeyance period (1922–1969).

For those Irish women readers looking back on Lois’s story, Lois’s predicament would have still appeared familiar and identifiable because their own potential marriage partners were still consistently and stringently subject to parental approval, a factor that would affect both upper and lower classes alike until well after the second-wave of feminism began in the 1960’s (Daly 663). However, for abeyance period women readers, Lois’s troubles under British common law may have seemed even less than their own. For abeyance period women readers, a woman’s status under the new Irish Home Rule may have seemed even more compounded, controlled, and politically defined within William Cosgrave’s administration (1921 – 1932), which laid down the basic premises for de Valera (1932 – 1959) and his restrictive 1937 Constitution later. Marriage was quickly becoming a one chance opportunity in 1929, the year of *The Last September’s* release, and de Valera’s decision to make
divorce illegal in 1937 would finalize that contention. Bowen herself could be seen as
having sought refuge in a sexless marriage that afforded her a kind of independence
and equanimity in a defense against Ireland’s newly emerging and restrictive laws of
Home Rule. Bowen’s novel had the potential to make the troubled times of an
Ascendancy-period Lois of the past British rule that at least allowed for legal divorce
and more than one chance to choose a partner, appear lesser than the troubles of the
mounting feminist abeyance period. This may have inspired some Irish women
readers to assess their own identities, the identities of those people around them, and
possibly the identity of their new nation.

This internal abeyance period assessment, then again, would register in the
context of an Irish woman reader’s religious affiliation and their strength of union with
the churches of the time, and also their view of emigration. Either Protestant or
Catholic women readers may have felt a sympathy for Lois coupled with a disdain for
Lois’s challenge of parental and patriarchal authority; and certainly, her emigration
would have been in the very least stigmatically viewed as unpatriotic, and at most,
worthy of excommunication. Patrick Ward writes,

The dialectics between ‘home’ and ‘abroad’, consciously or unconsciously,
pervaded the cultural and artistic consciousness of those who stayed, and those
who left. The fact of emigration and expatriation covertly permeated all aspects of
national life, for all Irish people in one way or another. After the traumas of war,
partition, and the establishment of two separate polities, each ossified in
sectarianism, there was little room for, or tolerance of dissent. (238)

The gender/emigration story in The Last September would have registered through
Foucault’s panopticon of surveillance, in this broader context a panopticon constructed
by post-colonial, Irish religious and nationalist beliefs reinforced by Irish Home Rule.
On the level of societal surveillance that Foucault suggests with his panopticon theory, the novel could have been received in 1929 as Foucauldian critic, Laurie Langbauer, describes: “Classical realism is actually both a document of and effective propaganda for the system of power in which all subjects are inscribed” (200). Both Catholic and Protestant women upheld patriotism and the church doctrines of the time and may have felt impelled to publicly rebuke Lois’s notions of emergence and emigration. In spite of this, when readers recognized Lois’s tragedy on the personal level, they may have recognized the even stronger impositions placed on themselves during the abeyance period, and institutionalized under Irish Home Rule, whether they felt free to speak of it in public or not.

Bowen’s novel directly communicated with the patriarchal marriage narrative of Cosgrave and de Valera when readers were reminded that even the recent oppressive past yielded more freedom for women than their present system, and that a woman from that less-constricted past felt there was no other lesser choice than to emigrate. The success of The Last September’s sales also meant Bowen communicated with a broad base of international readers that included Irish women as well because the novel avoided any nationalist bans on literature at the time (which as we see later with Edna O’Brien was not always the case). Through her era comparison, Bowen offered a kind of hind-sight that challenged the inner reflection of her fellow Irish women during a hearty and institutionalized feminist abeyance period.

Katherine B. Payant argues for contemporary women’s novels what Bowen succeeded at writing in 1929:
while language has been used by patriarchal culture to oppress women, as a basically neutral construct it can be appropriated by women to accurately document their experience. […] They can do so by dealing with aspects of women’s lives often left out of earlier women’s stories—issues of growing up female, careers other than marriage, fragmentation of women’s lives, and bonds between women, mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends. (6)

Payant exactly lists the issues paramount in *The Last September*; which strengthens the idea that what DuPlessis describes as *Writing Beyond the Ending* is taking place as an early hybridity in *The Last September*. Although Bowen begins the novel as a quest for marriage, and although the ever-present danger of the war continuously threatens to exact a nineteenth-century death ending for Lois, Gerald is the one who dies, and Lois lives on to construct a new life, not as the artist her Aunt Myra wishes her to be, but as a linguist in France, which fits into DuPlessis’ definition of the evolving twentieth-century ending as well:

> Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative. These tactics, among them reparenting, woman-to-woman and brother to sister bonds, and forms of the communal protagonist, take issue with the mainstays of the social and ideological organization of gender, as these appear in fiction. Writing beyond the ending, […] produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised. (5)

What makes Lois’s narrative a fusion of the marriage/death ending and the ending of “critical dissent” is that, although Lois’s emigration undercuts an oppressive system, her emigration is also stigmatically viewed in context with the symbolic death of her place in Anglo-Irish society (DuPlessis 5). Her new life exacts the loss of an old life, mixing death with transcendence, mixing the nineteenth-century with the twentieth century narrative pattern. Like Edna Pontelier in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*
(1899), Lois finds the offerings of society so bleak after Gerald’s death that she must leave completely. Unlike Edna Pontelier, however, Lois finds emigration rather than actual, physical death. This understanding leads to the conclusion that Bowen found early a liminal place to speak about gender, marriage, and female emigration; however, it also means she found no way for her heroine to face oppression without leaving her society behind. Consequently, in complicating the death ending, Bowen finds a narrative strategy that adds a modernist vantage point to her realism, allowing the author to confront forbidden subjects like female emigration among others such as racism, classism, and subordination to an Anglo-Irish patriarchal marriage narrative.

Bowen’s strategy to end Lois’s bildungsroman with emigration differentiates her novel from the traditional female bildungsroman. In *Appearing to Diminish*, Lorna Ellis charts the evolution from the heroic romance (mid-seventeenth century France), to amatory fiction (late seventeenth century to mid-eighteenth century), to the female bildungsroman (mid-eighteenth century), to the tragic paradigm (beginning mid-nineteenth century) (46, 162). Ellis explains that while “the themes of the female Bildungsroman do not immediately disappear (we see them for instance in Amy Bronte’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*), there is an increasing emphasis on the limits that society sets on the psychological growth of its heroines” (162). Whereas Ellis sees the female bildungsroman as being characterized by a “female power that allowed initially rebellious and independent heroines to maintain some autonomy while compromising with social expectations” which also “came at a price,” she makes a distinction for the tragic paradigms like
George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*:

In [these] novels, the heroines search for an inward truth, but rather than leading to a compromise with society, their self-reflection drives them to break further and further away from societal expectations. As these heroines maintain their right to interpret their own environment, to live by their own view of themselves rather than adopting societal expectations, they lose their ability to compromise in order to live in a hostile environment. (162)

When Gerald’s death both cancels Lois’s rebellion in becoming engaged to him, and accordingly fills her with grief, her disappointment makes it impossible for her to stay. Emigration seems the only option. Lois’s tragic paradigm is ushered on by Gerald’s death, but demands a great deal more from her sense of identity—it demands she lose her place in Anglo-Irish society.
Edna O’Brien: Politicizing the Romantic

Do you think people were disturbed by your treatment of women?
I think so, yes. I think so because it [The Country Girls Trilogy] was about the covert and not-so-covert, rather foolish sexuality of two girls. It was their romance and their sexuality, also unhappy married life – a young girl yearning and, indeed, eventually having sex with a much older married man. *Girls in Their Married Bliss* horrified them completely. Indeed, it was very funny. When it was published, I was really savaged. In fact, now, twenty-five years later, *Girls in Their Married Bliss* stands up. It has some guts. But I did have a very rough time on two levels. On the public level, being banned, and on a more personal level. […] You know, a bit of affirmation either from the family or the community helps a lot, especially when you start off. I had none. My own family, my mother and father, God rest them, were appalled. Everyone in the village was. I got anonymous letters about sewers and sewage and all that innuendo…

I think censorship was always more severe in rural Ireland. Understandably. People knew each other’s lives. But to write it is taboo. vii

(O’Brien qtd in Kilfeather, Walshe 4.1051).

If Elizabeth Bowen’s critics chose largely to overlook *The Last September*’s gendered narrative in favor of the novel’s historical attributes, then Edna O’Brien’s censors chose to completely throw out her “Romance” for seemingly not having any historical value at all, as the ban on *The Country Girls Trilogy* beginning in 1960 confirms. Bowen’s critique of the “natural” assumptions Irish society made about gender and marriage could largely be played down or distanced in view of her documentation of a declining Anglo-Irish culture and the Irish war for independence. However, O’Brien’s critique in *The Country Girl’s Trilogy* was so opposed to the robust Nationalist movement of her post-colonial era, a movement that intended to keep women either celibate or bound to the married hearth and home, that Irish censors declared O’Brien’s novels obscene and unfit for Irish readers. Mary Clancy
Breeden writes, “Based on the recommendations of the Evil Literature Committee, 1926, the Censorship Bill aimed to ban birth-control publications as well as ‘indecent literature’ (65). The name of the group behind the bill, the Evil Literature Committee, makes evident just how much the Catholic Church became intertwined with the Irish government after achieving Free State status (1922). Times had clearly changed in between the war for independence of *The Last September* (1919—1922) and the nation building era of *The Country Girls Trilogy* (1922—1959).

In order to understand the controversy and the subsequent banning of O’Brien’s novels, one has to understand the era for which she wrote and the consequential clash her subject matter had with the Catholic mindset of the time period. Margaret O’Callaghan affirms that “In the predominantly Catholic partitioned twenty-six counties that became the Free State, and after 1948 the Republic, Catholicism assumed a salience politically through its demographic weight and virtually unchallenged hegemony, and through very real influence exerted by the Catholic hierarchy on individual politicians” (5.124). After the long oppression of Catholic power under English and Protestant rule, the Church spared no time in reinvigorating their political status and re-designing a new Catholic nation in both the administrations of William Cosgrave (1922–1932) and Eamon de Valera (1932–1959). A first concern of the Catholic Church was that of the family unit; divorce was banned early in 1925, and as O’Callaghan registers, the woman’s place in the family unit was especially being designed around a Catholic context:

Catholicism is fundamental to an understanding of the image and status of women in Ireland. Motherhood was represented in the pronouncements of the
Catholic bishops as the ideal and natural role for women. It was also greatly celebrated within the wider culture. Female purity and virginity were simultaneously presented as even more elevated, and, as in other Catholic societies, the ideal Virgin Mary as the moral exemplar of all women contributed to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority that characterized the public voices of all those women who did not wish to be viewed as unsexed. As Marina Warner has written, the cult of Mary has very real implications for women and their view of themselves. It can foster feelings of guilt and confusion about their own sexuality. In the public sphere it can facilitate the legitimation of certain types of misogyny and contribute to the celebration of feminine self-sacrifice, subservience and silence. It can also empower women through an identification with Mary as mother of God and protector of the poor banished children of Eve. (5.125).

The cult of Mary not only endorsed female martyrdom but also rewarded self-sacrifice with the highest social and holy esteem. The indoctrination of this Catholic view into de Valera’s 1937 Constitution meant women were formally offered either chastity or consignment to the private married life of the home with the theoretical consolation of having divine standing there. The underlying meaning, however, was that Irish women had the highest expectations, that of the Virgin Mary, benchmarking both their mode of living and their sexuality, or supposed lack thereof. A review of the wording of Article 41.2 of the 1937 Constitution reflects both consignment and consolation:

1* In particular the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
2* The State shall therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. [Emphasis added.] (Scannell 72)

The 1937 Constitution more than “endeavoured” to keep women in the home for the good of the nation, however (72). Alpha Connelly stresses “Statutes specifically excluded women” and “cut off many channels of acquiring income in their own right during marriage; for most the route to economic independence was closed,” and additionally, “the job opportunities for the unmarried woman were restricted, since
employment outside the home was primarily the domain of men” (5.323, 5.320). The gender role of Irish women was not only defined in the Irish Constitution, but was generously adhered to in public spheres across society, including those of vocation, education, health policy, and political office.

It can’t be said that feminists and women’s organizations were completely inactive during the feminist abeyance period that resulted from Cosgrave and de Valera’s Catholic inspired policies; however, constitutional disputes are never easy confrontations. O’Callaghan reports:

During the 1920s radical nationalist women who had pushed the issue of women’s rights to one side in the revolutionary period, protested repeatedly against their betrayal at the hands of the revolutionaries with whom they had fought. Many women who remained in the political sphere did so as vicars on earth of the dead. (5.121)

Faced with a legal system that consistently did not acknowledge their issues and the inability to run for office after marriage, the number of women activists continued to drop after the first decade of independence. O’Callaghan further relays that at the time de Valera’s Constitution was received by the nation, the Joint Committee of Women’s Societies and Social Workers just managed to secure a single meeting with de Valera in January of 1937. The Committee asked for “a 50 percent representation in the nominated new second chamber, restoration of jury service to women, recruitment of women in the defense forces, the revoking of the objectionable sections of the Conditions of Employment Act and its consequences, particularly in the civil service. In fact the women got nothing that they demanded” (O’Callaghan 5.131).

Furthermore, with the Irish women’s role tightly secured within the Constitution, de
Valera only went on to legislate in the Local Government Act of 1941 “that in teaching and the civil service women were obliged to resign from their positions if they were married, with an option to return if and when they were widowed” (O’Callaghan 5.131). Without a separation of Church and State, Irish women found their place in society socially, vocationally, legally, and constitutionally controlled.

The censorship board, the ban on contraception and divorce, the constitutional definition of a married woman’s role, and the exclusion of women from the workplace left very few lawful choices during de Valera’s administration. Which makes it ironic that O’Brien is asked in the opening interview “Do you think people were disturbed by your treatment of women?” in comparison (Kilfeather, Walshe 4.1051). O’Callaghan outlines the social context De Valera’s administration placed Irish women:

The family was agreed to be the safe and stable unit in which a woman could both preside and acquire authority. Bridging the gap between the one you were born into and the one you hoped to preside over represented the central quest of most women’s lives. This meant avoiding the pitfalls of immodesty, bad company, bad behaviour, lack of chastity or, above all, sexual promiscuity, on the rocks of which the quest could collapse. An alternative was, of course, emigration and its attached dangers of the cesspits of vice, that, allegedly, tempted poor Irish girls in the cities of England or the United States. (5.130)

An Irish woman’s sexuality was forced into a direct relationship with her nationality. Successful citizenship equated with women following the moral code of the Catholic Church, which meant fulfilling the highest expectations of the cult of Mary, while any deviation from the norm or sexual infraction could lead to a fall from grace that just might result in the forfeiture of her place in society. Heather Ingman agrees, “The sexually loose woman was not only shocking, she was seen as anti-Irish or ‘foreign’. Very often she had to be expelled, if not from her country, at least from her family or
her community” (254). This atmosphere of persecution was especially endured by unwed mothers who were sent away to work in the laundries of the Catholic Church’s Magdalene Asylums, either until they gave their children up for adoption, or unfortunately, until they were too old to continue working.

Additionally, Mary E. Daly surmises the Irish government counted on emigration as a way to control dissent: “emigration may have reduced the pressures for change—by removing the discontented and the unemployed” (665).

Unchaste women seemed to threaten the government’s very idea of repopulating a new Catholic nation. However, losing their citizens to emigration was not the desirable or talked about aim of the State. Rather their control of the family unit and a woman’s sexuality was being justified by the government as an attempt to rebuild and repopulate a new Catholic nation that had lost enough citizens since the potato famine. In pursuit of their control over the desired Catholic family unit, however, the government realized it had to systematically regulate the influences on its nation state, which meant creating and utilizing a censorship board against any adversarial literature and also changing the public image of women to match their desired return to conservatism. As Edna O’Brien implies, the national image of the Irish woman was transformed back into the image of vulnerability (“Why”). O’Callaghan shows that gone were the images of powerful revolutionary women like Maude Gonne and Constance Markievics in full military uniform. They were replaced in the public eye once again by a romanticized Colleen inspired in part by the age-old tradition that had long represented Ireland as a woman (O’Callaghan 5.127).
However, as Clair Wills explains, “The ironic disjunction between romance literature and girlhood experience, which Edna O’Brien notes, is paralleled by the seemingly more oppressive discrepancy between nationalist ideology and female experience in the home” (5.1580). In other words, the difference between the representations of Irish women filtering down through Irish culture and in some romance literatures was far from the reality of the girlhood and female experiences actually happening, and far from the experiences O’Brien captured with her realism. The discrepancy between the State’s representations of women and the actuality, however, were not the only shortfalls affecting the State’s will to return Ireland to a rural and Catholic morality.

There were also large discrepancies between the ideals of the ideology and the social reality that concerned both genders. Connelly asserts that the changes the Irish government enacted into law were “Essentially expressive of the values of a middle-class elite” because poverty, a prolonged and continuing period of emigration after the famine, and late or missed chances to marry all worked against those ideals (5.321). Likewise, homosexuality did not fit into the State’s clearly heterosexual design. The kind of control the State was attempting was inconsistent with the nation’s needs. Sexuality was being secreted, and the absence of women in the workplace affected the economic success of individual families and then could likewise be felt on a national level. For example, a shortage of teachers by the late 1950’s necessitated lifting the ban on a married woman’s right to teach (O’Callaghan 5.131). Political historian Desmond Fennel reports, “In the 50s the economy was stagnant or declining. During the previous decade, masses of people had migrated from the small towns of the West
and South-west to Dublin and there had been a flow of emigration to England; now tens of thousands every year were leaving for England” (56). Rather than returning to the morality and way of life of de Valera’s rural Irishness, a portion of Irish society was leaving under pressure of economic downturn among other reasons. Fennel observes the implications for the State:

The cluster of symbols of Irish nationality and sovereignty which de Valera’s republic had gathered around it and on which its fundamental legitimacy depended, was being undermined by the obvious failure of the system’s economic principle. The state clothed in that symbolic array was simply not holding the people – not in the crudest physical sense, and decreasingly, therefore, in a spiritual and emotional sense. (57)

The State, however, only desired to keep the discrepancies between their Catholic ideals and the actuality quiet, and in fact, managed to do so effectively for over 30 years through the end of de Valera’s administration. However, like other countries during the decade of the sixties, Ireland experienced a resurgence of disquiet that led to a cultural renaissance. O’Brien’s novel *The Country Girls* was one of the first works to end the silence over an Irish woman’s identity and sexuality in the new Catholic nation. Siobhán Kilfeather and Éibhear Walshe, editors of the women’s volumes of *The Field Day Anthology* collaboratively write, “In the early 1960s, Edna O’Brien’s novels presented female heterosexual desire, and particularly the sexual experience of young girls and women, in a way that was explosively original to Irish fiction” (4.1039). Political historian Mary Kenny reflects in *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland: How the Irish Lost the Civilization They Created* that she first wrote about O’Brien’s accomplishment in the *Irish Press* during January 1970, acknowledging that O’Brien “became the first Irishwoman to assert her sexuality boldly and to demand,
of a right, the sexual freedom that men have traditionally enjoyed” (249). Kenny further contextualizes O’Brien’s work when she relates “That the Catholic Church was responsible for ‘marginalizing and ignoring’ women is not a charge which would have been made before 1968” (250). *The Country Girls Trilogy*, published serially in 1960, 1962, and 1964, breeched the discussion of an Irish woman’s sexuality for the coming Second Wave of Irish Feminism, a discussion that before had been shunned and secreted.

However, the controversy that immediately surrounded the novels must have been overwhelming, as the opening interview with O’Brien relates. O’Brien’s life was affected on both a public and private level (Kilfeather, Walshe 4.1051). O’Brien did have the foresight to move to London before writing the first novel, *The Country Girls*, however, and much can be said about the speed at which she wrote once she moved. O’Brien wrote the novel in its entirety within the first three weeks of leaving Ireland (Eckley 26). The immediate ban on the book and subsequent burning of her novel on the Church grounds in her home village of Twamgraney seems to justify O’Brien’s emigration, or as Patrick Ward would like to point out, O’Brien “eschews the term ‘exile’ in favour of ‘escape’” (242). In a way, O’Brien is the Catholic-version of Bowen’s Lois. Grace Eckley quotes O’Brien as saying “I realize now I would have had to leave Ireland in order to write about it. Because one needs the formality and the perspective that distance gives in order to write calmly about a place” (26). The short amount of time it took to write the first novel also suggests that O’Brien had been thinking about the content of her plot for a long time. The novels are at least
based in part on O’Brien’s experiences growing up in Western Ireland, attending school at the Convent of Mercy, and working in Dublin, even though O’Brien is the first to remind readers that “The Country Girls springs from a fusion of fact, feeling and imagination” (4.1051). This reminder is in part a defense against censors and both public and literary critics that would come to chastise the author for the actions and lives of her characters.

As far as the literati are concerned, two camps claim either side of The Country Girls Trilogy debate, and gender is not necessarily a deciding factor. While some critics hail O’Brien’s efforts, others have the opposite reaction. Feminist critics were frustrated with the lack of proactive-ness demonstrated by characters Kate and Baba; and admittedly, while O’Brien’s novels reveal the poor quality of some Irish women’s lives, even the suffering of women under de Valera’s oppressive policies, at the same time, her novels offer no practical solutions for their dilemma. Marjorie Howe surmises, “O’Brien’s famously explicit characters are often volubly inarticulate about their sexuality; their directness constitutes a search for sexual freedom and self-knowledge, rather than its achievement (4.929). Other critics cannot seem to get beyond O’Brien’s frankness about female sexuality. Darcy O’Brien writes a critique so clever in its ridicule of O’Brien in his essay “Edna O’Brien: a kind of Irish childhood” that he seems to almost embarrass himself in trying to mask his distaste for her work. One of his maneuvers is to take O’Brien’s character Dee from I Hardly Knew You and put her through a mock confession in which the priest resolutely condemns her promiscuity in the end, saying “My child you allowed yourself to
become a slave to the devil” (D. O’Brien 187). Those critics in favor of Catholic conservatives are some of O’Brien’s strongest, and perhaps most natural, adversaries.

In O’Brien’s defense, however, Helen Thompson phrases it best in *Irish Women Writers Speak Out*:

*O’Brien’s fiction consistently interrogates the cultural and political imperatives that reproduce femininity in Ireland by showing the ideals—celibacy in the convent and heterosexuality and motherhood in marriage—and the impossibilities of actually living up to them. To free women’s sexuality from the confines of the heterosexual family, O’Brien undermines the sanctity of the family by exposing its dysfunctions, highlighting its subsequent disintegration, and showing its repressive and therefore, debilitating effects on women’s psyches. In short, O’Brien attacks the foundations of Irish culture—state control of women’s reproduction, and the nationalist and religious mythologies, Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland—that have framed and, therefore, limited Irish women.* (“Interview” 198)

O’Brien’s ban and notoriety for attacking the very “foundations of Irish culture” may have, however, compromised still other critic’s willingness to participate in scholarly work on her writing at all (Thompson 198). It seems not many scholars want to participate in *The Country Girls Trilogy* debate. Just two book-length texts have been published on the author, the *Edna O’Brien’s* of Grace Eckley in 1974 and Amanda Greenwood in 2003, and the rest of O’Brien’s scholarly explication and evaluation can only be found intermittently in essay collections and singular articles (Colletta, O’Connor 3). O’Brien’s international publishing success and readership far outweigh any scholarly response to her work at present, a fact that is magnified by the 28 books she has written. Critics are just starting to show interest in recent years, while O’Brien’s readership and reputation continues to grow. According to Thompson:
While male Irish writers such as Joyce have literary reputations that obscure those of their female counterparts, Anne Enright points to an exception: Edna O’Brien. She calls O’Brien a ‘wonderful mistake’ because this Irish woman writer has received some of the privilege usually reserved for men. Indeed, she is published internationally by top publishing houses and has a reputation that matches many of her male contemporaries. (“Part Two” 145)

And yet, it could be this commercial success, and not more important substantive issues, that have kept O’Brien from receiving scholarly attention. O’Brien’s success as a popular writer may be the biggest reason she was chosen as one of the few women writers in the first three male-edited volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*.

Colletta and O’Connor list both Seamus Deane and John Foster, General Editor and Associate Editor of the male-edited *Field Day Anthology* respectively, as among the critics writing “Some of the most frequently quoted excoriations of O’Brien and her work” (12). John Foster, who introduces “Irish Fiction 1965–1990” in the male-edited *Field Day Anthology*, seems to rule out O’Brien, among others, from the beginning of his essay: “Irish fiction of the last quarter century has been ornamented with several international reputations – those of William Trevor, Brian Moore, Edna O’Brien and, of course, Samuel Beckett – but would still amount to a considerable body of work without them” (3.937). Additionally, Foster implies that Edna O’Brien’s self-imposed exile was only a means for the author to broaden her marketability:

If exile is commonly practiced by Irish writers, there are varieties of exile. The departures of Joyce and Stuart were a principled part of an aesthetic agenda. In contrast, the later departures of Edna O’Brien, Aidan Higgins, Clare Boylan, Julia O’Faoláin, William Trevor and Maurice Leitch seem less like aesthetic compulsion than the simple search for a bigger pond to swim in; in some instances,
the attraction of a livelier publishing market and a potentially larger readership. 
(3.941)

Foster’s approach seems to trivialize the profundity of what exile means to the lives of the writers he so lavishly lists; exile simply isn’t written off so easily. Moreover, Foster’s view of O’Brien as a writer of ‘popular’ fiction carries into his introduction of the single short story (“Number Ten”) of O’Brien’s presented in the male-edited *Field Day Anthology*:

Edna O’Brien’s early reputation was as a novelist of rural and provincial Ireland. The affecting naivety of her central characters threatened to suggest a naivety of artifice in the work that contained them. But she has since become a writer of ‘international’ fiction (metropolitan settings, an upper middle class or professional cast) of the sort sponsored by the *New Yorker*. (3.1043)

It’s as if O’Brien’s inclusion into the male-edited *Anthology* is based solely on her ability to sell her novels in volume, the very point Foster criticizes, and even then, she’s attributed only with the skill of being able to write for a magazine that is distinctly not Irish. As far as O’Brien is concerned, the author is fortunate that the women Field Day editors did not take the same view of her work in the women’s volumes.

O’Brien is included in the women’s volumes of *The Field Day Anthology* repeatedly and in a variety of ways: O’Brien’s writing is referenced in introduction essays like “Religion, Science, Theology and Ethics, 1500—2000” by Margaret Mac Curtain and “Feminism, Culture and Critique in English” by Clare Wills among others, excerpts from her cultural memoir *Mother Ireland*, other novels, and short stories are included, personal interviews are placed, and importantly for this study, scenes from all three novels of *The Country Girls Trilogy* are presented. Rather than
looking at O’Brien as a wholly popular writer, and rather than associating the *Trilogy* with naiveté, the women *Field Day* editors present a serious study on O’Brien that markedly gives credit to her work: Susan Parkes introduces O’Brien’s first novel, *The Country Girls,* writing, “This marked the beginning, in the 1960s, of a critical outcry against the conservative and repressive atmosphere of girl’s schools” (5.675). Siobhán Kilfeather and Éibhear Walsh describe a scene in *The Lonely Girl:* “Caithleen [Kate] narrates this excerpt, which recounts her painful efforts to overcome the sexual shame and inhibitions her upbringing has instilled in her” (4.1047). And Margaret O’Callaghan presents *Girls in Their Married Bliss:*

> Viewed as shocking, scandalous and to an extent stage-Irish they [the novels] were, naturally, banned. But O’Brien managed to convey a private world of unmarried Irish women in the 1950s which had not previously found any literary expression. Kate Brady, religious, passionate, an absolutist and a romantic, and her friend Baba Brennan, fun, cynical, pragmatic and kind, are linked by their shared pasts and the exigencies of solving the bewildering unfoldings of their futures. (5.171)

Whereas Irish censors and a dismissive school of critics might not find political or historical value in O’Brien’s *Trilogy,* the women editors of *The Field Day Anthology* assuredly document her novels as both a historical and political critique of an oppressive era in Ireland.

* * *

O’Brien’s *Trilogy* accomplished for female sexuality what James Joyce accomplished in *Ulysses* for sexuality: unmitigated disclosure, and O’Brien recognizes Joyce as one of her major influences. Undeniably when Ireland’s constitutional reformations made an Irish woman’s identity and sexuality central
issues in their political agenda, they effectively made an Irish woman’s identity and sexuality a political debate, and O’Brien was one of the first women to speak out. The *Country Girl’s Trilogy* challenged the Catholic patriarchal marriage narrative formalized directly in the Irish Constitution, and in very deliberate ways. In *The Country Girls* (1960), marriage is shown to be in a state of degradation, Kate and Baba defy their Catholic School’s attempt to confine their sexuality, and Kate’s subsequent affair with the much older Mr. Gentleman refutes the Catholic notion that marriages are indestructible. *The Lonely Girl* (1962), the longest study of the three novels, portrays a direct confrontation between battling patriarchal wills and the reaction of the female subject when Kate’s abusive father tries to forcibly take her from Eugene Gaillard, who he sees as a despicable adulterer and foreigner. In *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964), a title obviously made ironic by the novel’s unhappy events, O’Brien explores both the consequences of divorce for Kate and the abusive relationship between Baba and her Irish husband Frank. Moreover, the epilogue added in 1986 engages the loss of Kate to the pressures of the patriarchal, and chivalric, marriage narrative. On broader terms, the course of the *Trilogy*, Kate and Baba’s migration out of rural Ireland to the city of Dublin and their consecutive emigration to London, develops contrary to de Valera’s desired return to rural Irish roots, and subsequently, reveals to the world that Ireland was losing its citizens in spite of, or because of, de Valera’s reformations. In writing the *Trilogy*, O’Brien deliberately and openly contradicts the premises of the State and reveals the consequences women incurred from a nationally defined identity and sexuality.
O’Brien’s first act in designing the *Trilogy* in fact challenged the very representations of women promoted by nationalism. She designed her main characters to resemble, but not fulfill, the iconic gender models passed down through the generations from the heights of a romantic and patriotic nationalism. In writing the *Trilogy*, O’Brien kept in mind the two predominating representations of women given to her from childhood:

> It was with this jumble of association and dream and hope that I first sat down to write. Realizing that the earlier heroines were bawdy and the later ones lyrical I decided to have two, one who would conform to both my own and my country's view of what an Irish woman should be and one who would undermine every piece of protocol and religion and hypocrisy that there was. (“Why”)

She offers the romantic colleen image specific to de Valera’s era for Kate and the strong revolutionary woman from the previous war of independence era for Baba. Kate, with her auburn hair and marked vulnerability particularly resembles the colleen image doubly influenced by Hybernia, the 18th century woman symbolic of an Ireland ravaged by a colonial Britain, and the post-colonial, Catholic addition of the Virgin Mary, the personification of purity and motherhood. While Baba oppositely takes on a heady abandon as well as any of the revolutionary heroines O’Brien lists as Baba’s influences: Maude Gonne, Constance Markievics, and Pegeen Mike of J. M. Synge’s “Playboy of the Western World” (“Why”). However in the Trilogy, neither Kate nor Baba will fulfill the grandeur these representations of women stand for or endorse.

Contrary to O’Brien’s first intention to have Kate conform, in the novels, Kate is vulnerable but never pure, and Baba is never completely independent or revolutionizing. Conversely, O’Brien shows neither of the representations to be
practical or reflective of an Irish woman’s reality. Kate cannot live up to the pressure of de Valera’s Catholic ideals and the cult of Mary any more than Baba can break free of them—although both develop their desires around those pursuits. In this way, O’Brien defies a long tradition of personifications, and also literary conventions, that promote fantasy images of the Irish woman, while at the same time, she also documents the great effect such images have had on Irish women individually and collectively. O’Brien recognizes that even in a number of contemporary literatures “in describing the life of young women and girls in rural Ireland, the ‘real’ is already filtered through fantasy, and lived experience is already shot through with the stereotypical images current in Irish literary and popular culture” (Wills 5.1582)

In choosing to engage the influential relationship between national representations and women during the abeyance period, O’Brien also uncovers a man’s relationship to the same nationally promoted images of women. If the colleen of de Valera’s era (a hybrid Hybernia specifically mixed with the Virgin Mary), anticipated the purity of a new generation of mothers never far from the hearth and home, what was anticipated of the male population was to furnish protection for those women and that hearth and home. Attached to this view of manhood is the accrual of what has been generously discussed among gender scholars as a kind of hyper-masculinity among Irish males, one of defending protectorate and defensive stance. This stance, however, could have devastating effects on men if they found themselves unable to achieve the persona. The Irish-Catholic patriarchal marriage narrative anticipated not only men as breadwinners, but as heightened chivalric heroes rescuing
and defending their wives and families. Women, in turn, were expected to long for and await their rescue while emulating a combination of patience, virginity, and motherhood, or in other words, as the hybrid Hybernia de Valera encouraged, a Hybernia ironically both sexless (with its inclusion of the Virgin Mary) and yet sexed within the confines of propagation and nurturance.

The interaction between O’Brien’s mock female representations, Kate the vulnerable and Baba the rebellious, and the men they encounter in the Trilogy importantly revolves around the chivalric storyline. Kate searches time and again for the heroic man to replace her reprehensible and alcoholic father, while Baba considers herself fortunate to be wealthy, even if it means defending against an abusive husband. Kate and Baba’s failure to find men that demonstrate chivalry and fulfill their roles as protectorates, rather than abusers, ultimately explodes a post-colonial Ireland’s perception of male gender roles while also undermining the Catholic assumption that there are no justifications or grounds for divorce.

The marriages in O’Brien’s first novel, The Country Girls, all cry out in the very least for reconsideration. There is no example of a happy marriage to be seen. Instead, all parties seem to look outside their marriages to accumulate what’s lacking at home, and additionally, they act covertly to hide the fact. Kate’s own family is as far away from reflecting the ideals of de Valera as one could write. Even the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Brady have had only one daughter, Kate, frustrates the notion of nation building. Mrs. Brady seems to have waited patiently for a chivalric rescue only to find the reality is a drunken, absent, and abusive husband of whom she has to deceive in
order to obtain money for the groceries. Without being able to count on her husband, she turns to her own devices or to outsiders, like their live-in farmhand, Hickey, who works the farm in place of the alcoholic Mr. Brady, or the elderly neighbor Jack who is allowed to touch her knee under the table “because Jack was decent to her, with presents of candied peel and chocolate and samples of jam that he got from commercial travelers” (O’Brien T 14). One of O’Brien’s descriptions of Mrs. Brady associates her with hens pecking out their existence:

“Ah, that’s life, some work and others spend,” she said as she went off toward the yard with the bucket. Some of the hens perched on the rim of the bucket, picking. Her right shoulder sloped more than her left from carrying buckets. She was dragged down from heavy work, working to keep the place going, and at nighttime making lampshades and fire screens to make the house prettier. (T 8)

Mrs. Brady’s influence and death are a lasting impression on daughter Kate throughout the Trilogy. Mrs. Brady drowns early in the novel either in an attempt to leave her husband, or in an attempt to procure the few bags of groceries that the married man accompanying her brings along with them in the boat that capsizes on Shannon Lake. Neither Kate’s mother nor the strange man are ever found, but he leaves behind a wife and five children, and at a loss, Kate concludes, “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 then anyone I had ever heard of’ (O’Brien T 45).

Morgan reasons that Mrs. Brady and her death are related to another nationalist female representation:

In portraying Mrs. Brady as a victim of both her husband and the times, O’Brien places suffering in a historically specific social context. Mrs. Brady does bear
some physical resemblance to the Shan Van Vocht (the poor old woman) of nationalist mythology: Caithleen carries in her mind an image of her mother as a stooped woman, old before her time, who cries and sighs incessantly as she toils on the farm.

O’Brien in fact ends the Trilogy with Kate’s own drowning as a retrogression of repeating history. The nationalist image of Kate as a young colleen would like to refuse “the poor old woman” image of the Shan Van Vocht, but eventually time turns against Kate as it did for her mother before her, which is exactly what she seems to fear throughout the novels. Kate fears that she will either marry and be unhappy or that she won’t find someone before she turns into an old maid and suffers spinsterhood, which are both realized unfortunately, because after her marriage ends in divorce, Kate never remaries. Kate’s plight is further reflective of the few choices offered Irish women in life.

As with Lois in The Last September, Kate’s limited choices are compounded at first by a lack of suitors in the rural village where she grows up. Her only choices are drawn between the unattractive Tom (or the Ferret as everybody calls him), the debonair, yet married and middle aged, Mr. Gentleman, or the “sixty or seventy” year old Jack who once fondled her mother’s knee (O’Brien T 275). Jack does after all hold the deed to the family’s dilapidated estate house, which he uses for a familiar kind of manipulation on a young Kate to get her to marry him. The ties between Kate and her mother like those they share with Jack are intentional on O’Brien’s part. Kate will show a pattern of reliving, in part, her mother’s experiences, and O’Brien directs her underlying message of the novels towards the rhetorical assertion that the pattern of repeating an oppressive history must come to an end.
Baba also shares a connective relationship with her mother, Martha, although Martha lives under very different marital circumstances than Mrs. Brady. Baba’s father, Mr. Brennan, is a well-respected veterinarian who provides well for his family, as Kate learns when she is taken into Baba’s family after her mother’s death. (Mr. Brennan even defends Kate against her brooding father on occasion.) Martha, however, is discontent in her marriage because she once had a career as a dancer, and once commanded the attention of many men. Her husband at times is treated as a resented outsider because of it. Consequently, Martha retells her sad story for all the children to hear, exclaiming at the ending “I could have married a hundred men, a hundred men cried at my wedding” (O’Brien T 32). Morgan writes, “Whereas Mrs. Brady's sacrifices for her family are visible in her everyday labor, Martha's sacrifices—that she gave up a ballet career and potentially posher lifestyle for marriage--must be ritualistically narrated to her children” (O’Brien T 5). In this way, Martha sets higher economic standards for her children’s future marriages than her own, while lowering the value on other reasons for marrying such as the simple pursuit of happiness, which she sees as largely unobtainable or monetarily fruitless.

Martha consoles herself over her plight by flirting with strangers in the lounge of the Greyhound Hotel in the first novel, but by the middle of The Lonely Girl she has traded that in for religious renewal, going so far as visiting Oberammergau in Germany to attend the Passion, while also condemning Kate’s relationship with a divorced Eugene Gaillard for religious reasons. However, as described in Girls in Their Married Bliss, the underlying Martha never really changes. Martha will never
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develop a close relationship with Baba, but is only too happy that Baba succeeds her in marrying a richer man than she did:

Because of his money my mother was over here in London having the life of Riley: her corns attended to, new clothes, gin slings every evening in hotels [...] My mother had a right old time. ‘He’s a good man Frank,’ she’d say to me across the table in one of those lurid places, and then she’d look around for him and raise her glass and say ‘Frank, take care,’” and they’d drink to me: the bloody sacrificial lamb. (O’Brien T 386).

Baba tentatively explains further:

I don’t want to sound all martyrish about it, it’s just that I didn’t tell her things, but I did mention this physical ordeal and she said it would be all right, to just grit my teeth and suffer it. She said it was because of physical attraction that most marriages went wallop, that physical attraction was another form of dope. Dope was my mother’s word for anything people got by on. I don’t hold it against her. (O’Brien T 386)

Martha essentially suggests that Baba sacrifice her emotional and sexual needs for a monetarily secure future because it not only serves Baba but also serves Martha’s own satisfaction. Martha thinks nothing of what the actual consequences might be for Baba; mother and daughter aren’t close enough to discuss the details. Instead Martha offers Baba only an empty way to blankly accept self-sacrifice, a practice of martyrdom Martha knows from her own life.

Fittingly, O’Brien associates Martha with the martyrdom present in the cult of Mary and the nun’s in the convent school episodes: “Martha looked pale, but then she was always pale. She had a pale Madonna face with eyelids always lowered […] Not that Martha was motherly. She was too beautiful and cold for that. […] blue-black pile of hair, Madonna face, perched on a high stool in the lounge bar of the Greyhound Hotel” (T 30, 31). The image of the Madonna sitting up to the bar and flirting with
hotel patrons outright mocks the coveted representations of the Virgin Mary, and although the description is attributable to a sense of humor on O’Brien’s part, it must have maddened early Irish censors. What’s important for the novels is that Baba will follow her mother’s pattern of attention-seeking behavior, and furthermore, Martha as the vain primadonna and Mrs. Brady as the lone martyr together provide the social conditioning for the near polarized opposites Kate and Baba.

O’Brien develops tension in Kate and Baba’s friendship around the differing traits passed on from their mothers. If Kate is consistently unsure of her direction, Baba’s ambition is the force that moves the duo first to Dublin and then to London by using powers ranging from flamboyant personality to blatant coercion. If Kate is the kind of girl that wants to bring flowers to her teacher in order to feel accepted, Baba is the kind of girl who steals those flowers and smugly reaps the gratitude confidently, as she does in O’Brien’s first depiction of her (T16). Kate is both in awe of Baba’s determination and afraid of her fluctuations between joviality and downright mean tactics. Baba picks on Kate like a weaker sibling and even later threatens to reveal Kate’s interludes with the married Mr. Gentleman to his wife, until Kate bribes her with her dead mother’s “best ring” (O’Brien T62). Baba, at the same time, secretly envies Kate for any thing she obtains, whether it be the coat Eugene Gaillard buys for her or the scholarship she achieves in order to go to the private girl’s school at the convent. When Baba thinks she needs the privilege of attending the convent too, she makes her father pay for it, and then writes a note to Kate bragging that her way is better: “My father has it all fixed. I have my uniform got. Of course we’re paying,
It’s nicer when you pay. You’re a right-looking eejit” (O’Brien T 18). Again for Baba, accomplishment is equated with money. By the time they leave for the convent school, the two are suffering another bout of not speaking to each other, and consequently, they find out mostly on their own that the convent is not the place they want to be.

Instead of being welcomed into the endearing folds of religious devotion, the nuns at the convent provide an environment so bleak that the girls spend their first night accompanied by the crying of the entire dormitory, including themselves. Over the course of their education (which strongly resembles a prison internment), Kate finds a slug in her cabbage, their mail is intercepted for content, and their only encouragement is derived from a nun’s story about St. Teresa, who “worked in a laundry and let the soap spatter into her eyes as an act of mortification” (O’Brien T 73, 75, 80). Consequently, “Baba had got very quiet and she was not a favorite with the nuns. She was put standing for three hours in the chapels, because Sister Margaret overheard her saying the Holy Name” and Kate also worries herself to fatigue in trying to maintain her high grades (O’Brien T 80). The nuns are shown to be highly adversarial rather than enlightening when the nuns very efficiently pass down the modes of self-denial and self-flagellation to their interns. Reprehensibly, a Sister confiscates Kate’s tea service, the one possession she brought along to remember her mother, and never returns it. After that, any reminder of comfort is gone: “‘Jesus, ‘tis hell,’ [Baba] said. ‘I won’t stick it for a week’” (O’Brien T 69). However, the
promise of the modicum of independence their convent education promises the girls keeps them in school for the next three years (O’Brien T 101).

Morgan shows the duality unintentionally and unknowingly generated at the convent:

although brought up not to mention or enjoy sex, from their mothers' behavior Caithleen and Baba learn the uses of sexuality. At the convent, however, they must shun their bodies altogether. One of the cardinal rules of convent life, in fact, is that girls must "dress and undress under the shelter of their dressing gowns."

Taught through the cult of Mary that virginity is the ultimate virtue, but constantly reminded that in order to obtain marriage they have to be either desired or desirous, the girls struggle with both. The sequestering of the girls into the purely homosocial world of the dormitory does little to quell their sexuality both in the convent and back home, however. In fact, Kate and Baba’s first sexual awakening runs opposite the marriage narrative entirely when Kate reveals her sex-play with Baba in an elm grove back home: “Baba and I sat there and shared secrets, and once we took our knickers off and tickled one another. The greatest secret of all. Baba used to say she would tell, and every time she said that, I gave her a hankie or a new tartan ribbon or something” (O’Brien T 8). In the absence of an amiable friendship with Baba in the convent, however, Kate nurtures a relationship with a schoolmate named Cynthia that initiates further homoeroticism. In a subtle lesbian context later revisited in O’Brien’s short story “Sister Imelda,” (1984) (a story about a convent girl’s attraction to a nun) Kate and Cynthia turn to each other for comfort. Cynthia entices Kate by telling her a romantic story about a nun who “ran away with the gardener last year,” jumping over the high wall at night to leave with him (O’Brien T 77, 78). Kate recalls clearly what
happened after the story: “That night, when I was going to bed, Cynthia kissed me on the landing. She kissed me every night after that. We would have been killed if we were caught” (O’Brien 78). Notably, Baba becomes moderately jealous over the affair, resenting losing power over Kate, “She was begging me to exclude Cynthia from our walks and our little chats together. I think I stopped being afraid of Baba that night, and I went to bed quite happily” (O’Brien 78-79). Kate’s flirtation with Cynthia inside the convent clearly falls outside the heterosexual design of the Church and Ireland at the time. Thus Kate’s homoerotic relationship is an integral step towards her potential sexual independence, and O’Brien is signaling that there is at least one road towards liberation that is contrary to the patriarchal marriage narrative, albeit one that Kate does not feel compelled for long to follow.

Additionally, O’Brien explores another avenue that side winds along side the course of a patriarchal marriage. During visits back home for holidays and school breaks, Kate attracts the married Mr. Gentleman, which is an adulterous relationship only heightened by the overtones of pedophilia. Kate is just fourteen and has known Mr. Gentleman most of her life when he classically offers her a ride as she waits for the bus (O’Brien 53). Kate’s narration, however, romanticizes every encounter with Mr. Gentleman, not registering any strangeness about the situation or the age difference, which may indicate that the situation was not uncommon. The reason in part may also be the very grandness of the idea in obtaining Mr. Gentleman’s affections even if he is middle-aged. Mr. Gentleman, whose real name is Mr. de Maurier, is a French solicitor of wealth and respected standing in Kate’s village, and
women of every status including Martha and Baba admire him for his sophistication. His wife, however, is portrayed as anti-social and is hardly ever present for reasons unexplained. Kate describes her as a tall, dark, overly religious and “eccentric” woman, which seems to justify Kate’s exclusion of the woman from her thoughts (O’Brien T 13). The suggestion, however, is that Mr. Gentleman is trapped in a marriage with an overly cold-hearted woman. Another reason Kate so desires Mr. Gentleman’s attention is the psychological tie-in with her father. Whereas, her father is offensive, neglectful, and abusive, the affluent Mr. Gentleman lavishes her with affection, kisses, and presents. An underlying implication of a patriarchal marriage narrative is, after all, the idea that a child-like wife caters to the affectionate and rewarding “Daddy-like” male partner. The many gifts Mr. Gentleman offers a young and needy Kate seems to be in the back of her mind when she decides to go along with Baba’s scheme to get them kicked out of the convent; it will get her to Dublin sooner. During the summer holiday just before returning to school, Mr. Gentleman takes Kate out on his boat:

We rowed to an island far out from the shore, and boiled a kettle on his primus stove to make tea. It was a happy time, and he often kissed my hand and said I was his freckle-faced daughter.

“Are you my father?” I asked wistfully, because it was nice playing make-believe with Mr. Gentleman.

“Yes, I’m your father,” he said as he kissed the length of my arm, and he promised that when I went to Dublin later on he would be a very attentive father. (O’Brien T 101)

Baba’s plan to free them from the convent in order get them to Dublin even faster uses the kind of sexuality she knows the Sisters will condemn as the most abominable: sex between their own Sister Mary and Father Tom (O’Brien T 104).
Both of the girls sign their name to a note revealing the alleged affair, and Baba drops it in the chapel leaving it there to be found; Baba narrates the note’s reception:

That mope Peggy Darcy handed it to Sister Margaret below in the recreation hall, and didn’t old Margaret think ‘twas a prayer and she began to read it out loud. […] she went purple around the mouth and began to fume around the recreation hall. She beat several girls with her strap, and she was yelling, ‘Where are they, where are they, those children of Satan!’” (O’Brien 7105).

It is a scene almost predictable in outcome, and yet a scene about the rejection and condemnation of sexuality at its extreme. On one side, it’s taken for granted that nuns and priests wouldn’t have sex and that reverence is given to those taking vows; and yet on the other side, O’Brien is incensed enough to write about disrespecting and crossing those great boundaries. With this boundary in mind, Mac Curtain provides a timeline that shows O’Brien wrote early in the sixties what later novelists would also explore:

It is worth noting that women writing from the 1970s to the 1990s, that is, from a perspective of a late-twentieth-century vantage point, take a backward look at the Catholicism of their youth to recall a lost innocence and to settle old scores with austere convent schools, whereas writers of previous generations critique the authoritarian patterns of family and social behaviour mediated by church teaching, which relegated women to a passive and subservient station in life. […] Catholic culture in the first half of the twentieth century had to wait for the language and methodology of feminist theology to critique a patriarchal and gendered church. (4.570, 571)

When O’Brien wrote about Kate and Baba’s life and defiance in the convent in 1960, her retrospective account was one of the first attempts to bring out into the open the past experiences of Irish women because previous women writers had indeed felt the pressures of censorship and societal castigation too great in doing so. If Elizabeth Bowen offered abeyance period women the valuable chance to look back on a less
oppressive era, O’Brien offered a hindsight that, once evaluated and purged, allowed women to move forward as well. Kate and Baba indeed felt freed when they left the convent school, even though there was a certain amount of shame attached to the act that released them.

With the main obstacle of *The Country Girls*, the convent, out of the way, Kate and Baba settle in as flat-mates in a boarding house in Dublin run by the elderly and not un-motherly Joanna. The transition from country to city is relatively easy and mostly exciting at first. Kate fits into the friendly grocery where she works, and Baba directs their nightlife, which involves dances and dates, and obtaining the finery for those occasions. However, what seems to be the common events of any young, single women needs to be further compared to their era and social setting. Heather Ingman reminds, “Their eager embrace of the single life in the city provides a counter-narrative to the nationalist construct of Ireland as a family-centred and rural nation” (255). In moving to Dublin, Kate and Baba are just one step away, literally one book away, from emigration, and Ireland is just that far from losing some of its citizens.

Additionally, O’Brien compounds their risqué city life at the ending of *The Country Girls* by making Kate’s relationship with Mr. Gentleman the last and lesser struggle taking place after the dénouement of their expulsion from the convent school.

Perhaps intentionally, O’Brien writes past a positive ending in *The Country Girls*, which could have ended happily after the girl’s arrival in Dublin. However, Kate has just enough time to become bored with Dublin’s nightlife and the uncultured youths she dates before Mr. Gentleman shows up again. She is, after all, finally
eighteen (O’Brien T 145). Logically, Mr. Gentleman could have stayed in the countryside and the girls could have been left content in the freedom of single-life for a positive ending. Ultimately, however, after they nearly have sex, Mr. Gentleman offers Kate the chance to become his mistress and travel to Vienna with him where they will finally consummate and resolve his frustration. They even set a date for the trip, and Kate schedules a week off from work. Although instead of actually leaving, Kate is left standing out in the rain waiting for him. Mr. Gentleman’s telegram reads: ‘EVERTHING GONE WRONG. THREATS FROM YOUR FATHER. MY WIFE HAS ANOTHER NERVOUS BREAKDOWN. REGRET ENFORCED SILENCE. MUST NOT SEE YOU” (O’Brien T 175). His telegram trails the ending of the novel off into an unexpected and unfinished place for the reader and will also lead into and foreshadow the events in the second novel, The Lonely Girl. This serial ending strategy will also be used for the next two books as well. However, at the time of writing the first novel, the serial ending suggests O’Brien knew there was much more to write, and writing more in the next two novels, must have been like a purgation of pent up feeling.

In The Lonely Girl, O’Brien balances a study of Kate’s inner psychology with the main action of the novel; the confrontation between the patriarch of her childhood and the patriarch who she hopes will be her future husband. Baba is largely played down as a character, returning in the end to support her friend and to initiate their move to London. Away from rural Ireland and centered on Dublin, the main frustration of the plot is that Kate, now 21, has fallen in love, but her new lover, she
Breeden knows, is not what society will smile upon. On the surface level, Eugene Gaillard has a secure, international reputation as a documentary film director and seems promising in providing well for Kate. However, on a societal level, Eugene is also 35, not a Catholic, not quite divorced, has a child, and even though he has lived most of his life in Ireland, he has spent time abroad and is considered a foreigner (O’Brien T 284, 298). At one point, Kate’s entire village seems to scorn her for the relationship, school children taunt her, and Kate recalls her Aunt’s words of condemnation, “Divorce is worse than murder” (O’Brien T 260). In spite of this, Kate tries to dismiss everyone’s apprehensions including her own, admiring Eugene’s affluence as well as she did Mr. Gentleman’s, and retreating with him to his country estate, where for the first time she learns to cook and help manage a household. The relationship is only a semblance of what the Irish patriarchal marriage narrative anticipates however. Eugene places Kate in the right domestic setting, but his divorce makes him a highly unsuitable patriarch. All the while, however, Kate is further ignoring the conflicts from trying to meld very different backgrounds, which ultimately dissolves the relationship at the end of the book.

Eugene’s worldliness clearly doesn’t correspond to what Kate is: a young, country girl, although both are attracted to each other based on these unmatched qualities. Kate favors Eugene’s sophistication, and oppositely, Eugene is enticed by her still virginal innocence. However, with time, both will come to resent each other for these exact same traits. Kate is intimidated each time Eugene invites his affluent friends (including other women) to the house, and she is likewise threatened by the
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glamour of his wife who lives in America and personifies a classic Hollywood actress. In good times, Kate thinks, “Eugene guarded me like a child, taught me things, gave me books to read,” but in bad times, she accuses him, “You just make little of me and ignore me” (O’Brien T 323, 358). His answer is just as revealing: “Am I to stop talking to people because you haven’t learned to speak yet? If you can’t accommodate yourself to seeing me being amused by other human beings, we’d better just both go home right now,” (O’Brien T 358). The dynamics of their relationship are doubly stressed and made strange by the fact that she doesn’t have sex with him for a long time while living with him, and it should be underscored, that they wait until after the confrontation with her father to consummate their union.

Kate is thus unable to cross the sexual boundaries established in her upbringing until she feels Eugene can indeed overthrow those ties for her. Kate’s afraid, and Eugene appears patient, but perhaps he indulges in her virginity as a fetish. The couple’s arrangement firstly carries the connotations of the cult of Mary and relationally for Kate what Howes describes as a kind of “self-censorship and the internalization of social constraints” due to the extreme secreting of sexuality in Irish society (4.929). Howes recognizes the pattern in literature: “The most common sexual tragedy in these selections [of the anthology section] is the tragedy of a character who voluntarily renounces sexual happiness or is unable to embrace it when it is offered” (4.929). Secondly, this relationship also resembles Kate’s earlier relationship with the pedophilic Mr. Gentleman, which speaks loudly of Kate’s distorted psychological attachment to her abusive father. Eugene indeed manifests
both the abusiveness of Kate’s father and the generosity of Mr. Gentleman. Eugene first builds Kate up and then brings her down in a classic pattern of abuse that will chronically grow worse through both *The Lonely Girl* and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* when they are married.

The consequences in leaping from one patriarch in childhood directly to another in marriage (and when marriage is designed that way nationally) is that the woman is perpetually the child, never fully in charge of her life or environment. The struggle between the childhood patriarch and the marriage patriarch is what O’Brien showcases in *The Lonely Girl*, but the author’s rhetorical and political message resounds of more than that. In portraying a clash of patriarchs, O’Brien exposes the chivalric storyline that is underwriting the social makeup of her nation as well. The patriarchal marriage narrative is brought out and examined for its implications, connotations, and degradations of Irish women. And, Kate seems absolutely socially conditioned to stay beholden to the power-play, or rather, to stay the child caught in the middle. During the scene, Kate is, in fact, hidden under the bed for most of the ordeal (O’Brien 295).

The battle between Mr. Brady and Eugene is more than just a battle between men, as Ingman is the first to point out:

Ireland as defined by Caithleen’s [Kate’s] father and his companions is narrowly Catholic. Their country is their property and they have the right to expel anyone who doesn’t fit into their definition of Irishness. “We won our fight for freedom. It’s our country now”, Andy said. “We can have her put away. She’s not all there’ my father said.” (256)
To her father, Kate is like a commodity, yet unfortunately, Kate’s willingness to let Eugene defend her makes Kate his possession too. When Eugene hesitates in declaring his intentions to her father, saying “I haven’t any intentions” at first and then recouping with “I suppose in time I would like to marry her and have children…who knows,” Kate reverts to self-denigration and Catholicism in a mindset that accepts her status as an object: “He doesn’t really want me, I thought as I took short, quick breaths and said an Act of Contrition, thinking that I was near my end. I don’t know why I stayed under there, it was stifling” (O’Brien T 298). The main bartering point between Mr. Brady and Eugene becomes a question of whether or not Eugene will “turn” Catholic (298). However, Eugene has already revealed his aversion to the faith: “Catholics were the most opinionated people on earth—their self-mania, he said, frightened him,” even though Kate has already insisted on a Catholic wedding when and if it should take place (O’Brien T 201). Without Eugene’s acceptance of Catholicism, negotiations are over and the scene quickly becomes ugly. “’Look at the nose of him—you know what he is? They’ll be running this bloody country soon,’ Andy said” reminding everyone that foreigners could invade at any moment and wreck a post-colonial Ireland by seducing Irish women: “God, ‘tis a bloody shame, ruining a girl like that” (O’Brien T 299). The group’s xenophobia becomes transparent.

Without Eugene to defend her, Kate would indeed be ruined. If she returns to her Dublin apartment her father will abduct her back home for the second time in the novel, and once there, she will have to live with a tarnished reputation: “’She’s over
twenty-one, you can’t force her,’ Eugene said, ‘not even in Ireland’” (O’Brien T 299). But hooliganism boils over and Eugene is punched and kicked to the floor until Kate suddenly appears out from under the bed and the housekeeper shoots a shotgun into the air. Kate’s father mistakes his daughter for the ghost of his dead wife: “Oh, Lil, oh, Lily,” he whispered, and backed away from me clutching his teeth. Long after, I realized that he thought I was Mama risen from her grave in the Shannon lake. I must have looked like a ghost—my face daubed with tears and gray dust, my hair hanging in my eyes” (O’Brien T 301). In the paradox of the moment, Kate has become both the mother and daughter wrecked by her father’s way of life and holding him accountable, a foreshadowing of Kate’s drowning in the tragic epilogue to come. Along the same lines, O’Brien is holding the patriarchal and xenophobic nationalism that perpetuates Mr. Brady’s wrath accountable. Kate’s ghostly appearance and the shotgun stun the sensibilities of Mr. Brady; he very nearly has a heart attack and leaves defeated without his daughter. The confrontation ends in part as Kate’s victory over the childhood patriarch, and yet, she is still beholden to Eugene as a new patriarch and prospective husband.

For a time after the confrontation, Eugene pleases Kate, buying her a “marriage ring” and romancing her, although he is still not yet divorced (O’Brien T 314). The couple has sex for the first time in seeming recognition of overthrowing the old regime, and Kate “felt different from Baba now and wondered if Baba had experienced this and if she had been afraid, or if she liked it. I thought of Mama and of how she used to blow on hot soup before she gave it to me” (O’Brien T 317). Kate
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associates the power of extramarital sex with her mother in an odd moment of enlightenment, and perhaps too, wishes someone had prepared her better. Just afterwards, Baba once again matches and then exceeds Kate’s gain when she reveals she has had sex and may even be pregnant. However, poignantly within months of Kate giving her virginity to Eugene, he begins to negate their arrangement with frustrations over their age difference.

Once again, O’Brien is finished with the main drama of the book, and moves Kate towards the serial ending that leads to the next novel. This time, however, O’Brien is also foiling the traditional rescue that usually ends the chivalric romance, if only temporarily. Kate tires of Eugene’s condescension of both her age and religion, and more so the letters from his wife in America trying to persuade him to stay married to her instead. The dilemma demonstrates that an actual romance is much more complicated than the chivalric narrative affords. In the end, Kate devises a plan to bluff Eugene out of his moodiness and make him hasten towards divorce by returning to Baba in Dublin, although she has no intentions to stay away for long. When Eugene doesn’t call her back to the estate, however, she falls into a depression bordering hysterics with fits of crying. Baba, the only one that manages to bring her out of it, spontaneously offers to fund Kate’s move to London with her: “’Come to England,’ she said to me. ‘We’ll have a whale of a time. Striptease girls in Soho, that’s what we’ll be’” (O’Brien T 363). Pointedly when Kate finally accepts (anticipating Eugene’s rescue all the way to the boat fittingly named The Hibernia), Kate’s father is more supportive of her emigration than any plan to marry the un-
Catholic and un-divorced Eugene: “My father was delighted. In a letter he praised me for being so loyal to my family, and to my religion. He sent me fifty pounds’ reward” (O’Brien T 367, 375). Even though emigration is contrary to Mr. Brady’s valued nationalism, it may be short-lived, while the wrong marriage for Kate would have been life long. Although shortly before the girls leave, Kate has already foreshadowed for the third book, Girls in Their Married Bliss, what will ruin Baba’s ideas of their sexual liberation in London: “it occurred to me that if I had a baby he would probably marry me” (O’Brien T 349).

O’Brien’s use of Kate’s dependency in the second novel demonstrates the danger in accepting the chivalric storyline as the only means to a happy ending. Kate is increasingly affected by the failure of that fantasy to play out. The initial disappointment Kate feels over Mr. Gentleman’s inability to take her away from her plight in the first novel escalates into serious distress over Eugene’s refusal to fill that role in the second novel. Morgan sees the implications of Kate following the debilitating gender role afforded her:

Caithleen's [Kate’s] inability to see her circumstances in terms other than those by which her mother lived—that is to say, her unquestioning acceptance of the twin roles of victim and romantic heroine—exemplifies, O'Brien intimates, the most damaging effect of gendered nationalist mythologies. Instead of analyzing their conditions, young Irish women learned to perceive them through the lens of romance, and consequently to trust their well-being and happiness to men. Of course, in a society that restricts women’s rights and access to power as severely as early postcolonial Ireland did, dependence on men is practically inevitable.

By the time Kate reaches the third novel, she has become so intent in recovering her role in the chivalric romance, in spite of changing locations from Dublin to London, that she pursues Eugene a second time.
Ironically, instead of reaching out to the new way of life London would likely afford the girls, both Kate and Baba continue the ways of life they learned from their mothers and followed in Ireland. Kate captures her chivalric hero, Eugene, and Baba marries Frank, the richest Irish man she can find in London. However, in obtaining what they thought they desired, indeed what their country ensured they would desire, they are both dissatisfied to say the least. In their inability to embrace independence in a new country, O’Brien suggests that social conditioning isn’t so easily overcome. Just as finding the heroic male to improve their lives isn’t the answer, changing locations doesn’t seem to be the answer either. For with every passing moment in *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, O’Brien is insisting that the results from imposing an oppressive, chivalric marriage narrative on women are both lasting and disastrous. *Girls in Their Married Bliss* quickly becomes a cataclysm of disappointments and setbacks for both Kate and Baba, and unfortunately, they can only rely on each other.

Perhaps in part to reunite Kate and Baba more thoroughly in the third novel, O’Brien makes distinct changes to the narration. The narration changes from Kate’s singular voice in the first two novels to an alternation between Baba’s first-person narration and a third-person narrator used to disclose Kate’s perspective, and the strategy noticeably alters the tone for the reader. The change strengthens the friendship of Kate and Baba on one level; but on another, the shift to Baba’s first-person narration plays up Baba’s role and agency while the third-person narrator used for Kate plays down her connection with the reader and reflects the detachment and depression Kate is slipping into. It’s as if Kate needs a narrator to describe her life by
this point, or that O’Brien is directing the reader towards a stronger connection with Baba. James M. Cahalan suggests the author’s writing strategy changed when “O’Brien became increasingly critical of Kate’s plight, choosing in Girls in Their Married Bliss and the epilogue to switch the narrator to Baba, who is a much tougher feminist alternative to Caithleen/Kate throughout the trilogy (119). However, O’Brien’s elevation of Baba’s implied fortitude over Kate’s may be more an issue of degree rather than an issue of real difference. For Baba doesn’t manage to reach beyond her social conditioning either, although there are differences between how the two character’s backgrounds allow them to cope with their situations. Morgan explains a main difference between Kate and Baba: “whereas Kate's unrealistic expectations continually set her up for disappointment, pragmatic Baba never loses sight of the fact that in the existing social system, husbands and lovers are more likely to beat women, as her own spouse does periodically, than to safeguard their happiness or compensate for past traumas.” Whereas Kate considers her failed marriage in the third book a personal failure and consequently punishes herself, Baba avoids the pitfalls of forming a marriage around love altogether and instead forms her marriage around economic satisfaction.

Consequently, each character in turn reveals the downfall of the other’s mode of pursuit. Baba does indeed have a very different perspective on Kate’s life:

We weren’t here a year when she remet a crank called Eugene Gaillard, whom she’d known in Ireland. They took up their old refrain, fell in love, or thought they did, and lost no time making puke of it. The marriage was in the sacristy of a Catholic church. Question of having to. They wouldn’t do it out front because he was divorced and she was heavily pregnant. I was bridesmaid. Pink chiffon and hat with a veil, for which they paid. I looked like the bride. She was in a big,
floppy, striped maternity dress and a child’s face on her. She’s sly, the sort that would look like a child even if she kept her mother in a wardrobe. The priest didn’t look toward her stomach once. (O’Brien T 381)

Similarly, Kate’s narrator chronicles the implications of Baba’s marriage:

Baba owned one ranch-mink stole and intended owning several more. She’d even promised one to Kate. Baba had hazel eyes that drooped at the corners and were inclined to flashes of wickedness. An occasional blow from her husband gave to one or the other of those green eyes a permanent knowingness, as if at twenty-five she realized what life was all about. She had plans for them both to leave their husbands one day when they’d accumulated furs and diamonds, (O’Brien T 390)

By only a degree one scenario may be better than the other one. However, what determines Baba as the survivor in the end is her ability to distance herself from the emotional bonds that consume Kate.

Kate’s dedication to the idea of chivalric rescue lets her down hard when her life story doesn’t fulfill the ideals laid out for her. When Eugene’s abuse and neglect has Kate looking once again in an outside affair for the idealized love she doesn’t find at home, Eugene separates from her, falls for another young girl, the maid Maura, and in the end, vengefully takes Cash, their child, out of the country, leaving Kate to provide for herself by working at a laundry. Kate’s employment is most likely an intentional reference on O’Brien’s part to the unwedded mothers or wayward girls that were sent to work under terrible conditions in the Magdalene laundries. Neither Kate’s remorse nor her desperation to mend their relationship has any affect on Eugene, however. In her despair over finding herself displaced in society and replaced by Maura in both her husband and son’s life, Kate “said nothing about the years of emotional pummeling from him, or her own compulsion to love on an octave note from one day to the next” but rather thought “If only she had the decency to kill
herself. Water was the gentlest way to suicide” remembering her mother’s drowning (O’Brien T 447).

O’Brien goes so far as to revise the ending of Girls in Their Married Bliss in 1967, to heighten, as Eckley words it, “The hopelessness of the female condition” (29). Instead of ending the third novel with Kate and Baba’s idea of leaving for yet another country, as she originally planned, O’Brien ends it with Kate’s act to sterilize herself, so that she can bear no other children that can be taken away from her. Kate’s choice to end her fertility is the last point of power she feels she can control. Pivotal, during a psychiatric appointment after her initial breakdown and hospitalization, Kate connects her own weaknesses to those of her mother: “Her mother’s kindness and her mother’s accidental drowning had always given her a mantle of perfection” and “Now suddenly she saw that woman in a different light. A self-appointed martyr. A blackmailer. Stitching the cord back on. Smothering her one child in loathsome, sponge-soft, pamper love” (O’Brien T 477). Although Kate eventually forgives her mother, as Baba did as well, she also acknowledges that the strategies her mother taught her never prepared her to meet the cruelties that sometimes target the disempowered and submissive.

If Kate’s attachments to her mother, her son, and the patriarchal idea of Eugene are so weighted in her life that her love for them compromises her well-being, Baba’s detachment from close relationships likewise proves detrimental. Opposite from Kate’s maternal instincts is Baba’s determination not to give birth to the child she conceives from an affair. Part of the reason is that she believes her husband Frank in
the very least won’t accept the child, or at the very most, he might get violent with her. If Kate clings to her son defensively, Baba tries to abort her pregnancy by ingesting castor oil and taking a scalding bath, but is not successful. Frank characteristically quakes and shakes fists at the news, but then realizes a divorce might hinder his Catholic-based business. Uncharacteristically, Frank later cries at the thought of her adultery, and Baba “said for God’s sake to hit me, assault me, kill me, do whatever he had to do, but to get it over” (O’Brien T 470). Baba can take Frank’s physical abuse, but what she can’t handle is his attempt to come closer to her emotionally.

Additionally, in the Epilogue, Baba reveals she has passed on her emotional aloofness to, in her own words “the one illegitimate kid that I had, a girl that had a will of her own and a mind of her own from the second she was born. Vomited the milk I gave her, rejected me, from day one, preferred cow’s milk, solids, anything. She left home before she was thirteen, couldn’t stand us” (O’Brien T 515). The lack of intimacy Baba once shared with her mother, she now shares with her daughter. Without the epilogue, however, the idea that mothers leave a large and looming legacy for the next generation of daughters is not nearly as strong.

Before O’Brien wrote the Epilogue in 1986, the conclusion to Kate’s storyline in particular is very different. In the serial ending of Girls in Their Married Bliss, Kate is left wondering if Eugene will ever bring her son back to London. She consults a solicitor, but the solicitor makes it seem impossible for Kate to seek custody of Cash because “It boiled down to a question of money. They could go there, if she could afford it” (O’Brien T 506). Kate seems completely unable as a laundry worker to
afford to bring Cash back from the remote island Eugene has taken him to, and by every indication in the novel “It would go on like that, letters back and forth over the years, photographs at intervals, and these she dreaded, and she knew that she would have to steel herself against them” (O’Brien T 507) The serial ending leaves Kate suffering over her son which is only partly connected to her mother’s death by the connections she makes in the psychiatric appointment and her act of sterilization. At the same time, the reader is left wondering if Kate and Baba might still leave for another country to find Cash in the next installment and as O’Brien originally planned for Girls in Their Married Bliss. However, with the creation of the Epilogue, Cash’s fate is found to be fantastically resolved. According to Baba’s narration, Kate follows through with finding the money for the solicitor and as Baba describes it “At first she hadn’t the spunk to fight, but then it came to her, the old lioness tenacity—and she got geared for battle” (O’Brien T 515). The reader learns from Baba that Kate even wins custody of Cash when the judge allows him to choose to live with her over his father. Kate’s battle to win Cash back becomes unexpectedly a positive postscript in the epilogue, while O’Brien instead turns the story over to Baba’s tragic elegy of Kate’s drowning. Rather than leaving Kate and Baba at the serial ending of Girls in Their Married Bliss, O’Brien makes the unusual move to revise her work towards the death ending in 1986, a full twenty-two years after the third novel was published. O’Brien’s addition of the epilogue is not unlike Bowen’s addition of a preface, which also revisited the content of her text over two decades later.
The epilogue’s elegy is O’Brien’s final dramatic effort to define the differences between her heroines. The heroines that she began with, one lyrical and one bold, one representative of de Valera’s hybrid Mary/Hibernia and one representative of the strong icon of the war for independence, the era where feminist action seemed to last take place, would now be distinguishable by survivorship. In 1986 shortly after the epilogue joined the rest of the Trilogy in one volume, O’Brien went to great lengths to explain her reasons for finalizing Kate and Baba’s plotlines beyond the serial ending of Girls in Their Married Bliss. I quote O’Brien here at length because dividing the section, as is often the case, either diminishes or changes her meaning:

The characters remained with me as ghosts, but without the catharsis of death. I had never finished their story, I had left them suspended, thinking perhaps that they should stay young indefinitely or that their mistakes might be canceled out or they would achieve that much touted fallacy—a rebirth COMING back to them I knew that Baba's asperity had to prevail. Heroines don't have to be good anymore, because more women are writing fiction and are eager to express the more volatile part of themselves; equally they are less beholden to men. The masks are coming off by the minute. Long ago I had Baba exclaim, "It's not the vote women need, we should be armed," and I was castigated for it, charged with raucousness and a fatal departure from my lyrical self. But lyricism had to go, just as emotion had to be purged. In his film "The Marriage of Maria Braun," Rainer Werner Fassbinder (who knew a thing or two) had a character say, "It is not a good time out in the world for emotions, anymore." Lament it as we may we must accept that fact. Baba's voice is relevant to now, her assault on the world around her, the world of both men and women that she surveys with a scalding humor. I don't think it is that I have grown angrier with the years but rather more aware, and to wage war with words is a far healthier way than any other kind of warfare. (“Why”)

O’Brien very purposely chose the death ending for the epilogue because it was one last political statement for the Trilogy, one last battle in what she considered a “war with words” (“Why”). O’Brien felt she had to deliver Kate to the death ending because the character had almost chosen that arrangement from her inception. Kate
grew up in an era when her nation valued her life only as a wife and mother, and Kate believed in it. In subscribing to her nation’s values and believing in the un-real chivalric romance inspired by nationalism, she doomed herself to almost certain failure. Baba’s elegy recounts clearly that after Kate’s son grew up and left to attend school in America, Kate was still looking for “that someone [who] might come to her rescue, a male Florence Nightingale [who] might kneel and bandage and swoop her off to a life of certainty and bliss” (O’Brien T 511). Baba “knew there was some bloody man and that he was probably married and that she saw him once a fort-night or less, but of course saw him in street lamps, rain puddles, fire flames, and all that Lord Byron lunacy” (O’Brien T 527). When Kate’s last attempt at a chivalric romance miserably fails, Kate’s drowning brings the story full circle suggesting that Kate made no progress past her mother’s position in life at the beginning of the novel. What Baba mourns most in the passing of her friend is that Kate gave up the battle: “I suppose all that starvation, and time to think, brought her face to face with brass tacks, realized she was on her own, Good Shepherd wasn’t coming. Oh, Kate, why did you let the bastards win…why buckle under their barbaric whims?” (O’Brien T 513). Baba’s regret that Kate gave up is just like what Kate concluded for her own mother at the beginning of the Trilogy.

Baba, however unfortunate in her own circumstances, oppositely learned to compromise and defies the system around her in ways that enabled her self-preservation. Baba never bought into the chivalric romance plot that commanded Kate’s life; rather she scoffed at it with both humor and scorn. In what is perhaps
O’Brien’s most blatant denouncement of the Catholic faith in the *Trilogy*, Baba finds it easily within her to scoff even at the Pope:

He’s still for keeping women in bondage, sexual bondage above all, as if they weren’t fucked up enough with their own organs, and whoever said that all women in the world enjoy all the fucking they have to do—no one, certainly not me. The Pope is all for bevies of children within wedlock, more children to fill the slums and the buses and smash telephone kiosks, because of course it’s usually the ones in the slums that breed so profusely, part of their routine, like a fry-up. The smarter ones know all the ropes, know how to keep in with the Pope and still swing from the chandeliers. (O’Brien *T* 522)

O’Brien holds nothing back in her endeavor to expose the dysfunctional hold the Catholic Church and the patriarchal marriage narrative has on a woman’s sexuality.

While Baba considers herself fortunate not to have had more than one child and ranks herself even above “the smarter ones,” stating “I’m as crooked as anyone else, except that I don’t want to be,” indicating that she strives for something more (O’Brien *T* 522). Posthumously, Baba strives for something more for Kate as well, “I hope she rises up nightly like the banshee and does battle with her progenitors” (O’Brien *T* 523).

On that note of rising up beyond the ultimate ending of death, Kristine Byron describes O’Brien’s epilogue as a “literal ‘writing beyond the ending’” akin to what DuPlessis defines, yet not quite free of the nineteenth century death ending (18, 25). Byron theorizes, “O’Brien’s *Trilogy* and *Epilogue* lays the groundwork for scrutiny of the literary, as well as social, scripts available to women. The numerous literary allusions, especially to novels that follow a traditional female plot, lay bare the inadequacy of those literary scripts” (25). What Byron suggests, along with the commentary O’Brien writes in “Why Irish Heroines Don’t Have to Be Good
Anymore” shortly after publishing her epilogue, leads to the idea that O’Brien intentionally hybridizes the epilogue, intentionally uses the nineteenth-century death ending to exact a twentieth-century “writing beyond the ending” as well. The epilogue, as Byron explains, “articulates the welcome death of romanticism, subverting the traditional outcome of the [chivalric] romance plot” and undercuts “the most common outcomes of the female romance plot: [that] the heroine can only realize her potential as woman through marriage and childbearing” (23). O’Brien highlights and exacts the death ending in order to call attention to the literary conventions that reinforce the ideals of chivalric romance for women in society. In effect, Kate’s suicide makes it transparent that other writers should move beyond the strategy. Moreover, O’Brien’s critique is double-edged because it calls into question both literary and societal standards. Kate dies, the author seems to suggest, so that other women don’t have to. In effect, O’Brien martyrs Kate in such a way as to rival the martyrs associated with the Catholic Church. If Bowen’s Lois lost her identity to the forces of the patriarchal marriage narrative, O’Brien’s Kate lost her life—and with good reason.
Conclusion

Both Elizabeth Bowen and Edna O’Brien leave the lasting impression that there are histories hidden underneath the flamboyance of the public sphere. The authors’ novels attest to the ambition that the histories of the private sphere ought to be searched out and evaluated, especially since women have only in the last sixty years begun to negotiate space outside of domesticity. Even though women’s gender stories have been unduly privatized and granted subversion in a world full of political and wartime plotlines, a part of reclaiming a woman’s her-story means looking into the cultural and sociological systems found in the households of the past. The most recent past is especially pertinent and influential to a present that is diluted with the structures and remnants of traditions whose origins may be no longer remembered, remain unacknowledged, or are misinterpreted. The continued exclusion of women’s history from mainstream textbooks and literatures additionally continues to demand the reassessment and reclamation of the histories of the private sphere in order to revise those of the public sphere. In part, Bowen and O’Brien may have felt this same obligation for disclosure and exposure of an Irish cultural system that indeed endeavored to keep the issues of women disillusioned and secreted.

For near opposite reasons, Bowen and O’Brien’s novels and gender stories have been eclipsed by societal pressures. The historical setting in Bowen’s The Last September dominates the scholarship of her novel, while the subversiveness of O’Brien’s The Country Girl’s Trilogy leads to the quick dismissal of any historical or political potential for her novel. However in actuality, the opposite assertions can be
made for both novels. Additionally, the popular, yet perhaps misconceived, views of the novels may have even helped in distributing the authors’ stories of gender. Bowen’s gender story of possibilities outside the patriarchal marriage narrative may have slipped underneath the radar of Irish censors because of her novel’s historical setting. Along the same lines, the banning of O’Brien’s novels may have served well to kindle an even greater desire to read about an Irish woman’s identity and sexuality. In pairing Bowen and O’Brien, one also registers a sense that the patriarchy before Ireland’s independence only strengthened in the nation-building era that followed. The Victorian sensibilities that governed a colonial Ireland only deepened into the Catholic sensibilities that came to pointedly influence the new nation’s political agenda. Although Bowen and O’Brien’s novels speak to specific historical time periods, their comparison distinguishes between colonial and post-colonial cultures. Although the cost is high for a colonial Lois, she seems destined to leave her troubles behind with the burning of Danielstown, while the post-colonial Kate and Baba continue to struggle with their more entrenched Irish-Catholic socialization even after a much later emigration.

From a theoretical standpoint, the emigration of both novelists’ heroines suggests that the pressure of surveillance wrought by what Foucault terms panopticism can become so specific and concentrated within the borders of a country that the only means to relief is nothing short of escape from a culture that binds identity too tightly to a national ideology. Foucault is persuasive when he writes in “We ‘Other Victorians’”: 
We are informed that if repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality since the classical age, it stands to reason that we will not be able to free ourselves from it except at considerable cost: nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required. For the least glimmer of truth is conditioned by politics. (294)

By revealing the alternatives and confronting the patriarchal marriage narrative, Bowen and O’Brien’s novels insist that changes be made in the politics of the private sphere that design a woman’s life around heterosexual marriage, which of course produces reverberations felt in the politics of the public sphere as well. Bowen and O’Brien’s characters additionally render the goals of the hierarchical and patriarchal marriage narrative unrealistic. Their novels suggest an infinite amount of alternatives counter to the one choice promoted by that kind of single-minded ideology. In effect, the tragedies in the novels first show what intolerance affords, and then secondly, ask for the tolerance of diversity, while finally making the conclusion that without change, their culture can only achieve more of the same kinds of tragedies.

Each author, Bowen perhaps more subtly than O’Brien, deconstructs the stigmas of both emigration and those contrary to the idea of the one-time marriage: sexuality outside marriage, homosexuality, and the failure of forming the idealized union. The authors’ interrogation of gender roles is so strong that it’s a wonder that critics choose to chase the war for independence plotline in *The Last September* when Bowen features Lois’s bildungsroman as such an overt sexual coming-of-age, and likewise, that O’Brien’s motivations are ever considered less than political when the *Trilogy* is so postured against de Valera’s constitutional definition of an Irish woman’s
sexuality. Clearly Bowen’s display of Lois’s near adulterous affair with Mr. Montmorency, her engagement to the outsider Gerald, and her flirtation with Marda all fall outside the social mores of her culture; and rhetorically, Bowen thus opens so many alternate possibilities that Lois’s seemingly “natural” conformity to the marriage plot becomes an impossibility. Whereas O’Brien, from a more restrictive era and with a different rhetorical positioning, reveals explicitly the deformation of a woman’s identity and sexuality under an unnatural amount of suppression. Kate, first subject to child abuse, falls victim to a pedophile, and then later suffers degradation from a husband who fulfills both the abusive qualities of her father and Mr. Gentleman. Likewise, Baba’s view of her sexuality as only a means of enticement to gain economic standing and her view that she is only an object incapable of emotional ties are also a great deformation of a woman’s potential.

Bowen and O’Brien’s exploration of homoeroticism in particular countered the heterosexuality expected by the patriarchal marriage narrative, breaking new ground for the Irish authors that followed. Vera Kreilkamp chronicles Bowen’s contribution to contemporary literature:

[Lois’s] passionate bonding with Marda in The Last September, like the more explicitly lesbian desires characterizing one of [George] Moore’s young muslin martyrs, anticipates Molly Keane’s, Jennifer Johnston’s and William Trevor’s explorations of the celibate or homoerotic life choices of characters who respond to the failures of heterosexual love, marriage and parenthood in the big house. (73)

Although Bowen codified Lois and Marda’s relationship enough that she was still allowed to publish her novel, her theme of lesbian desire was unmistakable and influential to later writers. Given the degree of homophobia that existed in Ireland
Breeden 121
during the novel’s writing and publication, Bowen’s subtle exploration catered to a realistic depiction of a culturally restrained homoeroticism. Homosexuality was only recently decriminalized in Ireland in 1993 (Connolly 241). Moreover, in an introduction to Bowen’s “The Hotel” in the *Field Day Anthology*, Emma Donoghue shows Bowen returned to the subject repeatedly: “Throughout her work, Elizabeth Bowen presents a range of erotic relations between women, from the passionate sisters in ‘The Happy Autumn Fields’ […] to a character named as ‘a lesbian’ in *The Little Girls* (1963). More typical is the ambiguous, flirtatious kind of friendship in *The Hotel* (1927) (4.1109). Additionally, Cullingford’s study of the only child and gender in Bowen’s novels suggests that Bowen’s exploration of the homoerotic had ties to both the author’s position as an only child and her personal married life: “Hints that the Cameron marriage was never consummated, suggestions that Alan himself was gay, and evidence that Elizabeth was bisexual, suggest that her persistent symbolic connection between [the] onliness [of the only child] and queerness may have had personal roots” (280). Bowen had vested interest in disparaging the marriage plot and disenfranchising Lois from a system that relegated all love relationships to a heterosexual design.

Like Bowen, O’Brien also made heterosexual unions questionable. Although O’Brien follows her characters to the very ends of their heterosexual marriage contracts, O’Brien also builds an undercurrent of homoeroticsm between Kate and Baba. Whereas their heterosexual unions are characterized by abuse and alienation, the relationship Kate and Baba develop with each other is the strongest union either
woman ever forges; and often times, their intimacy and dependence on one another resembles that of a married couple. Kate is the only person Baba allows close to her and Baba is Kate’s only enduring emotional support. Moreover, the characters’ childhood sexual exploration with each other and the subsequent jealousy Baba feels over Kate’s involvement with Cynthia at the convent school cannot be misinterpreted. In writing “Erosion of Heterosexual Consensus, 1940—2001” for the Field Day Anthology, Siobhán Kilfeather and Éibhear Walshe recognize O’Brien’s contribution to opening up the explicit homoerotic dialogue: “The move towards sexual liberation in the 1960s is represented by excerpts from Edna O’Brien and Maurice Leitch” (4.1041). One aspect of the Trilogy’s tragedy could be seen as the inability of the two characters to marry each other rather than their abusive husbands. Additionally, Helen Thompson recognizes other works by O’Brien that “explore lesbian sexuality”: “Sister Imelda,” (1984), Virginia (1985), and The High Road (1988) (198).

At the core of each novel is the overriding message that women should not accept the limited domestic script the patriarchal marriage narrative writes for them, a script that asserts women only have value through marriage and childbearing. Because if a woman accepts this first precedent, the same script sets upon elaborating and designing further cultural restraints that end up designing a woman’s entire life story around domesticity. At the pinnacle of Lois’s tragic bildungsroman she discovers, “I really can’t live at all if it has all got to be arranged” (Bowen LS 191). And, Baba more blatantly recognizes the tragedy in Kate’s absorption into the marriage plot: “I don’t blame her, I realize she was in the fucking wilderness. Born
there. Hadn’t the reins to haul herself out. Should have gone to night school, learned a few things, a few mottos such as ‘Put thy trust in no man’” (O’Brien T 531). These novels overwhelmingly suggest that marriage cannot be a satisfactory relationship within a hierarchal, patriarchal superstructure that discounts a woman’s independent identity.

Bowen and O’Brien’s novels only inspire further conversation, however. While some critics believe that there is every indication that a modernized Ireland has indeed made progress towards the tolerance of diversity, there are still other critics that proclaim full tolerance hasn’t been achieved either quickly or thoroughly enough. The division between male and female authors in the Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, which clearly segregated the sexes into separate volumes, is testimony that there is still much room for improvement. Yet, the will to have a comprehensive anthology without gender separation is also a testimony to the desire to deconstruct such differences. And while Linda Connolly admirably calls for the revision of women’s history and activism during the abeyance period, addressing the concern of “The ‘lateness’ of second-wave feminism” in Ireland compared to other countries, which “has been explained by associating Catholicism with an innate and essential traditionalism,” still others mark the changes associated with Ireland’s newly found modernity since the end of de Valera’s administration (13). Contemporary author Liz McManus optimistically relates in 2003, “the subversive power of the writing of Joyce or McGahern or Flann O’Brien or Edna O’Brien is dependent on the context of an Irish society now unrecognizable and firmly in the past. Ireland has been radically
transformed in one generation and my generation tracks the same course” (Thompson 81). Mc Manus’s view may, however, be measured and tempered with Nuala O’Faolain’s complaint in 1983, just twenty years earlier:

Women don’t count for much in contemporary Ireland, and neither does woman’s writing. Woman writers there are, of course, and good ones. […] Recently an autobiography—Sisters, by June Levine—which includes the first memoir of the Irish women’s movement, has been the first work by a woman, since Edna O’Brien nearly thirty years ago, to stimulate censorship, scandal, acrimony and delight. […] In indirect and oblique ways certain voices have broken the silence. Kate O’Brien, for instance, and Elizabeth Bowen, both only recently dead. Their books can be found on the same shelf as American sexual surveys in a big [unnamed] Dublin bookshop. (88-89)

In between the difference, the space between optimism and pessimism, Ireland seems to have rejoined an international community that, at least by now in theoretical precedence, encourages and discusses the respect of women’s rights and the tolerance of diversity. In between independence and modernity, in a time proclaimed an abeyance, Bowen and O’Brien used their voices to open spaces in their Irish culture for this unfinished discussion to continue.
Notes

i  See Patrick Ward’s *Exile, Emigration, and Irish Writing* (7-9) for more on Sean O’Faolain’s opposition to Eamon de Valera.

ii  W. B. Yeats’ poem is an ironic, and perhaps even ill-suited, match for a segment subtitled “Elizabeth Bowen” when considering Charles Stewart Parnell was a devoted Nationalist leader while Bowen’s family would have rather remained neutral, or on occasion, Unionist (McCormack 2.853-854).

iii  See *The Current Debate Over the Irish Literary Canon* (19-24) for a call to examine the volumes for the placement of authors: “The contributors to this book [*The Current Debate*] collectively agree that the lack of women writers in the first three volumes is a shocking oversight, yet, they do not come to a consensus in their readings of the subsequent volumes” (19-20).

iv  See Patrick Ward’s *Exile, Emigration, and Irish Writing* for more on both the acceptance and stigmatism of exiled writers.

v  The 1999 film version of *The Last September*, directed by Deborah Warner, in fact heightens the political element of the novel by improvising the film plot around the clashing nationalities involved in the love triangle between the Anglo-Irish Lois, the English Gerald, and the Irish rebel Peter Connor, even though Peter Connor has no direct contact with Lois in the novel. Although entertaining, the movie none-the-less does not follow the tone, meaning, or original plot of Bowen’s novel.

vi  Laurence’s reference to Weiniger most likely refers to Otto Weininger, the author who killed himself shortly after publishing his controversial philosophical study *Sex and Character* in 1903. There are speculations that because Weininger’s conclusions in *Sex and Character* were largely sexist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic, he could no longer live with himself because he was both homosexual and Jewish. Aurthur Evans writes in “The Logic of Homophobia” that “Although Jewish and gay, he was outspokenly anti-Semitic and homophobic” and that “*Sex and Character* is one of the most striking examples of misogyny ever printed.” One implication for Laurence may be that he too suffers from not being able to reveal his true self; however, it is unknown in what context Bowen understood Otto Weininger.

vii From “Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer” (1990), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions*, Volume IV. “Edna O’Brien was interviewed by Julia Carlson for the volume she edited for Article 19, the International Centre on Censorship, a human rights organization that campaigns for the right to human expression worldwide” (Kilfeather, Walshe 4.1051).
Sex in a Cold Climate (2003) directed by Steve Humphries and The Magadalene Sisters (2004) directed by Peter Mullan, broke the silence over the abuse going on inside the Magdalene Asylums, which the Catholic Church operated in Ireland up until 1996. The documentary style film follows the accounts of Irish women who spent their youths working inside the laundries under terrible conditions and with lifelong repercussions. Unfortunately, their experiences are not presented as unique, but rather experiences shared with thousands of other Irish women, mostly unwed mothers or those women considered wayward. Young girls across Irish society were also affected when parents sometimes threatened to send them to the laundries for acting inappropriately, using the general fear of the laundries as a means of social control.

Mary E. Daly chronicles in “Social Change Since 1922” that television changed social life dramatically when it was allowed into the country in 1961, and “The timing reinforces the sense that the 1960s was a decade of major change in Irish society” (665).

As headlined on the university’s website, in June of 2006 the University College Dublin (UCD) awarded O’Brien the Ulysses Medal for authorship, included her literary papers in the UCD Special Collections, and employed her as an adjunct professor of creative writing (UCD News). O’Brien’s late recognition seems to assure that times in Ireland continue to change.

O’Brien in fact is often compared to James Joyce and went so far as to pay tribute to him in 1999 by researching his life and writing his biography, simply titled James Joyce. See Michael Patrick Gillespie’s article “Edna O’Brien and the Lives of James Joyce” republished in Wild Colonial Girl by Lisa Colletta and Maureen O’Connor for a critical review of O’Brien’s biography.

The novel was renamed The Girl with Green Eyes for a short time in 1964 to match the film that was produced from the book that same year. O’Brien would have 3 more films produced from her writing in the sixties and seventies. The Lonely Girl was perhaps chosen to film over The Country Girls because the second novel wasn’t as direct in confronting the Catholic Church, but rather the Catholic family, and Girls in Their Married Bliss (1964) was just being published.

Patrick Ward shows that the majority of Anglo-Irish that emigrated were lower-class, but that both the Ascendancy class and lower class Anglo-Irish emigrants “quickly assimilated and became indistinguishable” in their new countries (58). France was the destination of the Protestant Wolfe Tone in 1796 when he was exiled from Ireland after establishing the political group, The United Irish Men, who wanted separation from England for both Protestants and Catholics. Lois’s emigration to France is in part contextualized by revolutionaries such as Wolfe Tone, and subsequently, a search for liberalality and independence. A Protestant’s experience of
emigration and exile may have been different from that of the Catholic’s stigmatic experience; however, emigration was still considered a hardship among Protestants.


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