

‘The Art of Writing’:

The Influence of Spanish Literary Culture on the work of Kate O’Brien

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the influence that Spanish literary culture had on Kate O’Brien’s work. There are overt Spanish elements in a number of O’Brien’s writings; however, upon a closer inspection of both her fiction and non-fiction, this research reveals how a more subtle influence of Spain runs through the core of all her work and that her experimental writing style is inextricably linked to Spanish literary culture. As such, this thesis illuminates the way in which O’Brien’s engagement with the writings of Concha Espina, Jacinto Benavente, Miguel Cervantes and Teresa of Avila provided her with a model with which to negotiate the social, religious and familial restraints faced by a female Catholic novelist in post-independence Ireland. The thesis is structured in four parts with a chapter devoted to the unique influence of each writer on O’Brien. Importantly, the thesis confronts some received critical assumptions about O’Brien. More specifically, it challenges the idea that O’Brien was a conservative writer whose work was stylistically timid and outdated in tone. In doing so, this re-assessment of O’Brien’s work offers a new approach to her writing, as it situates her in both an Irish and an international context of writers who are regarded as modernists.

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Abbreviations

The following is a key to abbreviations used in this study.

ed.	edited by
eds	editors
rev.	revised
rev.edn.	revised edition
trans.	translated by
UL	University of Limerick

The following abbreviations are used for frequently cited texts:

<i>WMC</i>	<i>Without My Cloak</i>
<i>ML</i>	<i>Mary Lavelle</i>
<i>FS</i>	<i>Farewell Spain</i>
<i>PW</i>	<i>Pray for the Wanderer</i>
<i>LS</i>	<i>The Land of Spices</i>
<i>Sum</i>	<i>The Last of Summer</i>
<i>TL</i>	<i>That Lady</i>
<i>T</i>	<i>Teresa of Avila</i>
<i>AS</i>	<i>As Music & Splendour</i>
<i>WL</i>	‘Writers of Letters’
<i>M</i>	<i>Mariflor</i>
<i>PB</i>	<i>Princesa Bebé</i>
<i>DQ</i>	<i>Don Quixote</i>

Introduction

‘Try to be one of those people on whom nothing is lost.’

- Henry James¹

In ‘The Art of Writing’, Kate O’Brien refers to Henry James’ proto-Modernist manifesto ‘The Art of Fiction.’ This particular statement, she says, is ‘elementarily good advice to the novelist,’ and she points to the work of experimental fiction writers such as Marcel Proust, Gustave Flaubert and James Joyce to support her argument.² Like her literary predecessors, O’Brien’s artistic vision was nurtured by European literature. Her experiences in Spain show how she became what James had instructed the novice writer to be: ‘one of those people on whom nothing is lost.’

Spain, O’Brien reflected towards the end of her life, was ‘a country which was in fact to influence me very much, and still does, in all my writing.’³ Evidence from her literary output suggests that this was indeed the case. There are overt Spanish elements in a number of her works. Two of her nine published novels, *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *That Lady* (1946), are set in Spain; she wrote the personal idiosyncratic travel book *Farewell Spain* (1937) and a monograph of Saint Teresa of Avila. Following on from a closer inspection of both her fiction and non-fiction, a more subtle influence of Spain can be identified that runs through the core of all her work. The influence is not merely thematic, but also stylistic. Her experimental writing style is inextricably linked to Spanish literary culture. In fact, O’Brien’s borrowings from and adaptations of the works of Concha Espina, Jacinto Benavente, Miguel

¹ Henry James, ‘The Art of Fiction’, cited in Kate O’Brien, ‘The Art of Writing’, *University Review*, vol. 3, no.4 (Spring, 1964), p. 9.

² O’Brien, ‘The Art of Writing’, pp. 9-13.

³ Kate O’Brien, Typescript draft of lecture for the Sir William Gibb School for Girls in Faversham Kent (12 November 1965), The Kate O’Brien Papers, University of Limerick, MS Collection List P12, MS 155, (1).

de Cervantes and Teresa of Avila reveal her underestimated literary skill. As such, O'Brien can be considered as a modernist Irish writer, as will be discussed later in this introduction.

Crucially, it was during her time as a governess in Spain in 1922-23 that O'Brien tells us she first began to write, inspired, in part, by her newly acquired fascination with the country's literature and culture.⁴ However, after graduating from University College Dublin in 1919, she had no desire to become a professional writer. In fact, she recalls in a television interview from 1962 that although some of her friends 'had fixed vocations' she did not remember having 'any particular ambition in myself.'⁵ In order to earn a living she worked in England as a journalist in Manchester and as a teacher in London. She also spent time in the United States working as a secretary to her brother-in-law before leaving for Spain in 1922 to take up a post as governess in a Basque household. All the while she slowly fell in love with the country that she had discovered:

I was pleased in my roots with the unexpected Spain I had found – and glad to the extent that I would not realise for years to have opened up acquaintance with a country I was to love very much [...] I have remembered nothing much, nothing of great general or personal interest from that lost year, but I see now that though smudgy, it was a more indelible year for me than many [...] I am glad to have had it. (*FS*, 211)

Despite the fact that she left Bilbao after only eight months, returning to London because of her sudden decision to marry Gustaaf Renier, her time in Spain fed her imagination and in due course, would inspire several novels and stimulate a copious number of references scattered throughout her work.

It would be ten years before O'Brien renewed her acquaintance with Spain when, between 1932 and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, she spent her summers travelling around the north-western towns and cities. She later fictionalised some of these experiences, and she also published a travelogue *Farewell Spain* in 1937 in which her interest

⁴ Kate O'Brien, *Farewell Spain* [1937] (London: Virago, 2006), p. 209 & p. 212. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *FS*.

⁵ *Kate O'Brien: A Self-Portrait* [Documentary] RTÉ Libraries and Archives (28 March 1962).

in Spanish history, literature, and culture is avowed in tandem with a condemnation of Franco's ideology. O'Brien particularly identified with the culture of medieval Catholic Spain and 'her' Spain was the one she found in Castile. Her cities of pilgrimage include Santander, Madrid, Avila, Salamanca and Burgos; she loved to visit the Prado in Madrid, read classic works of literature, attend the bullfight or travel through the austere Castilian countryside, constantly observing. *Farewell Spain's* importance as a key text in any evaluation of her aesthetic has been critically neglected. Yet, her experiences in pre-Civil War Spain contributed greatly to O'Brien's imaginative development and an understanding of her engagement with its culture is crucial in any assessment of her work.

O'Brien is amongst an elite group of Irish writers who lived in self-imposed exile, but whose work was preoccupied with life at home. For instance, even though James Joyce spent most of his adult life living in continental Europe, Ireland was the centre of his fictional world. George Moore and Samuel Beckett wrote about Ireland from a position of detachment in Paris, whilst prolonged interludes spent in the bohemian atmosphere of London and Paris allowed W.B. Yeats to reflect on his homeland. Patrick Ward argues that living in exile 'is a liberating condition free from the constraints of conventionality and custom.'⁶ This is certainly true for the Irish writers cited here who found a freedom within the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Europe that Ireland could not provide. Much attention has been paid to the continued centrality of home in the work of exiled Irish writers; however, critics have failed, in the most part, to fully assess the impact of specific, foreign cultures on their aesthetic. Joycean commentators, for example, have rarely sought to connect his artistic development to the rich multicultural nature of turn-of-the-century Trieste. Yet, as John McCourt argues:

It was in Trieste that Joyce wrote most of the stories of *Dubliners*, all of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Exiles*, and significant sections of *Ulysses*. While

⁶ Patrick Ward, *Exile, Emigration and Irish Writing* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002), p. 184.

locating all of these works in Dublin, Joyce was also absorbing the social, political, literary, linguistic and religious atmospheres of ‘tatty easty’ – the land of the east.⁷

The culture Joyce experienced in Trieste between 1904 and 1920 was crucial in his development as a novelist, in a similar way that Spain was fundamental to O’Brien’s aesthetic formation. Also like Joyce, O’Brien was born into a middle-class Catholic family and spent her formative years in Ireland, but it was by living in a new country, experiencing a new culture, that both reached artistic maturity. An engagement with European culture afforded Joyce and O’Brien a measure of religious, sexual, and artistic freedom, which was impossible in the Ireland of their day. The need to escape the stultifying air of home manifests itself in both these writers’ fiction; for example, Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and O’Brien’s protagonist in *Mary Lavelle* are placed at odds with contemporary Irish values, and leaving Ireland is inevitable and necessary if they are to define themselves. The influence of foreign cultures on the work of Irish writers is, therefore, crucial to any understanding of their work.

As Eibhear Walshe points out, O’Brien’s fictive representation of sexual dissidence found an imaginative setting in Spain, as ‘it gave her a distance from the Ireland she sought to remake in her fictions.’⁸ Exile meant she could invent a liberal version of Catholicism in her novels where individual conscience and personal choice on moral concerns was possible. In *Farewell Spain*, O’Brien talks about her Spain as being ‘individualistic, free and libertarian,’ which was a complete contrast to Ireland which, since gaining independence, had become increasingly restrictive, parochial, and conservative (*FS* 150). She particularly identified with the liberal Spain of the Spanish Second Republic that existed prior to the outbreak of civil war in 1936. In 1931, a Second Republic had been declared in Spain and, administered by a Liberal government, the Catholic Church was removed as the official state religion; divorce

⁷ John McCourt, *The Years of Bloom: James Joyce in Trieste, 1904-1920* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2001), p. 3.

⁸ Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O’Brien: A Writing Life*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004), p. 29.

was introduced and sexual freedom became part of a wider programme. Here, according to O'Brien, 'in principle at least there was freedom of Speech, freedom of publication, as of religion and of irreligion'⁹ O'Brien rebelled against the individual restraints imposed by the narrow nationalism and puritanical Catholicism of Ireland, much preferring the personal freedom she had found in Spain as a young independent Irishwoman. It is this liberal Spain, her Spain, that she says 'farewell' to in her travelogue, the one that she fears will be lost if Franco, and fascism, are triumphant in the Spanish Civil War.

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War was a topic of interest and discussion across much of the western world and across the spectrum of Irish society. That the tragic events in Spain aroused emotive responses in the political arena, popular press, and literary magazines is not unduly surprising given, as Robert A. Stradling points out, 'Ireland's history, ancient and modern, predisposed the nation to involvement in the Spanish Civil War.'¹⁰ In contrast to the rest of the British Isles, citizens of the Irish Free State were mainly pro-Franco which was due, for the most part, to the propaganda circulated by the conservative newspaper the *Irish Independent* and sections of the Irish Catholic Church. For example, readers of the *Irish Independent* were informed that communist sympathisers had lied when they claimed that the war in Spain was between democracy and fascism. It was in fact, the paper claimed, 'a fight between the Faith and the Antichrist.'¹¹ In the same newspaper, articles such as one on the 10th August 1936 only served to whip up support for Franco and the Right by reporting that 'bodies of nuns are left on the sidewalks of principal streets.'¹² Moreover, church congregations were cajoled into raising funds to support Franco in his quest to bring those who committed atrocities against church property and the clergy to justice.

⁹ Kate O'Brien, Typescript draft of article which begins: 'Last night I had a happy experience.' The Kate O'Brien Papers, UL, MS P12, 82.

¹⁰ Robert A. Stradling, *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (New York: Mandolin, 1999), p. 128.

¹¹ Cited in Frank Shovlin, *The Irish Literary Periodical, 1923-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 83.

¹² *Irish Independent* (10 August 1936), p. 2.

In reality, although there had been some attacks on Church property and the clergy by the Republican faction in Spain, Franco had exaggerated the religious persecution by the left to strengthen his own cause. He rallied the support of many Catholic and conservatives throughout Europe and the Western World by deceiving them into thinking that the war was first and foremost a Christian crusade against communism. Although the official State response in Ireland was to remain neutral with regards to the Spanish conflict, Eoin O'Duffy, former police commissioner and founder of fascist organisation the Blueshirts, suggested that Irish volunteers enlist in an Irish Brigade to go to Franco's aid.¹³ In 1936, an army of around 750 men, led by O'Duffy, left for Spain believing their primary role was to fight for the Catholic Church. Significantly, the Irish Brigade was the only armed force from a Western democracy to support Franco's cause.

There was, however, many on the left of the political spectrum in Ireland who felt a strong identification with the plight of the Spanish Republic. Writers and intellectuals, for example, voiced their feelings on the Spanish Civil War in a series of editorials and articles in *Ireland Today*. The September 1936 issue demonstrated support for the Republican government but also acknowledged the untruths being promulgated by both sides.¹⁴ Thirteen years after the end of the Irish Civil War, *Ireland Today* attempted, in subsequent articles throughout the course of its run, to provide its readers with a more balanced view of the Spanish war, which was, as Frank Shovlin argues:

a conflict which bore resemblances to its Irish equivalent. In both wars the Church backed the winning side; in both conflicts republicanism, in whatever form, was the loser, and the victorious sides oversaw years of conservative government supported by big business and wealthy landowners. To add to the sense of familiarity, the make-up and leadership of the different Irish factions that went on to fight on opposing sides in Spain added further reminders of the Irish past [...]

¹³ Eoin O'Duffy fought on the pro-treaty side in the Irish Civil War and was commissioner of the Garda Síochána between 1922 and 1933. He was an admirer of Benito Mussolini and began to embrace fascist ideology. In 1933 he formed The National Guard (Blueshirts), a movement which adopted outward symbols of European fascism and wore a distinctive blue uniform. For more information see Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy: A Self-made Hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ See Frank Shovlin, *The Irish Literary Periodical*, pp. 80-81.

O'Duffy's Irish Brigade was not the only armed force that left Ireland's shores to fight in Spain. Frank Ryan, who fought on the Republican side in the Irish Civil War, led the International Brigade volunteers to fight on the side of the government forces and the fight against international fascism. As the 250 volunteers left Ireland, Ryan said, 'We want to show that there is a close bond between the democracies of Ireland and Spain. Our fight is the fight of the Spanish people, as it is of all the peoples who are the victims of tyranny.'¹⁵ The sentiment of this quote was echoed by many Catholics who saw through Franco's propaganda and viewed it, not as a war against Christianity but, like Kate O'Brien herself, as 'a war waged by the forces of militaristic absolutism against democracy' (*FS*, 219).

Importantly, the writing of *Farewell Spain* coincided with the preparation of the 1937 Irish Constitution, which in O'Brien's opinion, was a restrictive document that tied the Irish people, particularly women, irrevocably to the Catholic Church in ways that would impinge upon their freedoms. Specifically, Article 41 of The Constitution, which preordained women to 'a life within the home' concerned O'Brien.¹⁶ In her novel *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938) published the year after *Farewell Spain*, O'Brien voices her trepidation towards the 1937 Constitution which, for her, was indicative of Ireland's 'own brand of fascism,' and she makes it clear that although De Valera was a milder, more 'subtle' ruler than Franco he was a dictator all the same.¹⁷ In 'Transcending Borders – Limerick, Ireland, Europe: Kate O'Brien as Critic and Novelist,' Karin Zettl argues that: 'Whilst the official Ireland was asserting the separateness of its native culture, O'Brien was developing a vision that rested upon her intimacy with a number of different cultures.'¹⁸ This thesis demonstrates that the most

¹⁵ Quoted in S. Cronin, *Frank Ryan: The Search for the Republic* (Dublin, Repsol, 1980), p. 84.

¹⁶ Article 41.2.1 of The 1937 Constitution cited in J.M. Kelly, *The Irish Constitution*, 3rd ed. (Dublin: UCD Jurist Publishing, 1994), p. 989.

¹⁷ Kate O'Brien, *Pray for the Wanderer* (London: Heinemann, 1938), p. 41.

¹⁸ Karin Zettl, 'Transcending Borders – Limerick, Ireland, Europe: Kate O'Brien as Critic and Novelist', in Patricia A. Lynch, Joachim Fischer, Brian Coates (eds), *Back to the Present Forward to the Past: Irish Writing and History Since 1798, Volume 2* (New York: Rodopi, 2006), p. 42.

important ‘other’ culture from which Kate O’Brien re-approached Ireland was Spanish, and that an engagement with its avant-garde literary culture shines through her corpus of work.

As a novelist writing in the culturally insular Ireland of the Free State, O’Brien’s fiction has, for the most part, been perceived as conservative and outdated. The study of O’Brien as an avant-garde writer is, therefore, at the beginning of a new vogue in literary scholarship. This thesis takes as its starting point Aintzane Legaretta Mentxaka’s recent study of O’Brien, *Kate O’Brien and the Fiction of Identity* (2011).¹⁹ Mentxaka has shown that a reassessment of O’Brien as a modernist writer is a fruitful seam to explore and provides the impetus for a long overdue re-reading of her novels. Her work provides a comprehensive re-reading of *Mary Lavelle*, which is O’Brien’s third novel and the first of her works to be set in Spain. Mentxaka explores the importance of *Mary Lavelle* to political and queer activism and whilst doing so she points to new lines of research that are valuable to follow. For example, she is the first critic to suggest the importance of *Farewell Spain* as a companion to *Mary Lavelle* and the first to suggest that the former contains many intertextual references that require further exploration. There are several allusions throughout the travelogue to writers from the Spanish literary canon, and this thesis picks up on this line of enquiry in order to provide a clearer understanding of the influences that drove O’Brien’s aesthetic.

Prior to the publication of Mentxaka’s work, few attempts had been made by literary scholars to engage with her experimental writing style or devote serious research to the Spanish influence in her work. This neglect is due, in part, to O’Brien’s precarious position within the Irish literary canon. When critics have engaged with her work, the main focus has been on her representations of the Catholic middle-classes, and there is a critical tendency to pigeonhole her as a writer of romantic fiction. For instance, one of O’Brien’s earliest critics, Vivian Mercier, referred to her as ‘the ablest practitioner of Romance in the English

¹⁹ Aintzane Legaretta Mentxaka, *Kate O’Brien and the Fiction of Identity* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2011).

language.’²⁰ Commentary such as this has led Eavan Boland more recently to write that O’Brien ‘fell into the general category of romantic novelist, a category which critics of realistic fiction, in a later generation were quick to diminish and reject.’²¹ Moreover, although O’Brien was not quite forgotten in general works on Irish fiction during her lifetime, the prevalence of Revival and counter-Revival approaches to literary fiction had an impact on whether O’Brien’s work was deemed relevant. This myopia within the Irish canon is apparent in John Jordan’s opening remark in his article on O’Brien’s fiction in *The Bell*: ‘Kate O’Brien has nothing in common, ultimately, with what might be called the ‘Irish’ school, with, say Stephens or O’Flaherty or O’Connor or O’Faoláin. Her closest link might be with Elizabeth Bowen.’²² Jordan’s comments evoke Stephen Gwynn’s remark that O’Brien’s novels were rarely considered in anthologies or histories of Irish fiction because to be Irish was understood as working-class and concerned with revolution, whereas ‘richer Catholic merchants and their families’ had much in common with the Ascendancy, and as a result were deemed to be more akin to the English than the Irish.²³

O’Brien’s background certainly placed her in a position of difference in post-independence Ireland. O’Brien was born in Limerick in 1897, the secure status of her bourgeois merchant family with their close links to England and the Continent had little in common with the frugality of an inward-looking nation. O’Brien’s father was a successful breeder of thoroughbred horses who provided his children with a life of loving and abundant comfort: wardrobes full of the latest fashion, summer holidays, devoted servants and education at the best local schools. However, life at Boru House, their large family home, was painfully disrupted when O’Brien’s mother died of cancer in 1903. Rather than leave her

²⁰ Vivian Mercier, ‘Kate O’Brien’, *Irish Writing* vol. 1 (1946), p. 87.

²¹ Eavan Boland, ‘The Legacy of Kate O’Brien’ [1985], in John Logan (ed.), *With Warmest Love: Lectures for Kate O’Brien 1894-93* (Limerick: Mellick Press, 1994), p. 7.

²² John Jordan, ‘Kate O’Brien – A Note on her Themes’, *The Bell*, vol. 9, no. 2 (January 1954), p. 53.

²³ Stephen Gwynn, *Irish Literature and Drama in the English Language: A Short History* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1936), pp. 222-23.

at home with her younger brothers and an elderly nanny, five year old Kate was sent as the youngest boarder to Laurel Hill, the convent school in Limerick that her sisters attended and where she would spend the next thirteen years.

Laurel Hill was founded in 1844 by a French Order of nuns - the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus.²⁴ By the time O'Brien became a pupil in 1903 it was, as Eibhear Walshe states, 'the favoured school for daughters of the local merchant and professional classes.'²⁵ Despite being the youngest pupil by several years, she soon familiarized herself with the rules and regulations of Laurel Hill and it is clear from her fiction that she came to savour convent school life. O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* (1941), which is discussed in length in this thesis, provides in affectionate detail the author's vivid recollection of the rituals and ceremonies of Laurel Hill. Indeed, as Walshe argues in his biography of O'Brien, the nuns of her convent school gave her 'the only secure vision of female authority in her childhood. It is not surprising to find that she carried a veneration of the world of the convent into her adult life and into her fiction.'²⁶

O'Brien enjoyed her time at Laurel Hill and in an RTÉ television interview of 1962 recalls that she was a 'conscientious and rather industrious child. I loved my lessons.'²⁷ She was an avid reader of literature and poetry, and as Karen Zettl notes: 'At Laurel Hill the Irish language and literature were being taught side by side with the French and the English tradition [...] Kate O'Brien for instance remembers school productions of Irish Renaissance dramas as well of plays by Racine or Schiller.'²⁸ However, as Clare Boylan points out in her introduction to *The Land of Spices*, the school was viewed with suspicion locally because the children were taught languages other than Irish and both nuns and pupils drank real coffee,

²⁴ For more information on the history of Laurel Hill Convent, see Richard Ahern, 'Laurel Hill: a French Foundation', in *The Old Limerick Journal*, vol. 25 (Summer 1989), pp. 129-131

²⁵ Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p. 12.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 13.

²⁷ Cited in Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 13.

²⁸ Zettl, 'Transending Borders', p. 42.

and, as a result, ‘exposed to both religious and French influences at an impressionable age’, O’Brien ‘emerged both high minded and broad minded.’²⁹ In the early twentieth century the nationalist movement in Ireland grew increasingly politicised and, as a result, more hostile towards everything English. Consequently, the quest to promote all things Gaelic generated an insular cultural nationalism which was intolerant toward foreign cultural influences.

When O’Brien left her Limerick convent school, she was familiar with the rich aesthetic, religious and cultural heritage of Europe, and unlike the cultural nationalists of the period, she never experienced the English and continental cultures as antagonistic to her Irishness. Her time at Laurel Hill, and her subsequent university education, meant her mind had been stretched in a way unusual for an Irish woman of her time. However, if it had not been for her tenacity and persistence she may never have gone to university. When she won a scholarship to University College Dublin in 1916 she was pressured by her family into taking a job in a bank instead. In her conventional bourgeois Catholic upbringing, higher education was seen as a waste for women, a situation that O’Brien considered a tragedy and greatly resented. However, despite familial objections, she got her B.A. in English and French, but was outraged when an uncle sent a letter of congratulations which ended: ‘I wonder what the next step will be – M.A. or Ma?’³⁰ Undoubtedly, O’Brien’s convent education vitalised her and gave her the impetus to explore the possibilities that existed beyond Ireland’s borders. It is therefore not surprising that in her fiction she writes of the struggle for intelligent girls to pursue their own destiny in much the same way she did herself. For O’Brien education was the key to personal and artistic freedom.

Despite the perpetuating uncertainty as how exactly to categorise O’Brien’s fiction, her novels were generally well received by the public and critics in Ireland. Her first attempt at fiction writing, *Without My Cloak* (1931), was a best seller; it was also a critical success,

²⁹ Clare Boylan, ‘Introduction’ to *The Land of Spices* (London: Virago, 2000), p. x.

³⁰ Cited in Boylan, ‘Introduction’, p. x.

winning both the Hawthornden and James Tait Black memorial prizes.³¹ Her achievements served to augment her reputation amongst her contemporaries. Seán O’Faoláin, who Jordan claimed had nothing in common with O’Brien, was sufficiently concerned about her popularity as an ‘Irish’ author that he wrote a letter to his publisher asking to stall the publication of O’Brien’s *The Ante Room* as he feared that it may adversely affect the sales of his novel, *A Nest of Simple Folk* (1934): ‘Kate O’Brien has finished a sequel to *Without My Cloak* and lest it clash with my book – for both that and this cover the same country and her novel, also was a chronicle of generations, I thought you might like to forestall her book.’³²

Such was O’Faoláin’s belief in his first novel that he had told his literary editor only a few months previously that, ‘This is a bloody great book;’³³ yet, despite his confidence he was aware, even at this early stage in their careers, of O’Brien’s aptitude for the genre. O’Faoláin was right to be anxious about competing with O’Brien’s novel as *A Nest of Simple Folk* was not as successful as he had hoped. He would ultimately be remembered not as an award winning novelist like O’Brien but as an accomplished short story writer. O’Faoláin was also, in his editorials in *The Bell*, one of the few voices of liberal secularism in the 1930s and 1940s, and, as an author who had his own work banned in Ireland, became renowned for his frequent attacks on state censorship of publications.³⁴ The Censorship of Publications Act (1929) was originally drafted to jettison the distribution and sale of obscene literature that was creeping into Ireland from America and Britain. The act reflected the moral concerns and principles of the leaders of the Irish Free State and it was accepted by most Irish people as a necessary safeguard against external threats to their Catholic identity.³⁵ However, as Terence

³¹ Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O’Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p. 51.

³² Seán O’Faoláin to Jonathan Cape (4 September 1933), Seán O’Faoláin Collection, The Archive of British Publishing and Printing, Special Collections, The University of Reading.

³³ Seán O’Faoláin to Jonathan Cape (30 May 1933).

³⁴ See Frank Shovlin, *The Irish Literary Periodical 1923-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 96-130.

³⁵ In brief the act provided for the banning of publications on three grounds, including that they are ‘in general tendency indecent or obscene.’ In a separate section, the word ‘indecent’ is defined ‘as including, suggestive of,

Brown argues, the act only succeeded in becoming ‘a weapon of cultural and social control.’³⁶

When O’Brien’s *The Land of Spices* was banned in May 1941 - three months after it was published - for one innocuous line, ‘She saw Etienne and her father, in the embrace of love,’ O’Faoláin was amongst those who felt that the censors had overreacted: ‘The official notice declares this book to be banned in Eire because it is “in general decency indecent”’. Clearly this is a lie.’³⁷ For him, the five members of the censorship board in their decision to find O’Brien’s novel ‘indecent’ had gone against the opinions of newspaper reviewers, periodicals and the general public, and thus they represented a failure of cultural authority in the new state.³⁸ The banning of *The Land of Spices* not only caused something of a furore amongst the intelligentsia at the time but in 1942 it became one of the first novels to be the subject of a senate debate.³⁹

Senator Sir John Keane tabled a motion before the house in which he criticised the censorship board and called for an amendment to the Censorship of Publications Act (1929). He complained that the public no longer had confidence in the board and used the example of the banning of *The Land of Spices* to state his case:

I have read it carefully and I may not be a very good judge but I consider that its general motif is almost religious [...] As anyone who has read the book will agree, the Reverend Mother depicted in it is a most noble character. She goes into the convent and takes the veil because she discovers, to her great surprise, that her father is given to unnatural vice. How she makes this discovery is important. If references to unnatural vices ran frequently through the whole book, and was dwelt on persistently I could understand, possibly, the grounds for objection. But it is a single reference and it is commendably short [...] for that phrase and that phrase alone that book is censored. Where that book can be held to be in its general tendency indecent or in the words of

or inciting to sexual morality or unnatural vice or likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave.’ See Julia Carlson, *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and The Irish Writer* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 3-4.

³⁶ Terence Brown, ‘The Counter Revival: Provincialism and Censorship 1930-1965’, in Seamus Deane et al (eds.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, vol. III* (Derry: Field Day Co, 1991), p. 89.

³⁷ Kate O’Brien, *The Land of Spices* [1941] (London: Virago, 1988), p. 157. Séan O’Faoláin, ‘Standards and Taste’, in *The Bell*, vol. 2, no. 3 (June 1941), p. 7.

³⁸ See Séan O’Faoláin, ‘Standards and Taste’, p. 8.

³⁹ For an account of the senate debate in 1942 and its historical context see Michael Adams, *Censorship: the Irish experience* (Dublin: Sceptre Books, 1968), pp. 84-95. See also Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002*, 2nd ed. (London: Harper, 2004), pp. 184-186.

the definition ‘to incite to sexual immorality or unnatural vice or is likely in any similar manner to corrupt or deprave’ I cannot see.⁴⁰

Despite Senator Keane’s protestations the motion was defeated; however in October 1945, and as a result of the earlier debates, a bill was passed in Dáil Éireann which allowed for the establishment of an appeals board. O’Brien was encouraged, particularly by Keane, to lodge an appeal against *The Land of Spices*. In a letter to her publishers in May 1948, O’Brien asked for assistance in getting the appeal passed through: ‘it would be fun, the intellectuals in Ireland always made a great special fuss about the banning of “Land of Spices”, and everyone would enjoy very much making the censors reverse their judgement over it.’⁴¹ She also emphasised the financial benefit to all parties involved should the ban be rescinded, ‘what would be good commercially would be to have a small imprint ready to shoot into Eire on release of the ban.’⁴² The prohibition was finally revoked in 1949.⁴³

The Land of Spices was not the first of O’Brien’s works to be censored in her homeland. *Mary Lavelle* was banned on publication in 1936, but was not the subject of the same close scrutiny.⁴⁴ In Ireland at this time, sex other than for legitimate procreation was deemed immoral and seen as the worst possible transgression – a mortal sin. There would, therefore, have been little point in challenging the censorship of a novel that openly portrayed an adulterous liaison, and unlike *The Land of Spices* the ban was not revoked. As Senator Keane and O’Faoláin had fervently argued, neither *The Land of Spices* nor the sentence that decided its fate, could hardly be described as ‘indecent and obscene’ which was the criteria for censorship. Thus, there could have been other factors that influenced the board’s decision to ban the book.

⁴⁰ Cited in Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 90.

⁴¹ Kate O’Brien to Louise Callaghan (5 May, 1948) in papers held at the The Random House Group Archive and Library of the University of Reading. Permission granted by The Random House Group Ltd.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Clare Hutton & Patrick Walsh (eds.), *The Oxford History of the Irish Book, vol. v: The Irish Book in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 646.

⁴⁴ The banning of *Mary Lavelle* is discussed further in Chapter Two.

The guardians of the Irish Free State were suspicious of writers who not only offended its moral values but were critical of the new society. O'Brien, it can be argued, was guilty of both. Firstly, in *Mary Lavelle*, a young Irish woman had dared to exercise individual judgement and instigate a love affair with a married man. Secondly, in response to the censorship of her novel, O'Brien quickly wrote and published *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938), a novel that vehemently attacks the patriarchal and insular nature of Irish society under the leadership of Eamon de Valera. Yet, as there was no inference of a sexual act anywhere in the book escaped censorship. By the time *The Land of Spices* was published in 1941, it is probable that O'Brien's work was seen increasingly by the authorities as a possible threat to the state building project, and therefore, she needed to be silenced. Moreover, O'Brien's promotion of independent women attending university in this novel would have been viewed with suspicion, as it went against the idealised role of women. The censors then would have frowned upon O'Brien's devaluing of the 'family' which was specified in the 1937 Constitution as the fundamental unit of Irish society.⁴⁵

Undoubtedly, censorship had a significant impact on O'Brien's profile and reputation in Ireland. Notwithstanding, O'Brien's novels continued to sell in sufficient numbers elsewhere. *The Land of Spices* was successful enough in the United States to warrant a generous contract from her American publishers, Doubleday, for four more novels.⁴⁶ Her next novel, *The Last of Summer*, published in 1943 sold well and in the same year she secured the rights to translate it into Spanish, Swedish, Dutch, German, and Czech, which gave her some financial security.⁴⁷

Outside of Ireland, her public profile was raised in 1945 by the British film *Brief Encounter* which was hugely successful at the box office on both sides of the Atlantic. Here, in a line from the opening scenes of the film, the co-protagonist Celia Johnson declares that

⁴⁵ O'Brien's response to the 1937 Irish Constitution is discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

⁴⁶ See Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 93 & p. 95.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 95.

she has reserved ‘the latest Kate O’Brien’ at her local library.⁴⁸ The script, co-written by O’Brien’s friend Noël Coward, reflected an era when trapped middle-class men and women contemplated adultery but, due to an innate morality, put the thought aside. The reference to O’Brien, whose middle-class protagonists are constrained in their pursuit of love by expectations of family and society, is a metaphor for the torrid story of forbidden attraction which is about to unfold. The film was banned in Ireland on its release on the grounds that it portrayed adultery in a sympathetic light.⁴⁹

The commercial success of O’Brien’s next novel *That Lady* (1946), a historical novel set in sixteenth-century Spain, could be attributed to her brief affirmation in *Brief Encounter*, but her reputation as a controversial writer may also have worked in her favour. With the exception of *Without My Cloak*, *That Lady* was O’Brien’s best-selling novel and the proceeds enabled her to buy a large house in Roundstone, County Galway.⁵⁰ This novel, even though it lacked Irish characters or concerns, renewed her popularity in Ireland, both with the Irish reading public and within intellectual circles. In an interview later in her life O’Brien played down the personal consequences of censorship but made her frustration evident:

I object to censorship, it is as simple as that. I think that it’s a foolish imposition, people have always had the ordinary censorships of decent society, religion, conscience and the law and it seems we can’t manage with those weapons to protect ourselves from what we object to [...] I’ve been censored, I don’t know if I’ve suffered.⁵¹

This quote suggests that the consequence of censorship on O’Brien’s literary career is not necessarily a negative one. Like other Irish writers who had their work banned in their own country, the implications of censorship took its toll on her with regards to literary recognition and loss of revenue. However, given her reluctance to admit that she had ‘suffered’ by being

⁴⁸ David Lean, *Brief Encounter* (Eagle-Lion, 1945).

⁴⁹ See Kevin Rockett, *Irish Film Censorship: A Cultural Journey from Silent Cinema to Internet Pornography* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), p. 130.

⁵⁰ In 1949, *That Lady* was adapted for the Broadway stage and made into a Hollywood film version in 1955. See Walshe, *A Writing Life*, pp. 107-108.

⁵¹ Cited in Walshe, *A Writing Life*, pp. 67-68.

censored, it could be argued that she benefitted, and possibly enjoyed, some aspects of the notoriety which it gave her.

Despite the success of O'Brien's novels during her lifetime, her work was no longer popular at the time of her death in 1974, and much of it had been out of print for some time. The majority of secondary material that exists on O'Brien stems from a resurgence of interest resulting from the re-publication of some of her novels during the 1980s by the feminist publishing houses, Virago in London and Arlen House in Galway.⁵² A special edition of Limerick based journal *The Stony Thursday Book*, edited by John Jordan and published in 1981, concentrated on O'Brien's work and marked the beginning of a renewed critical interest. In 1984 the Kate O'Brien weekend, an annual literary conference in her honour, was launched in Limerick.⁵³ However, despite its name the lectures engaging with O'Brien and her work disappointingly account for less than a third of the programme. The event has recently celebrated its thirtieth year, yet only two edited collections of essays, *With Warmest Love* (1994) and *Faithful Companions* (2009) have resulted from the conference and again there are only a small number of essays which engage with O'Brien's work. Furthermore, only one essay in *With Warmest Love*, 'Kate O'Brien: A Personal and Literary Portrait,' taken from a lecture given by José Maria Areilza, her male charge in Bilbao, gives an insight into the importance of her year as a governess in Spain.

The half-hearted approach to honouring O'Brien serves to highlight the decades of Irish unease with the radical elements within her fiction and the hitherto reluctance to fully explore her literary corpus. That O'Brien's work is not considered as accomplished as other experimental Irish writers, Joyce and Yeats for example, is due, in part, to the fact that the vast majority of commentators find fault with most aspects of her work. Indeed, in her review of Walshe's biography of O'Brien, Anne Haverty states:

⁵² An upshot of second wave feminist movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the establishment of feminist publishing projects who proceeded to re-issue out of print novels by women.

⁵³ John Jordan (ed.), *The Stony Thursday Book*, 7 (Limerick: Limerick Arts Council, 1981).

Really, Kate O'Brien should not have been a particularly good novelist. Her preoccupations could be said to be narrow and were continually recycled. Bent on idealising her middle-class Limerick background and the milieu she came from, she had propagandist tendencies. She was almost devoid of the illuminating qualities of humour and irony. She could be careless or even unimaginative [...] and her ear for cadence and rhythm was not the best – her sentence construction is often clumsy and clotted.⁵⁴

This evaluation is representative of much O'Brien criticism. Moreover, Patricia Coughlan argues that O'Brien produced 'a series of novels which are, it should be admitted at the outset, of uneven quality, largely lacking in stylistic elegance and apparently innocent of the great modernists' developments in narrative technique, if not altogether in vision.'⁵⁵ As Mentxaka argues the reason for this unenthusiastic approach to O'Brien is because a narrow contextualisation of her work 'has created a number of problems when her books have been forcibly fitted into a number of available models. As a result her work has been severely distorted, and many multi-generic, inter/sub-textual features have been misread as flaws.'⁵⁶ However, this research demonstrates that an examination of the thematic and stylistic influence of Spanish literary culture on Kate O'Brien's literary corpus contests the vast majority of the claims made by Haverty and Coughlan.

An apathy towards O'Brien alongside a difficulty in positioning her within a specific category is evident in the anthologies and histories of Irish literature in the 1980s and 1990s. O'Brien is considered, albeit briefly, in Maurice Harmon and Roger McHugh's *Short History of Anglo-Irish Literature: From its Origins to the Present Day* (1982), where the authors patronisingly suggest that she should have concentrated on matters that concern women, such as romance and family, and not embroil herself as she did in her novel *Pray for the Wanderer*, with Irish political concerns.⁵⁷ James M. Cahalan in *The Irish Novel: A Critical*

⁵⁴ Anne Haverty, 'Limerick's Liberated Lady', *The Irish Times* (15 April 2006), p. 12.

⁵⁵ Patricia Coughlan, 'Kate O'Brien: Feminist Beauty, Feminist Writing and Sexual Role', in Eibhear Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), p. 60.

⁵⁶ Mentxaka, 'Fiction of Identity', p. 11.

⁵⁷ Roger Joseph McHugh and Maurice Harmon, *Short History of Anglo-Irish Literature from its Origins to the Present Day* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1982).

History is more complementary of O'Brien's ability as a fiction writer, but he dismissively groups her into a generalised category of realist writers who cover Ascendancy and middle-class life, including Maria Edgeworth, Emily Lawless and Somerville and Ross.⁵⁸ Despite the raising of her profile there is no entry for O'Brien in Norman Vance's significant study, *Irish Literature: A Social History: Tradition, Identity and Difference* (1990); however, the merits, in terms of the romance genre, of her 1934 novel, *The Ante-Room*, is discussed by John Cronin in *Irish Fiction, 1900-1940* (1992).⁵⁹ Declan Kiberd's influential *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1996) briefly discusses the banning of O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* and he argues that, as a writer who found herself at odds with the prevalent conservative ideology, she would remain marginalised in Ireland for the rest of her career.⁶⁰

At the beginning of the new century there was still an inconsistency in the critical attention given to O'Brien, and Irish women writers in general. O'Brien does feature, however, in Declan Kiberd's *Irish Classics* (2000) where her moral consciousness (which is likened to George Eliot) is discussed through the lens of *The Ante-Room*.⁶¹ O'Brien is assessed, albeit reductively, in Norman Vance's 2002 work, *Irish Literature since 1800*. Vance discusses O'Brien in terms of individual women's lives, family and societal relationships. Whilst he acknowledges that O'Brien's themes are 'often transnational,' such as the subject of female self-realisation within the tradition of Catholic Europe, he overlooks novels such as *Mary Lavelle*, *Pray for the Wanderer* and *As Music and Splendour* (1958), that specifically compare Irish and European culture.⁶² This reluctance to explore O'Brien's themes in a wider context is indicative of Irish literary scholarship's fixation with the

⁵⁸ James M. Cahalan, *The Irish Novel: A Critical History* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1988).

⁵⁹ Norman Vance, *Irish Literature: A Social History: Tradition, Identity and Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); John Cronin, *Irish Fiction, 1900-1940* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1992).

⁶⁰ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996).

⁶¹ Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000).

⁶² Norman Vance, *Irish Literature since 1800* (Harlow: Longman, 2002), p. 195.

parochial aspects in her work, and the notion that any engagement with European culture was strictly the province of Ireland's male writers.

The relatively obscure position of women in the Irish literary canon was addressed in 2006 by the publication of the *Field Day Anthology: Women's Writing and Traditions, Vols IV & V*, where a vast range of work by women writers, including Kate O'Brien, was analysed and discussed.⁶³ Since these volumes there has been an increase in works which have provided an overview of the Irish literary tradition within a framework of inclusiveness. The addition of O'Brien to the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (2006) and more recently Derek Hand's *A History of the Irish Novel* (2011) served to advance her position within the Irish literary canon.⁶⁴ However, there is still much research to be undertaken before O'Brien is recognised within the critical field of Irish fiction, as a modernist, alongside Joyce, Yeats, Beckett and Bowen. O'Brien, however, was inspired by a different set of influences to these writers and until her engagement with Spanish literary culture is critically recognised she will continue to stand apart.

A lack of awareness by O'Brien's critics in terms of her experimental writing style and her interest in Spanish literature is evident by the paucity of scholarly writing on it. Lorna Reynolds' *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (1987) was the first full-length critical study of O'Brien's fiction.⁶⁵ Reynolds, who describes O'Brien as a romantic realist but also as a subtly feminist writer, provides a biographical sketch and a useful but brief analysis of the novels which she considers important. Two of the novels that are interrogated in this thesis, *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer* are given scant attention, as Reynolds did not consider them as important as O'Brien's other works. There is also a critical reluctance to

⁶³ Angela Bourke *et al* (eds), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vols 4 & 5 (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 2001).

⁶⁴ Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (eds), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Derek Hand, *A History of the Irish Novel: From 1665 to 2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁶⁵ Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987).

confront O'Brien's sexuality and consequently there is no mention of the lesbian characters in her fiction. O'Brien's sexuality, however, is addressed in Adele Dalsimer's *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (1993) as the lesbian themes in the novels are brought to light. Dalsimer's book is also the first significant work to provide a uniform critique of all O'Brien's novels, and where her importance to the then emerging Irish feminist literary tradition is extolled. However, whilst Dalsimer recognises the influence of James Joyce on O'Brien's approach to fiction writing, she refers to her having a 'traditional literary style,' and suggests that this is 'far more akin to that of the Victorian novel than that of contemporary avant-garde fiction.'⁶⁶ What is noticeable in both Reynolds and Dalsimer's introductory monographs of O'Brien is the lack of coverage given to key areas of imaginative development in her work. For example, although both writers acknowledge that her time in Spain provided the impetus for the two novels which she set there, *Mary Lavelle* and *That Lady*, the fundamental impact which Spanish culture had on O'Brien is not explored. Significantly, there is no reference to Saint Teresa of Avila, who is a constant presence throughout O'Brien's work.

Eibhear Walshe's collection *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* includes an essay by Michael Cronin, 'Moving Pictures: Kate O'Brien's Travel Writing', in which he discusses the merits of *Farewell Spain* as a sentimental travel book. *Ordinary People Dancing* challenges both Reynolds and Dalsimer's assumptions of O'Brien as a conservative writer by including new perspectives on the novels. In his introduction, Walshe highlights the difficulties faced by past critics who have attempted to categorise her fiction: 'The problems arise directly from the nature of her writing, her literary reputation, her cultural placing, her sexuality, and her intellect. Together these conspire to create a sense of unease.'⁶⁷ The essays then sought to readdress the balance in so that O'Brien's significance to the modern Irish literary canon could be re-assessed. Perspectives such as those from feminist

⁶⁶ Adele Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2006), p. xvii

⁶⁷ Eibhear Walshe, 'Introduction,' in Eibhear Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), p. 1.

studies, queer studies, class, religion and exile as reflected in Walshe's collection, became possible. Importantly, in his own essay 'Lock Up Your Daughters,' Walshe acknowledges the influence of Spanish culture on O'Brien's aesthetic, and in his biography *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (2006), his focus on her interest in Spain and particularly, Teresa of Avila, provided the initial impetus for this research. Walshe's study, which to date remains the only authoritative biography on O'Brien, provides a useful insight into her life regarding her sexuality, as well as offering a broad overview of her literary corpus. Because of the scope of the work and its biographical nature, Walshe is unable to provide any comprehensive analysis of her literary influences or writing style.

Since Walshe's biography, there has been a significant increase in the number of journal articles that engage with O'Brien's sexuality or Catholicism.⁶⁸ O'Brien's interest in Spanish culture, however, continues to be underestimated. Aintzane Legaretta Mentxaka's excellent research (discussed previously), Lorna Reynolds essay, 'The Image of Spain in the Novels of Kate O'Brien' (1987) and Ute Mittermaier's unpublished doctoral thesis, 'Images of Spain in Irish Literature, 1922-1975' (2009) remain, to date, the only studies to address the importance of Spain to O'Brien's aesthetic.⁶⁹ The fact that this area of O'Brien's work is a vastly under-researched topic testifies to the lack of innovative critical work which O'Brien's work generates.

⁶⁸ Recent essays include Michael Cronin, 'Kate O'Brien and the Erotics of Liberal Catholic Dissent', *Field Day Review*, vol. 6 (2010), pp. 29-51; Gerardine Meaney, 'Territory and Transgression: History, Nationality and Sexuality in Kate O'Brien's Fiction', *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Winter, 1997), pp. 77-92; Aintzane Legaretta Mentxaka, 'A "Catholic Agnostic" – Kate O'Brien', in Eamon Maher and Eugene O'Brien (eds), *Breaking the Mould: Literary Representations of Irish Catholicism* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 87-104; Tina O'Toole, 'Cé Leis Tú? Queering Irish Migrant Literature', *Irish University Review*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2013), pp. 131-145; Sharon Tighe-Mooney, 'Sexuality and Religion in Kate O'Brien's Fiction', in Deirdre Quinn and Sharon Tighe-Mooney (eds), *Essays in Irish Literary Criticism: Themes of Gender, Sexuality, and Corporeality* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), pp. 125-139.

⁶⁹ Lorna Reynolds, 'The Image of Spain the Novels of Kate O'Brien', in Wolfgang Zach and Heinz Kosok (eds), *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England and the World*, vol. 3 of *National Images and Stereotypes* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1987), pp. 181-187; Ute Mittermaier, *Images of Spain in Irish Literature 1922-1975* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2010).

During the last ten years there has been a slow but steady increase in scholarly works that focus on modernism in writing by Irish women, and that call for the inclusion of writers such as O'Brien in the reconstruction of the Irish modernist canon. This work has been started, albeit tentatively, by Gerardine Meaney, who in an essay of 2004 titled 'Regendering Modernism: The Woman Artist in Irish Women's Fiction,' pointed out that between 1922 and 1960, 'Irish fiction was dominated by an *avant-garde* writing in exile and the local dominance of the short story. Attention to the non-canonical fiction of women during the period, however, reveals a literature that exceeds this paradigm.'⁷⁰ Meaney argues that since the link between sexual dissidence and aesthetic freedom is a persistent trope of modernism in the Irish context, O'Brien's *As Music and Splendour* should be considered as modernist. However, although she discusses the possibility of modernist themes within the novel, she denies the existence of a modernist writing style. In her 2009 essay, 'Colleen Modernism: Modernism's Afterlife in Irish Women's Writing,' Paige Reynolds acknowledges the reluctance of literary scholarship to explore the significant contribution Irish women writers have made to modernism. Her essay examines how Elizabeth Bowen, Brigid Brophy and May Manning helped to promote high modernism's formal and thematic conventions, and although Kate O'Brien is omitted from this particular study, Reynolds does acknowledge the need to reassess her work.⁷¹ *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women Writers* (2010) provides a comprehensive overview of transatlantic modernist female writers. Although the majority of essays in the collection concentrate on the thematic concerns of women writers who have been situated convincingly amongst the pantheon of modernists, such as, Virginia

⁷⁰ Gerardine Meaney, 'Regendering Modernism: The Woman Artist in Irish Women's Fiction,' *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2004), p. 81.

⁷¹ Paige Reynolds, 'Colleen Modernism: Modernism's Afterlife in Irish Women's Writing', *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 44, no. 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter, 2009), pp. 94-117.

Woolf, Gertrude Stein and Elizabeth Bowen, Heather Ingman's discussion of Kate O'Brien as a novelist who 'is starting to be claimed for modernism' is welcome.⁷²

A renewed interest in Irish modernism has seen the parameters move from the narrow focus on Joyce and Yeats, yet few of these critical studies address in any sustained way how women writers engaged with modernist imperatives. Edwina Keown's and Carol Taaffe's edited collection, *Irish Modernism* (2010), claims to be the first interdisciplinary volume to present a sustained examination of the emergence, reception and legacy of modernism in Ireland, yet it is dominated by the literary works (with the exception of an essay which incorporates Elizabeth Bowen's *A World of Love*) of male writers.⁷³ The most recent full length study on Irish modernism, *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* (2014), offers an insightful and accessible overview of the period in which Irish artists not only helped to create a distinctive nationalist literature but also changed the face of European and Anglophone culture.⁷⁴ Anne Fogarty's essay 'Women and Modernism' cites Lady Gregory, Katherine Cecil Thurston and Eva Gore-Booth amongst a selection of women writers who produced modernist literature before 1930, and she includes Kate O'Brien in a post 1930 group with Bowen and Maeve Brennan. Fogarty argues the reason for the omission of women from the Irish modernist canon is due to the fact that, 'New Women's fiction and the Irish Literary revival are generally treated as movements separate from modernism and running athwart it, thus often obscuring the experimentalism of female artists who played with artistic form.'⁷⁵ She devotes a paragraph to how O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* and *The Land of Spices*

⁷² Heather Ingman, 'Religion & the Occult in Women's Modernism', in Maren Tova Linett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Women Writers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 189.

⁷³ Edwina Keown and Carol Taaffe (eds), *Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics, Reimagining Ireland Vol. 14* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009).

⁷⁴ Joe Cleary (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁷⁵ Anne Fogarty, 'Women and Modernism,' in Joe Cleary (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 149.

trouble the parameters of the *Bildungsroman*, but Fogarty gives scant attention to the avant-garde writing style present in both novels.

Despite the awareness by recent critics of the need to assess O'Brien's place within the Irish modernist canon, the critical understanding of her work remains inadequate, and as such the scope for future research is extensive. Appraising Kate O'Brien's literary career, which spanned over fifty years and included nine novels (her tenth, *Constancy*, remained unfinished at her death), nine plays, two film scripts, two biographies, two travelogues, short stories, copious criticism and journalism, is beyond the span of any one thesis. This research is not intended as another literary biography or as a general critical overview, but as a detailed comparative analysis of a representative number of O'Brien's fiction and non-fiction books confined to those which demonstrate the influence of the selected works of one of the four Spanish writers selected. The rationale behind the choice of Espina, Benavente, Cervantes and Teresa of Avila is threefold. Firstly, they are all raised in the text of *Farewell Spain*, a book that as Mentxaka has already established contains a plethora of intertextual markers. Secondly, a close textual analysis revealed sufficient material to warrant a chapter on each writer. Finally, the Spanish writers selected will form an interconnected whole and justify their selection ahead of any others that could equally have taken their place. The influences on O'Brien's literary corpus are diverse, yet the reason for choosing those presented here are considered and rationalised. For instance, the impact of contemporary female modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf on O'Brien's work has yet to be considered. Similarly the references to English poets, Russian novelists and French dramatists within her oeuvre would suggest she was immersed in the culture and literature of many European countries. This exploration has focused on the influence of Spanish literary culture because of O'Brien's time in Spain. The significance of the Spanish writers in this study to O'Brien is

reflected by their inclusion in *Farewell Spain*: a biased, individual account which is littered with biographical markers.

This study is a radical departure from existing approaches to O'Brien, which frame her work largely in terms of her Irish nationality or her sexuality. This re-assessment of O'Brien's work offers a new approach to her writing, as it locates her in an international context of writers who are regarded as modernist novelists. It will seek to challenge some of the received critical notions about her work and situate it within an accurate critical perspective, allowing subsequent research to build upon work established here. Important archival material, including correspondence, diaries, journalism and essays, provides a more significant analysis and fuller historical context than has been offered in any study to date.

However, one of the most noticeable aspects of researching Kate O'Brien is the total lack of access and availability of her private letters. The letters that are obtainable include, for example, two letters written to her friend Mary Hanley (one of which is quoted at the beginning of Chapter Four), letters to her sister Nance, and a small file of correspondence between O'Brien and her literary editor at William Heinemann Ltd, all of which contain little in the way of personal material. A lack of access to certain intimate information is an ongoing problem for O'Brien scholars; Mentxaka, for instance, is one such researcher who laments the 'perennial difficulties in accessing material related to Kate O'Brien.'⁷⁶ The obfuscation appears to be the result of O'Brien's insistence that none of her letters should ever be published and a shared reluctance by her co-correspondents to have their personal lives aired in public. This conspiracy is evident in the correspondence between O'Brien's literary executor Mary O'Neill, her former lover and life-long friend, and London publishing house, Virago. O'Neill's enduring loyalty to her former partner was clearly evident when Virago sought permission to re-publish some of O'Brien's work in 1983. An internal memo

⁷⁶ Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p, 232.

from the company archive reveals a bitter dispute between publisher and literary executor over a proposed new introduction to the re-issue of *Mary Lavelle* by Tamsin Hargreaves:

I've been on the phone for an hour with Mary O'Neill who is Kate O'Brien's literary executor and was obviously her lover for many, many years. I sent her a copy of Tamsin's intro and she is outraged and desperately upset about all the references to lesbianism [...] She said that Kate O'Brien said there was never to be a biography of her, that she wanted no personal details of her life to be written about.⁷⁷

O'Neill proved to be a formidable opponent. She sought legal advice and threatened to cancel the publishing contract unless all the paragraphs about O'Brien's personal life were removed. The introduction was duly revised; *Mary Lavelle* was published, and O'Neill's association with Virago as O'Brien's literary executor continued until her death in 1987. Given the above information, therefore, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that to save future recriminations, any personal correspondence between O'Brien and her former lovers has been destroyed.

This thesis is structured in four parts, with a chapter dedicated to each of the following writers from the Spanish literary canon: Concha Espina, Jacinto Benavente, Miguel de Cervantes and Teresa of Avila. The first chapter analyses the influence of Concha Espina's novel *Mariflor* (1904) on O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* and *The Last of Summer* (1943), paying particular attention to the themes present in both authors' work, including their engagement with the binary relationship of modernity and tradition, Freudian theory, feminism, and the deployment of the location of the convent as a means of escape from familial and societal restraints. On first reading there may not appear to be any correlation between Espina and O'Brien's fiction. Nevertheless, although the novels are situated within their own unique cultures and separated by time and place, this chapter argues that in *The Land of Spices* (1941) and *The Last of Summer* (1943) O'Brien adeptly appropriates some of

⁷⁷ Alexandra Pringle to Carmen Cahill, The British Library Archive, Western Manuscripts MS 88904/1/324 (October 1983).

Espina's themes and character types from *Mariflor*. As an Irish Catholic novelist writing about her own bourgeois class, O'Brien had few predecessors. Katherine Cecil Thurston and James Joyce depicted Irish bourgeois life in their fiction, however the absence of a writer who fully explored the class dynamics and moral dilemmas of Catholic middle-class women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was telling. O'Brien is the writer who most significantly developed the Irish bourgeois novel as a means of popular entertainment and as a vehicle for social commentary and critique; but unable to find a suitable framework for her ideas within Irish writing, she had to look further afield for direction. This chapter demonstrates how Concha Espina, whose fiction was concerned with the restrictions Catholic bourgeois society placed on women, would have appealed as a literary model to O'Brien. As a Catholic middle-class woman trying to forge a career in a male-dominated literary establishment, Espina had much in common with O'Brien. Like O'Brien, the contextualisation of Espina's work has been dictated by common assumptions, and she also suffered from a diminished interest in her work after her death. However, in recent years Espina's novels have been subject to review by revisionist scholars, who place her within the context of the modernist and avant-garde movements of the 1920s and 1930s.

Chapter two examines a selection of Jacinto Benavente's plays in relation to O'Brien's novels, *Without My Cloak* (1931) and *That Lady* (1941). One of the main themes in Benavente's early twentieth-century drama is, as in Espina's fiction, the struggle of middle-class women in their pursuit of autonomy. This chapter examines the way in which O'Brien adapted Benavente's methods of dealing with what he perceived to be the hypocrisy and complacency of the Spanish middle-classes in her fiction. O'Brien began her professional writing career as a dramatist, yet her interest in and the influence of European theatre on her formation as a novelist has been overlooked. Her connection with the cultural intelligentsia in Dublin also provides a link to Benavente. Walter Starkie wrote the only full-length critical

study of Benavente, which was written in English and available in the mid-1920s, and the chapter argues that O'Brien used this seminal book as a key point of reference. Benavente was amongst a group of Spanish writers who were aligned to the Generation of 1898, and the chapter will demonstrate that O'Brien identified with certain aspects of this experimental and forward-thinking movement in her rebellion against Catholic conservative tradition.

The third chapter analyses the influence of *Don Quixote* on O'Brien's writing style in *Without My Cloak*, *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938). In addition, O'Brien's interpretation of Cervantes' protagonist is examined through the 'quixotic' characters of Don Pablo, Agatha Conlon (*Mary Lavelle*) and Nell Mahoney (*Pray for the Wanderer*). In *Don Quixote*, Cervantes confronted what he considered to be the flaws of late sixteenth-century Spanish society. However, the ideological constraints imposed by his society precluded the open expression or even the suggestion of defiance. Nonetheless, Cervantes confronted the central pillar of traditional ideology by going against the Spanish Church, but he expressed his dissent through various disguises to avoid being caught by the Inquisition. The chapter analyses how, through her identification with Cervantes, O'Brien adopted a similar technique in her protest against modern Ireland's censorship legislation and the 1937 Constitution.

The opposition of Cervantes to official ideology is equal in significance with the robust but covert dissent of Saint Teresa of Avila. Neither Cervantes or Saint Teresa can be considered marginal figures in Spanish culture; indeed, both of these figures are at its core. They are the two most widely translated Spanish authors of all time. Chapter Four illustrates the ways in which an engagement with Teresa of Avila's writings profoundly shaped O'Brien's approach to all of her major works after *The Ante-Room* (1934). The chapter provides an analysis of O'Brien's non-fiction and fiction which demonstrates her appropriation of the saint as both a lesbian icon and as a model for avant-garde feminist

writing. The Spanish saint was the most significant influence on O'Brien's aesthetic, and her interpretation of Teresa's life is evident in her fictive representation of women, as they exemplify traits that the saint exudes in O'Brien's full-length non-fiction study, *Teresa of Avila* (1951). To this end the chapter provides examples from *Mary Lavelle*, *The Land of Spices*, *The Flower of May* (1953) and *As Music & Splendour* (1958). Finally, it will demonstrate how O'Brien's analysis of Saint Teresa's letters was crucial to her understanding of the saint.

That Kate O'Brien employs many genres in her fiction - the novels can be approached from a romantic, realist, or historical framework - or that she takes on multiple themes is not in dispute. What this research seeks to re-address is the tendency in literary scholarship to unconvincingly fit her work into a number of single available models and dismiss the possibility that her work is multi-genre and alert to experimentation. The focus of examination in this thesis is O'Brien's imaginative development, her movement away from the constrictions of life in Ireland towards Spain and the possibilities she found within its literary culture. The following quote from the opening chapter of *Farewell Spain*, epitomises the importance of Spain to O'Brien:

For some of us there has been Spain. First the Spain we imagined – a place we cannot remember now – and afterwards the Spain we found. There were many surprises in that second Spain [...] But somehow we went back there and went back. We got to know it somewhat [...] and as we did found ourselves caring very little whether we should ever get to know any other country even one half so well. (FS 17-18)

O'Brien did return to Spain many times, not just in person but more importantly in the context of this thesis, in her imagination. This study is not a retracing of O'Brien's physical journey around her Spain but instead it shows how, throughout her writing career, she returned to its literary culture for direction and inspiration. As she wrote in *Farewell Spain*: 'We are back again indeed – in the country we love to be in, the land

we care for uncritically, though without illusion we think, and with eyes wide open’
(*FS* 19).

I

Concha Espina: Unlikely bedfellows

In *Farewell Spain* (1937) Kate O'Brien recalls that on the numerous times she has departed from Santander by bus, the vehicle always makes a customary stop on the Paseo in front of a granite statue of the successful and prolific writer, Concha Espina. She declares that she rather enjoys paying ritual homage to 'a distinguished and now aged daughter of the region, whose celebrated novels I am always intending to read.'¹ However, if O'Brien had known at the time of writing that Espina was to support the nationalist cause in the Spanish Civil War, she would not have been as magnanimous in her comments.² Until her ideological switch in the mid-1930s Espina was, like O'Brien and many artists and intellectuals, a fervent supporter of the Spanish Second Republic, a perspective reflected in her literary output at the time. O'Brien would have been astounded by Espina's divergence in political principles, in particular the way she overtly sympathised with the Falangists in the fiction she produced during the 1940s.³ It is not surprising then that O'Brien, who made it abundantly clear in *Farewell Spain* that she was 'on the side of the Republic,' failed to mention Espina in any of her literary output thereafter (*FS* 123).

It has been well documented that O'Brien was vociferous in her anger at the prospect of Spain succumbing to the fascist dictatorship of General Franco, which, as she said in *Farewell Spain* was 'openly aimed at the murder of every democratic principle' (*FS* 221).

¹ Kate O'Brien, *Farewell Spain* [1937] (London: Virago Press, 2006), p. 44. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *FS*.

² *Farewell Spain* was written in London between October 1936 and February 1937.

³ Founded in 1933 by José Antonio Primo de Rivera (son of ex-dictator Miguel), the Falange Español were an extremely violent Fascist organization who fought on the Nationalist side against the Spanish Second Republic during the Spanish Civil War. In the February 1936 national elections the Falange party had gathered just 45,000 votes around Spain and no seat in the Madrid parliament (Las Cortes). Yet, as the only party approved by General Franco, it grew rapidly in the areas conquered since the military rebellion against the Republic had erupted in July 1936. For more detailed information see Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism in Spain 1923-1977* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), pp. 88-114.

Given Espina's political stance and the lack of tangible evidence to prove that O'Brien did proceed to read any of the Spanish writer's work, it would be reasonable for critics to assume that Espina would have had little influence on O'Brien, and therefore, any correlation between the literary work of the two writers has been overlooked. Nonetheless, O'Brien was sometimes disingenuous about her literary influences, so for critics to reject Espina as a literary stimulus solely on the grounds of the two writers supporting opposite sides during the Civil War would be remiss.

It is clear from the comment made in *Farewell Spain* that O'Brien was conscious of Espina's standing in Spanish letters. Born in Santander in 1869 to a wealthy landowning family, Espina wrote at a time when very few Spanish women entered the literary field and she is renowned for her unique achievement of being the first Spanish female author able to rely primarily on her publications as a source of income.⁴ Additionally, since Mary O'Neill, who accompanied O'Brien to Spain on several occasions, describes her in the new introduction to *Farewell Spain* as a knowledgeable traveller with a 'very perceptive temperament,' it is extremely probable that O'Brien would have been aware of the general themes in Espina's work.⁵ Importantly, a close inspection of Espina's pre-Civil War fiction reveals remarkable thematic similarities to O'Brien's narratives. For example, Espina's early writings reflect a deep emotional attachment to her birthplace of Santander, much in the same way as O'Brien wrote about her own hometown, Limerick. A recurring theme in Espina's work is the pursuit of love and freedom by intelligent middle-class women struggling against the restraints imposed by family and society, which is an issue that is central to O'Brien's oeuvre. There is also a recurrence in Espina's novels of the same female character, in various guises and with different names, who is clearly a representation of the author herself.⁶ Most

⁴ See Mary Lee Bretz, *Concha Espina* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), pp. 7-9.

⁵ Mary O'Neill, 'Introduction,' in O'Brien, *Farewell Spain*, p. xvi.

⁶ See Richard E. Chandler & Kessel Schwartz, *A New History of Spanish Literature Revised Edition* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), p. 164.

of O'Brien's fiction has been considered, for the most part, to be autobiographical, and many of her protagonists, such as Mary Lavelle in *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and Anna Murphy in *The Land of Spices*, are clearly versions of the author herself. Furthermore, as Eibhear Walshe points out, O'Brien's journalism 'always celebrated empowered women' and most of her literary essays focused on women like Teresa of Avila, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot and Maria Edgeworth rather than distinguished men of letters.⁷ Therefore, given O'Brien's enduring interest in Spanish literary culture and her admiration of resolute women writers, it is doubtful that she would have failed to seek out the work of such an emblematic female novelist with whom she shared much common ground.

In *Farewell Spain*, O'Brien focuses on another Santander author who has a monument on the same Paseo as Concha Espina: the novelist Jose Maria de Pereda (1833-1906). Why O'Brien chose to single out Pereda and Concha Espina and discuss their literary merits in her travelogue, when as she admits, 'there are many equally interesting statues scattered around Spain,' is a matter worthy of consideration (*FS* 44). In Pereda's case, O'Brien is clearly aware of his work as she describes him disparagingly as 'a vast fellow of the nineteenth century, one or two of whose books I have had the hardihood to buy' (*FS* 44). Commenting on his novels she states that 'he moralised too much, that he overdid his regionalism and that he was sentimental' (*FS* 44). Pereda is situated within the Spanish literary canon as a realist conservative writer whose regional novels were authenticated by his excessive use of local dialect. Pereda's work emphasised the evils of contemporary life, especially in large cities with their demoralizing and corrupting influences. He stressed the glories of the Church and the monarchy and believed in a patriarchal system of government where docile peasants are ruled by virtuous middle-class administrators.⁸ O'Brien would likely have been particularly

⁷ Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p. 117.

⁸ For more detailed information on Pereda's life and work see Chandler & Schwartz, *Spanish Literature*, pp. 136-37.

aggravated by the fact that Pereda always found a way of curtailing the independent spirit of his female characters.

The themes in Pereda's novels, arguably, anticipate the dominant patriarchal discourse espoused in de Valera's Ireland and, therefore, it can be concluded from O'Brien's comments as well as from her own literary themes that she was not inspired by Pereda's work. Like many Irish writers of her generation O'Brien was disillusioned by the Irish Free State's creation of an imaginary sense of nationhood by idealising Gaelic rural self-sufficiency and frugality.⁹ *Pray for the Wanderer*, published shortly after *Farewell Spain* in 1938, is generally seen as O'Brien's hastily written critique of Irish society as she saw it in 1937.¹⁰ However, given that at the time of her writing *Farewell Spain*, the 1937 Constitution was being proposed in Ireland and *Mary Lavelle* had been banned by the Irish Censorship Board only months earlier, it is possible that this criticism of Pereda was a subtle demonstration of her already growing disillusionment with her own country. It is also likely that O'Brien deliberately raised him at this juncture in *Farewell Spain* as an implicit contrast to Concha Espina.

In *Kate O'Brien and the Fiction of Identity*, Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka sets a precedent as the first critic to analyse O'Brien's technique of signposting the reader to hidden meanings in the narrative of *Farewell Spain*. For instance, in the chapter entitled 'Sword of Pelayo,' O'Brien wittily describes her companion Mary O'Neill's first visit to Spain and her arrival in Coruña, but it soon becomes apparent that the author is not impressed with this part of the peninsula: 'I have not lingered on Coruña in this reminiscence, because, in spite of its being the hometown of Don Salvador de Madariaga, I think it is a rather boring place' (*FS*

⁹ The official ideology of the Irish Free State expressed a concern to preserve the supposed purity of a mainly rural and Catholic society from the caustic effects of liberal individualism and social modernism. During the 1930s, Irish writers such as Kate O'Brien, Seán O'Faoláin, Austin Clarke and Patrick Kavanagh were now confronted by political pressures and aesthetic dilemmas as they faced the restrictions imposed in an Ireland which was being lost beneath a wave of religious doctrine.

¹⁰ See Brad Kent, 'An argument manqué: Kate O'Brien's *Pray for the Wanderer*,' *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2010), pp. 285-98.

73). What is poignant here is that although de Madariaga's name is 'dropped' into the text of *Farewell Spain* just as briefly as Concha Espina, Mentxaka has identified - in her re-reading of *Mary Lavelle* - de Madariaga's work as a stimulus for O'Brien's interest in the Generation of 1898. Indeed, as Mentxaka states: 'it seems to me that she [O'Brien] was inspired by Salvador de Madariaga's book *Spain* (he is mentioned in *FS* 73), which includes a full chapter, comprehensive and insightful, on the Generación del Noventayochó.'¹¹ Nonetheless, like Espina, de Madariaga does not appear to be mentioned elsewhere in O'Brien's writings or, until Mentxaka's recent study, cited as an important influence by critics. This chapter proposes that, in a similar way to her employment of de Madariaga, O'Brien used Espina as a cipher in *Farewell Spain* and familiarised herself with some of the Spanish writer's work and was influenced by it.

Whether O'Brien read any of Espina's novels, and indeed which ones, can only be speculated. *La esfinge maragata* (1914) (The Maragatan Sphinx) won the prestigious Fastenrath Prize awarded by the Spanish Royal Academy and was the first of Espina's novels to attract serious attention.¹² Of all Espina's work, *La esfinge maragata* acquired the greatest international reputation as a result of its translation as *Mariflor* in 1924 in the United States, and thereafter in most European countries.¹³ Although O'Brien had studied French at school at both Laurel Hill and UCD, she admits in the travelogue that:

I did not really learn Spanish. I learnt rather quickly to talk and understand on the surface, to skim the newspapers and guess the content and emotion of an easy poem. I forsook my grammars then, and have never really learnt Spanish. At night in my room overlooking the harbour I read Castilian sometimes and looked up words as I went – but more often I read English, or wrote English. (*FS* 212)

O'Brien's lack of Spanish may have prevented her from reading Espina's most popular work whilst she was working in Bilbao as a governess. However, the novel's subsequent

¹¹ Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka, *Kate O'Brien and the Fiction of Identity* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2011), p. 36.

¹² Bretz, *Concha Espina*, p. 11.

¹³ First authorised English translation by Frances Douglas – Concha Espina, *Mariflor* (The Macmillan Company: New York, 1924).

publication in English probably encouraged her to engage with it, and thus, it is feasible that if she had not already read it at the time of writing *Farewell Spain* that she did so soon after.

Parallels can be drawn between Espina's *Mariflor* and O'Brien's novels, *The Land of Spices* (1941) and *The Last of Summer* (1943), even though at first glance there does not appear to be any correlation between them. For example, *Mariflor* is located in a primitive village in Northern Spain at the turn of the century, whilst *The Last of Summer* is set on a bourgeois estate in rural Ireland on the eve of World War Two and *The Land of Spices* is based on the author's own experience in a French-run Irish convent school. Nonetheless, although the novels are situated within their own unique cultures and separated by time and place, this chapter argues that in *The Land of Spices* and *The Last of Summer* O'Brien adeptly borrowed some of Espina's themes and character types from *Mariflor* and made them her own. This is not the first time borrowing occurs in O'Brien's oeuvre. As Mentxaka points out O'Brien 'was not just attentive to the intellectual avant-garde in general, but she paid particular attention to stylistic experimentation amongst her contemporaries (e.g., Proust, Joyce and Woolf).'¹⁴ Mentxaka is correct in her observation as in 'The Art of Writing,' O'Brien clearly champions Proust and Joyce as accomplished and radical literary experimenters.¹⁵

Moreover, O'Brien's interpretation of avant-garde literature is revealed in a lecture of 1966 in which she states that for her avant-gardism suggests 'agility' and 'flexibility.'¹⁶ In her paper, O'Brien consigns these attributes to Irish writers such as Wilde, Yeats, Joyce, Synge and Beckett who she claimed were 'sheer' avant-garde as they had, in their time, adopted experimental methods of writing which could be described as: 'Individual – a new

¹⁴ Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p. 104.

¹⁵ See Kate O'Brien, 'The Art of Writing', *University Review*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Spring, 1964), pp. 6-14.

¹⁶ See Kate O'Brien, Typescript draft of unpublished lecture 'Ireland and *Avant-Gardism*', May 1966 (University of Limerick [hereafter UL], The Kate O'Brien Papers, P12, 157.

way of crying out loud'.¹⁷ Mentxaka suggests that there is notable evidence of O'Brien's admiration for these experimental writers by highlighting a number of references to Proust in *Mary Lavelle*, and she argues that in *The Land of Spices* O'Brien 'imitates' Joyce's style by 'using long and meandering sentences to capture Ana's thoughts.'¹⁸ Dalsimer also claims that a literary kinship with Joyce is manifest in O'Brien's novels in her suggestion that *The Land of Spices* is 'Kate O'Brien's portrait of the artist as a young woman.'¹⁹ Moreover, Father Conroy in the novel is clearly a reference to Joyce's Gabriel Conroy in *Dubliners* and Anna Murphy's brother Charlie attends Clongowes – the school of Joyce's youth. Mentxaka not only refers to O'Brien's already recognized interest in Proust and Joyce, but, more importantly for the context of this chapter, she points out that the relevance of other writers' work to O'Brien's has been critically ignored, despite them being a major influence. For example, she suggests that in *The Flower of May* (1953), O'Brien pays homage to Virginia Woolf by performing 'a curious experiment' in re-fictionalizing 'her more memorable creations.'²⁰ In fact she goes as far as to say that *The Flower of May* mainly rewrites Woolf's 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*.²¹ Mentxaka's reading then provides a basis to explore O'Brien's method of signposting other writers throughout the rest of her work. Before Espina and O'Brien's novels are analysed and then compared, a brief biography of Espina and an outline of her contribution to the Spanish literary canon will illustrate how she could have appealed as a literary model to O'Brien.

Concha Espina was raised during the latter decades of the nineteenth century in a patriarchal society that discouraged independence in women. She enjoyed all the advantages of Spanish bourgeois society, so it was assumed that she would never require the skills needed for economic self-sufficiency. The efforts of the Spanish middle-class at this time

¹⁷ O'Brien, 'Ireland and Avant-Gardism'.

¹⁸ See Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, pp. 104-105.

¹⁹ Adele Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1990), p. 50.

²⁰ Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p. 105.

²¹ Ibid.

were focused on marrying their daughters into the aristocracy, and thus Espina's childhood was typical of the period: she attended a convent school and was instructed at home by private tutors in piano, embroidery and dance.²² Middle-class Spanish boys, however, were educated to read philosophical works and foreign literature which were sources and models not available to girls; indeed, women in Spain did not have access to university until after 1910. Therefore, although as a young child she was encouraged by her mother to compose poetry, she was never afforded the opportunity to develop her literary talents and besides, there was little precedent in Spain for women writers at this time. For example, although Rosalía de Castro published her first volume of poetry in 1863 in Galician, her poems were not available in Spanish until 1884. Emilio Pardo Bazán was among those who did most to further the cause of women writers yet she did not become a national figure until after 1883. So while these women were probably an inspiration for Espina in her later years, in the initial stages of her literary development there were no models for her to follow.²³

When she was twenty-one, the family suffered a change in fortune when Espina's mother died and her father subsequently went bankrupt. Shortly after her mother's death she met and became engaged to Ramón de la Serna, the son of a wealthy family with financial interests in Chile. It soon became apparent that in order to save his family's rapidly disappearing fortune, Ramón would have to go to Chile to administer it so Espina was forced to choose between a long separation and a hurried marriage. Deprived of emotional and financial security by the recent loss of her mother and her family's economic situation, she was disorientated and lonely. Thus, without considering the ramifications of such a hasty

²² Limited access to education, work and political participation facilitated the subordination of women which was taken for granted in nineteenth-century Spain. Working class women were not nearly so secluded as their middle-class counterparts whose behaviour was strictly regulated by social convention. For example, working-class women were sometimes employed outside the home in menial jobs, but for middle-class women their role was solely as homemaker. For a detailed discussion of middle-class women's social and legal status in Spain see Jesus Cruz, *The Rise of Middle-Class Culture in Nineteenth-century Spain* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2011).

²³ For more information on Conch Espina's early years see Bretz, *Concha Espina*, pp. 13-14.

decision, she decided to marry Ramón and almost immediately after the wedding the couple went to live in Valparaíso.

The couple spent three years in Chile, where Ramón attempted unsuccessfully to preserve his family's interests. With little income to support them, Espina took her first steps toward independence when a local newspaper agreed to publish some of her poetry. This success gave her the confidence to submit articles to other newspapers, and she was soon earning a living as paid correspondent for *El Correo Español* of Buenos Aires.²⁴ Temperamental differences had already created marital tension, and Espina's successful attempt at journalism contributed further to the conflict. In many ways the three years spent in Chile had proved to be the unhappiest of her life, but her time in Chile opened her eyes to the rich diversity of Hispanic cultures, and her exposure to new forms of life undoubtedly helped to broaden her artistic vision. Thus, as Bretz observes, when the couple returned to Spain with their two young children, Espina 'brought with her not only personal disillusionment but a counterbalancing confidence in her artistic abilities and knowledge of life that enabled her to pursue her career.'²⁵

On their return the family spent the next five years in the small town of Mazcuerras. Nonetheless, Espina was growing increasingly unhappy in her marriage as Ramón was becoming ever more resentful of his wife's success and dedication to her writing; in 1904 she had published her first volume of poetry, *Misflores* (My flowers) and in 1907 she won first prize in a local literary competition for her short story, 'La riada' ('The Rapids').²⁶ In 1908, after an incident where he deliberately destroyed some of her writings, Espina sought a separation from Ramón. Her husband took advantage of an excellent job opportunity in Mexico and with his departure she was free to pursue her literary career. However, she knew this would involve relocating to Madrid, the centre of Spain's publishing industry and the

²⁴ Bretz, *Concha Espina*, p. 15.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

only place where a woman could hope to be successful in the field of literature. With barely enough money to get her started and accompanied by her three youngest children, Espina moved to Madrid to seek a career in letters.

There are, undoubtedly, comparisons which can be made between O'Brien and Espina's life patterns, particularly with regard to their Catholic middle-class upbringing, formative time spent abroad, and unsuccessful marriages. For example, O'Brien's childhood was similar to Espina's in that she was provided with a life of abundant comfort and educated at a convent school. As both Espina and O'Brien reached maturity they realised that to be successful female writers they would have to overcome the limitations of their particular circumstances, and it is therefore not surprising that O'Brien's fiction and Espina's pre-civil war novels are concerned with the restrictions Catholic bourgeois society placed on women. Time spent abroad as a young woman inspired Espina to become a professional writer and the same can be said of O'Brien. After separating from her husband, Espina never remarried and carried a deep distrust of matrimony into her work, a feature which is clearly recognisable in *Mariflor*. O'Brien's marriage in 1923 to Gustaaf Renier, a Dutch journalist, lasted only eleven months. The details of why the marriage failed are vague, but as Walshe points out in his biography of O'Brien 'it is clear that this marriage was a mistake for Kate.'²⁷ However, O'Brien never refers to this period of her life in any of her autobiographical writings and consequently, despite a glut of rumours, the reasons for the early ending of the marriage can only be surmised. For example, one line of speculation suggests that Renier was a homosexual and became the inspiration for Henry Archer in *The Land of Spices*.²⁸ Another surrounds the sexuality of O'Brien herself, which will be discussed in chapter four of this thesis. Yet, whatever the reason for the separation O'Brien would never marry again, and as her friend Lorna Reynolds recalled, 'she always spoke of marriage as an undertaking of

²⁷ Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

desperate gravity.’²⁹ Like Espina, O’Brien’s negative feeling towards matrimony is evident in her fiction. For instance in *The Last of Summer*, O’Brien’s protagonist, Angèle, tells her cousin Martin: ‘I don’t want a proposal of marriage. I’d loathe to be married [...] Yes. I think it’s a perfect thing. But it’s not for me. I’m quite unsuitable.’³⁰

Espina’s fighting spirit and perseverance paid off when in 1909 she published her first novel, *La Niña de Luzmela* (The Girl from Luzmela), with commercial success. Three more novels followed before the publication in 1914 of *La Esfinge Maragata* (The Maragatan Sphinx). According to Espina, the novel is an ideal paradigm in assessing her merits as a writer as it is typical in both thought and technique.³¹ Yet, categorising her work has generally proven problematic which has been more difficult due to the general critical neglect, until recently, of female Spanish writers. As Catherine Davies points out in *Spanish Women’s Writing, 1849-1996*, women have been writing in the Spanish language for centuries; St Teresa of Avila, for example, is arguably one of the world’s greatest literary figures.³² However, it was not until after the period following the first declaration of International Women’s Day, on March 8th, 1976 that Spanish women writers have sustained serious critical attention.³³ Since that time Spain has witnessed the escalation and institutionalisation of feminist activities which coincided with the sudden increase in women’s writing and a surge of books on the culture and history of Spanish women. A steady stream of critical studies, such as Mary Lee Bretz’s study of Concha Espina, have been published in English since the late 1970s, mainly by female academics in the United States.

It is almost inconceivable, but nonetheless true, that during the first forty years of the twentieth century, at the height of literary and artistic creation in Spain, it is generally

²⁹ Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O’Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), p. 36.

³⁰ Kate O’Brien, *The Last of Summer* [1943] (London: Virago, 1990), p. 69. Hereafter cited in the text parenthetically as *Sum*.

³¹ Concha Espina was interviewed by Geoffrey Fozard in 1948. See Geoffrey Fozard, “‘La esfinge maragata’ of Concha Espina,” (Unpublished Thesis, University of Liverpool, 1949), p. 2.

³² Catherine Davies, *Spanish Women’s Writing, 1849-1996* (London: The Athlone Press, 1998), p. 1.

³³ *Ibid.*

assumed that no great women novelist or poet made the grade. Critics in Spain, Davies writes, ‘are notorious for the imposition of generations and dominant movements in their ordering of discursive practices and cultural activities. Seldom do women participate in these groups; seldom are they included in literary histories.’³⁴ For instance, in *A Literary History of Spain: The Twentieth Century*, Espina receives a typical cursory mention: ‘Some of her novels are rather watery accounts of the lives of sentimental, spiritual, but very ordinary young ladies such as one imagines Concha Espina to have been.’³⁵ Indeed, as this example demonstrates, literature by women was often marginalised, trivialised or simply ignored, in large part because their literary forms and themes were different from those of the men who played an important role in shaping the criteria of canonical inclusion.

Roberta Johnson rightly argues in *Gender and Nation in the Spanish Modernist Novel* that male Spanish authors of the early twentieth century (often referred to as the Generations of ’98, ’14 and ’27) ‘were more modernist in the traditional understanding of the term, emphasising technical and verbal innovation in their efforts to represent the contents of an individual consciousness.’³⁶ Conversely, women engaged in what Johnson refers to as social modernism, a mode that focuses on interpersonal relations within formal and informal social parameters. Johnson’s ground-breaking study seeks to open up the Spanish modernist canon to include the social modernism of women writers, a modernism that focused on domestic issues, gender roles, and relations between the sexes.

In her re-evaluation of Kate O’Brien’s work, Mentxaka argues for a long overdue re-reading of her novels as modernist and experimental. In a parallel with Johnson’s examination of the Spanish modernist canon, Mentxaka states that one of the urgent tasks within the Irish literary canon ‘is to review the construction of canonical modernism that

³⁴ Davies, *Women’s Writing*, p. 2.

³⁵ G.G. Brown, *A Literary History of Spain: The Twentieth Century* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1972), p. 212.

³⁶ Roberta Johnson, *Gender and Nation in the Spanish Modernist Novel* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), p. vii.

ensured the exclusion of writers such as O'Brien.'³⁷ Similarly, in her revisionist study of Spanish literature, Johnson includes Espina in a group of Spanish female writers who have yet to be analysed within the context of the modernist and avant-garde movements of the 1920s and 1930s. At the time the Spanish Second Republic came into being in 1931, Espina was writing as a pro-Republican feminist who, alongside Carmen de Burgos and María Martínez Sierra, paved the way for the next generation of female Spanish writers.³⁸ Undoubtedly, the surge of political and cultural activity witnessed during the 1920s and 1930s was fertile ground for Spanish women writers and, according to Johnson, their work needs to be analysed within the forces which helped to shape them.

Through the 1920s and early 1930s Concha Espina was an active member of the Madrid literary establishment based at the The Residencia de Estudiantes, and her friends and supporters included the poets Gerardo Diego and Federico García Lorca, both associated with the avant-garde movement in Spain.³⁹ O'Brien would likely have been aware of the existence of this vibrant, fruitful hub of writers and artists who would gather together daily at each other's houses, or in Madrid's cafes and bars to discuss their ideas and opinions. She savoured the pulsating culture of Madrid and was clearly familiar with the layout of her 'favourite capital city.'⁴⁰ In *Farewell Spain*, the author recalls how she particularly enjoyed visiting the Prado museum, attending bullfights and sitting at pavement cafes (*FS* 130).

Espina and her contemporaries viewed a Republican form of government as an opportunity for sexual equality and, as such, through the narrative of their work, are socially

³⁷ Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p. 7.

³⁸ The Spanish Second Republic is discussed in the introduction to this thesis but it is pertinent to reiterate here that women's issues, such as suffrage, divorce and equal pay were central to the Republican agenda.

³⁹ The Residencia de Estudiantes – literally translated as 'Student Residence' – is one of the original cultural centres in Madrid. Founded in 1910, the Residence was a prestigious institution that helped foster and create the intellectual environment of Spain's brightest young writers and artists. However, the Spanish Civil War indicated an end to this intellectual period as many writers were forced into exile and censorship increased under Franco's dictatorship. Enric Bou, 'Poetry between 1920 and 1940,' in David T. Gies (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 557.

⁴⁰ Kate O'Brien, Typescript draft of lecture for Association of Professional and Business Women (12 November 1965), The Kate O'Brien Papers, U L, MS Collection List P12, MS 166.

and politically committed New Women who do not yet exist in Spain but who are projected for the future. Indeed, in 1931 Espina said: 'The present form of government has my greatest hopes...because the Republic was my political allusion during my entire life. In a few months Spain has covered many years. How can one not be optimistic!'⁴¹ Espina fervently favoured women's right to vote and publicly supported divorce legislation even though she realised that this stance might adversely affect the sales of her books.

One such feminist avant-garde novel, Espina's *La virgin prudente* (1929) (The Wise Virgin), imagines how a woman might negotiate a path in the uncharted territory of public life. On the eve of the novel's publication, Espina herself believed that it would cause a furore 'because of the advanced nature of its theories and the daring with which they are presented.'⁴² The protagonist, Aurora de España, (Dawn of Spain) represents the birth of a New Spain in which women are able to develop as intellectuals. Unlike the traditional Spanish woman, Aurora has ideals and imagination. She attends university and becomes a lawyer with a radical and controversial thesis on women's rights in which she argues that women must be given the same political rights as men without any limitations on their mutual association. Nonetheless, Aurora soon realises that her ideal for women is perhaps too advanced for her epoch and her vision comes to an end after she has an unpleasant nightmare where she is persecuted.

With the passing years, however, Espina's political views became increasingly conservative which was subsequently reflected in her literary output, and is the most likely reason for the diminished interest in her work during the decades following her death. During the Civil War, Espina was placed under house arrest by republicans for openly supporting the Falangists, and thus as a consequence of Espina's strong association with extreme right-wing political factions she has been largely ignored by Hispanic literary critics. As Bretz notes, the

⁴¹ Cited in Johnson, *Gender and Nation*, p. 258.

⁴² Ibid.

formation of the Spanish canon in universities outside of Spain was mostly directed by Republican exiles who had strong political reasons to exclude Espina.⁴³ Catherine Davies, for example, has omitted Espina in any detail from her study of Spanish female authors. Davies, who says that Espina's post-Civil War work 'was spoilt by nationalist rhetoric', instead assigns full chapters to writers associated with the feminist centre-left, such as Carmen de Burgos and Rosa Chacel.⁴⁴

The contextualization of Espina's work has, like O'Brien's, been dictated by common assumptions. Indeed, Mentxaka argues that: 'Her [O'Brien's] writing has been aligned for the most part to realism and the nineteenth-century, as well as romance, all considered outmoded or unchallenging, stylistically timid and ideologically moribund.'⁴⁵ Yet a more recent and, arguably, accurate appraisal would describe her as a feminist, modernist writer who mixed genres and forms. Espina's pre-Civil War writing has been aligned for the most part to realism and the nineteenth-century regional novel. For instance, in *The Literature of Spain and Latin America*, J.E. Luebering claims that 'Espina's novels most nearly approach the regional novel as epitomized by Pereda.'⁴⁶ Yet, interestingly, during an interview in 1934 when Espina was asked if she wished to be considered as a regional writer, she replied: 'Oh, no. Of course I write better of my own village, but I do not feel that I am a regional writer. You will notice, for example, that I do not use dialect in my novels as Pereda did.'⁴⁷ In Bretz's analysis of *Mariflor*, she offers the following, and arguably more accurate, critical approach:

⁴³ Reprisals against Franco's former enemies on the left were exceedingly harsh, particularly in the decade after the war when thousands of Republicans were imprisoned and executed. That work was, in great measure, carried out by the Falange. By the time Franco died, still in power, in 1975, the majority of Spaniards no longer wanted to identify themselves with a regime that had for nearly forty years looked more to the past than to the future. See George R. Esenwein, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 267-268.

⁴⁴ Davies, *Women's Writing*, p. 114.

⁴⁵ Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p. 102.

⁴⁶ J.E. Luebering (ed.), *The Literature of Spain and Latin America* (New York: Britannia Educational Publishing, 2011), p. 73.

⁴⁷ James O. Swain, 'A Visit to Concha Espina at Luzmela', *Hispania*, vol. 17, no. 4 (December 1934), p. 337.

Notwithstanding a number of thematic and structural similarities, *Mariflor* departs from the Regionalistic novel in many ways. Stylistically, Concha Espina is closer to her contemporaries than her predecessors [...] The juxtaposition of lyricism and severity as well as the plasticity of certain images suggest the influence of Impressionism and Modernism [...] In style as in philosophy and narrative technique, Concha Espina combines certain characteristics of nineteenth-century literary movements with others of the twentieth century.⁴⁸

Espina, then, could be regarded as an individual writer and *Mariflor* her artistic experimentation with modernist techniques. Certainly, the work, as Bretz notes:

is something more than a novel of regional customs. Concha Espina combines the regionalistic vision of the nineteenth-century with the regenerationist interest of the Generation of 1898. The final product is a perfect balance of geographical setting, plot development, social analysis and characterization.⁴⁹

Additionally, when read from a feminist perspective as Judith A. Kirkpatrick observes in her essay 'From Male Text to Female Community: Concha Espina's *La esfinge maragata*:', 'the text illustrates *Mariflor*'s real and metaphorical passage from a world in which woman is primarily a construct of male imagination and language into a female community where women would define themselves in terms of their own strengths and concerns.'⁵⁰ *Mariflor* certainly reflects the concerns of women writers trying to establish their place in early twentieth-century Spain, and it is those concerns with which O'Brien, as an Irish woman having a similar struggle in determining her role as a writer in 1930s Ireland, was all too familiar with.

There is a general consensus amongst O'Brien's critics that some aspects of her work changed after her experiences of censorship, the outcome of the Spanish Civil War, and the deteriorating situation in Europe. Indeed, as Walshe observes, the work she produced during the 1940s 'was a kind of resistance writing, a response to censorship, to war and to her unstable working life.'⁵¹ Whilst this is certainly true, there are themes and character types in

⁴⁸ Bretz, *Concha Espina*, p. 53.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵⁰ Judith A. Kirkpatrick, 'From Male Text to Female Community: Concha Espina's *La esfinge maragata*', *Hispania*, vol. 78, no. 2 (May 1995), p. 262.

⁵¹ Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 92.

The Land of Spices and *The Last of Summer* which point to the pervasive influence of *Mariflor*. Espina's novel was influential in the composition of *The Land of Spices* as here for the first time O'Brien openly promotes the cause of feminism and presents the convent as an alternative and fulfilling way of life for a woman. In *The Last of Summer*, O'Brien mirrors the prevalent themes in *Mariflor* and engages with the modern/traditional binary, Freudian theory, and the deployment of the convent as a means of escape from familial restraints for her Irish girls. These themes are played out by Angèle, Hannah, Jo, and to some extent Tom and Martin, who bear a striking resemblance to Espina's main characters in *Mariflor*.

In *Mariflor*, Concha Espina describes a remote and culturally singular district of León which is home to the villages of the Maragatos people. Outside influences are unwelcome in this community because a life based on strict tradition is hostile to foreign customs and ideas. The main thread to the story surrounds the central character Mariflor who must choose between a marriage for love or for financial convenience. All the marriages in this community are of convenience and those Maragatos who marry an 'outsider' never return to instil foreign influence. Set at the turn of the century, the novel begins as Mariflor and her grandmother, Dolores, leave the port city of La Coruña to travel to the Maragatos village of the grandmother. Mariflor's mother has recently passed away and her father, Martin, who is also a Maragato, has emigrated to South America to find his brother, Isidoro, to try and make enough money to support the family. It transpires that Dolores has squandered her inheritance on trying to establish Isidoro in Argentina, leaving the rest of the family in a precarious financial position. On the train journey, Mariflor meets the poet Rogelio Terán who is on his way to a nearby village, and they fall in love. Mariflor tells her companion that her family have arranged for her to marry her cousin, Antonio— a man she has never met, but her father has assured her she has the right to refuse if she is not happy to proceed with the union. Mariflor informs Rogelio that her father and mother were happily married and she too

believes that she has a right to love who she wants and to choose her own husband. It is obvious to Rogelio that young Spanish woman, despite wearing the traditional costume of the Maragatos, presents a dramatic contrast to her grandmother:

The grandmother is a rude country-woman, a slave of the soil [...] one might fancy that she is bound in captivity, that feudal shackles oppress and torture her, that she has stepped from out the past, from the age of unquestioning servitude; while the girl, graceful and elegant, bespeaks independence and arrogance; even in her bizarre costume her entire appearance reveals the modern stamp of charm and culture.⁵²

Here, Espina juxtaposes the character of Mariflor, an enlightened city girl with the traditionalism of the grandmother. Mariflor comes from a society that differs radically from that of her Maragatan family as she has had an education and experienced culture, comfort, and luxury. The reader is informed by Rogelio that the two women represent ‘two castes, two epochs, two civilisations,’ indeed this contrast of modern and traditional is a theme which is interspersed throughout the novel (*M* 7). For example, *Mariflor* begins with a journey from the city to the country on a modern mode of transportation. This train journey, as Roberta Johnson observes in *Gender and Nation in the Spanish Modernist Novel*, is framed to contrast modern urban Spain with the rural traditional nation.⁵³ With Rogelio’s promise to write and visit, Mariflor proceeds to visit Valdecruces keen to discover her father’s homeland. However, Mariflor struggles to adapt to medieval village life and it soon becomes apparent that her ideals are clearly at odds with the villagers’ views on love and marriage.

Written between 1941 and 1942, whilst O’Brien was living and working in England, *The Last of Summer* is set in Drumaninch in the West of Ireland, between August and September 1939, just before World War Two is declared.⁵⁴ The novel confronts the issue of neutrality in the face of a European war, which situates the topic as a source of concern, reflected by the many discussions on the subject among the characters throughout the text.

⁵² Concha Espina, *Mariflor* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), p. 7. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *M*.

⁵³ Johnson, *Gender and Nation*, p. 84.

⁵⁴ This is the first of O’Brien’s novels in which she uses an Irish locale other than Mellick (her fictional Limerick).

Nevertheless, *The Last of Summer* also echoes the author's complex feelings towards the country which twice rejected her as an artist. The novel opens with the impromptu arrival of Angèle Maury-Kernahan at her late father's family estate, Waterpark. The French woman is travelling with some friends in Ireland, and decides to visit her Irish family. In *Mariflor*, Espina aligns her main protagonist with modernity and thus she stands apart from all the other women in the novel. In *The Last of Summer*, O'Brien employs the character of Mariflor as a model for Angèle, and by adopting a similar method to Espina, the device of the outsider is used to challenge an established system of values. For instance, as Angèle approaches Waterpark for the first time she is immediately alienated by her new surroundings when a young local girl makes a disparaging remark about her bright red lipstick:

She felt tears of fury in her eyes. What a fool she was! Surely she knew yokeldom by now, in many countries, and was accustomed to being a stranger, looking a stranger, in places where strangers are targets? But in this shaft sped by a rude little girl – no novelty – she felt an accidental expression of something which had vaguely oppressed and surprised her, these ten days, in the Irish air – an arrogance of austerity, contempt for personal feeling, coldness and perhaps fear of idiosyncrasy [...] She hated the rudeness and she heard the insult to her reddened mouth symbolically – so self-conscious was she. She heard it as an ignoble warning from the people of her father (*Sum* 5).

Here, O'Brien condemns a conservative culture, which lacking empathy, denies participation in the outside world. O'Brien hated the individual restraints that were imposed by the narrow nationalism and puritanical Catholicism of the Irish Free State, much preferring the personal freedom she had found in Spain in the early 1930s. The Ireland depicted in the *The Last of Summer* is a repository for all that is backward. The red lipstick is symbolic of the cultural distance which exists between rural Ireland and Europe. Although new magazines such as the *Modern Girl* were providing tips on make-up and fashion to Irish girls in the 1930s, the wearing of bright red lipstick, particularly in a rural area such as O'Brien's Drumaninch in

The Last of Summer, would have definitely been frowned upon.⁵⁵ Ireland's insularity is seen through the lens of Angèle who is intelligent, attractive, and symbolic of modernising European influences. Angèle is a representation of the author herself, the self-imposed emigrée whose homeland repudiated her novels.

On her arrival at Waterpark, Angèle is introduced to the mistress of the house, her aunt-in-law, Hannah Kernahan, and discovers, to her astonishment, that the three Kernahan cousins, Tom, Martin and Jo, are unaware of her existence. In Espina's novel, Mariflor's father was ostracised by his family because he married an 'outsider,' and correspondingly, the Kernahans wanted nothing to do with Angèle's father because he had chosen to live in Paris and marry a French actress. Tom was never invited to return to Waterpark and when Hannah was asked why no effort had been made to contact his wife and daughter after he died, she replied: 'What was the good of trying to make friends then, with strangers?' (*Sum* 16). In response to Angèle's explanation of her reason for visiting the Kernahan family, her cousin, Martin, expresses the hope that Angèle will stay with them for a time. Hannah's response to Martin's wish conveys her dislike of Angèle's unexpected visit, albeit in a veiled manner: "'She's not very likely to give herself time to, Martin dear,'" said Mrs Kernahan. "You see, she belongs to the world – not to our old backwater"' (*Sum* 19). Hannah's remark makes it clear to Angèle that she is unwelcome, different, foreign and worldly, as O'Brien draws attention to the distinction between Ireland and the world outside.

It is apparent that, like Espina's Mariflor, Angèle has experience of a wider world and there are a number of parallels which can be drawn between the two young women. For example, in a similar way to Mariflor, the catalyst for Angèle's first ever visit to her father's ancestral home is the recent death of her mother. Additionally, like Mariflor's parents,

⁵⁵ Induced by what it perceived as insidious influences and new inter-war fashions, the Church-run state advocated female decorum and modesty. Maintaining the 'status quo', within a strictly Catholic paradigm, involved severe censorship of literature, family and self. In particular, the moral and social constraints upon women in the Irish Free State were considerable. See Myrtle Hill, *Women in Ireland: A Century of Change* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2003), pp. 110-12.

Angèle's mother and father were happily married; her father was a devoted husband and, as she fondly remembers, 'her mother had known and lived with love' (*Sum* 91). Angèle had a 'European' education in France and her mother's job had afforded her the opportunity to travel around the northern towns of Spain; she cannot comprehend that her mother had married someone from this 'little place' (*Sum* 4). In a comparable way to Mariflor, Angèle's arrival threatens the safe insularity of the family as her arrival is disruptive and her presence a provocative one in the family. The Kernahan cousins, Tom, Martin and Jo are captivated by Angèle, and the two young men fall in love with her. Angèle falls in love with Tom and to Hannah's horror accepts his proposal of marriage; however, before the necessary dispensation from the bishop can be arranged, war is declared. Tom is persuaded by his mother of his selfishness in thinking of taking Angèle away from her own enlightened way of life to live in the country. Tom bows to his mother's judgement and Angèle leaves for France without delay.

Nevertheless, it is not the plot that is crucial in this novel, a point which has already been underlined by O'Brien's critics. For example, as Lorna Reynolds argues: 'the skill of the writer is devoted to the creation of Hannah Kernahan's character and the emotional stranglehold she has on her eldest son, Tom.'⁵⁶ Eavan Boland has a similar view: 'The character of Hannah Kernahan is one of the strengths of the book – indeed, one of the strongest portraits in all of O'Brien's work. This is a characterisation made up of insight and irony.'⁵⁷ So, instead of climatic action in *The Last of Summer*, O'Brien gives the reader an intense psychological portrait of one her main characters. Hannah is a resourceful widow who rules Waterpark with the help of her eldest son, Tom, whom she loves with passionate possessiveness. Apparently, Hannah's first love was Angèle's father, also called Tom, who she was engaged to, but it transpires that he jilted her. To save face, a heartbroken Hannah

⁵⁶ Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe), p. 80.

⁵⁷ Eavan Boland, 'Introduction,' in O'Brien, *The Last of Summer*, p. 7.

married Tom's eldest brother, Ned, and led an unhappy existence until he died. Subsequently, Tom went abroad and ties between the families were cut. For Hannah, injured pride has prevented all reference to him, his French wife or his daughter. Hannah found consolation in the love of her son Tom who she adores to the exclusion of her two other children, and as the housekeeper Dotey tells Angèle, she worships him 'inordinately' (*Sum* 113). Married life had not been good to Hannah; she had suffered the heartbreak of losing two of her babies, one in childbirth, the other aged eighteen months and there was always financial anxiety too. However, Dotey informs Angèle that Hannah is widely known in the local community as: 'A woman in a million [...] a widow who had suffered many's the dark trial all through her married life, and had to bring up her children single handed – an example to us all' (*Sum*, 113). Tom views his mother, Hannah, as more or less a saint, he had been told countless times by priests, nuns and family friends that she was a wonderful woman: 'a credit to her sex, that she suffered as few are called upon to suffer, and that he must never forget' (*Sum* 76).

Hannah is a microcosm of 1930s Ireland, and Angèle's experience in Ireland is O'Brien's dramatisation of the nation's treatment of *The Land of Spices*. Jo, and particularly Martin represent the author's response to it. Hannah is beautiful and clever, but she is also narcissistic and controlling, traits in her character which Martin and Jo draw attention to. For instance, Hannah is too selfish to realise that Tom may want a wife and in a calculated but manipulative way does everything she can to discourage it. Martin advises Angèle that if she stays and marries Tom, Hannah would make her life difficult: 'She'll be too much for you always. You'll never make a go of it [...] It's a miserable battle and you'll lose it. She doesn't want you. She hates you in a way' (*Sum* 220). Although Jo agrees with Angèle that she and Tom should leave for Paris without delay, she tells her: 'But it'll be over Mother's dead body, I warn you. She's quite capable of giving him a small dose of poison or something, enough to

make him unfit to travel' (*Sum* 208). Hannah is, undoubtedly, the villain of the novel, self-centred and treacherous and is implicated in the narrow-mindedness of her country and class. The approach of war leaves Hannah untouched. What has a European war got to do with Ireland, she asks, whenever the matter is raised. The way she deals with her French niece symbolises Ireland's cultural and political insularity in the face of a world war. Hannah's nemesis, Angèle, represents the European opinion on the moral obligation of participating in the war, in a country where such opinions were heavily censored.

In Hannah Kernahan, O'Brien gives the reader her only extensively studied character of a mother, and a mother's relationship with her children. O'Brien only vaguely remembered her own mother – so in her portrayal of Hannah she was not drawing from personal experience. It is probable, therefore, that in *The Last of Summer* O'Brien is again borrowing from *Mariflor*, this time from Espina's portrayal of egocentric mother/son relationships. Arguably, the inspiration for Hannah is taken from two characters in *Mariflor*: Mariflor's aunt-in-law, Ramona and grandmother, Dolores. None of the mother characters under discussion in this chapter function as the protagonist, but their effect on the plot and the psychological ripples of their relationships to others are pivotal to the lives and struggles of others. Espina's Ramona is depicted as a harsh woman, dried up by the excessive work of the fields, and as Fozard succinctly puts it, 'sourness pervades her whole character.'⁵⁸ Although Mariflor is fond of her cousins and becomes emotionally attached to them she feels nothing for her Aunt Ramona, who rouses in her 'an unutterable terror' (*M* 80).

Like O'Brien's Hannah, Ramona is indignant towards her newly arrived niece. She disapproves of Mariflor's relationship with Rogelio Terán as it defies both local customs and the economic interests of the family. She cannot comprehend that even though the financial salvation of the family hinges on Mariflor's marriage to Antonio, her niece refuses to

⁵⁸ Fozard, "'La Esfinge Maragata'" of Concha Espina,' p. 38.

consider the matter. The similarities with Hannah do not end there. Ramona also adores her eldest son to the exclusion of her other children and has a particularly difficult relationship with her daughter Marinella. She disapproves of Marinella because she feels she is selfish in wanting to leave the family unit and join a convent when the family need her help to tend the arid fields in order for them to subsist. In this pre-modern society children are conditioned from an early age to value self-denial over emotional fulfilment and deviation from the norm is severely reprimanded – an ethos which is evident in O’Brien’s depiction of Ireland in *The Last of Summer*. Like Hannah, Ramona has a protective and distrusting demeanour that few can penetrate. Indeed, both these women are armed with insular indifference to everybody and everything outside their immediate circle and direct interests.

Espina’s Dolores is a traditional country woman with a feudal mentality. She is not a main character and for the most part she sits quietly in the background, too old and tired to be noticed. However, what is significant about Dolores character is that, in a similar way to O’Brien’s Hannah, she is the personification of traditional values and resistance to change, thereby illustrating the contradiction between rural and urban, modern and traditional. In another parallel with Hannah, Dolores’ one remaining passion in life is the love she has for her son. As the village priest explains to Mariflor, ‘her blind idolatry’ has had disastrous consequences on the rest of the family (*M* 205). It becomes apparent that the economic ruin of the Salvadores family is a direct result of Dolores’s obsession with Isidoro. Of the thirteen children born to Dolores, only two survived, Isidoro and Mariflor’s father, Martin. Isidoro is physically weak and financially inept, but she is the grandmother’s favourite by default because Martin chose to marry someone from outside the clan. Dolores idolises Isidoro and deeply resents her daughter-in-law Ramona. Indeed, Fozard points out that the strong maternal love, typical of the Maragatas, has become ‘perverted in her.’⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Fozard, “‘La Esfinge Maragata’ of Concha Espina”, p. 37.

When Espina was writing *La Esfinge Maragata* (The Maragatan Sphinx) around 1913, the Freudian term ‘Oedipus complex’ had recently been applied in psychoanalytic literary criticism.⁶⁰ It was in his analysis of the myth of Oedipus in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) that Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) first acknowledged that *Hamlet* offered a Shakespearean parallel.⁶¹ It was not until 1910 that the ‘Oedipus complex’ attracted serious attention when psychoanalyst Ernest Jones developed Freud’s theory in his article on Hamlet and the Oedipus-Complex.⁶² Concha Espina clearly draws on Freud’s theory in *La Esfinge Maragata*, as not only does she explore the consequences of obsessive mother/son relationships but also alludes to the sphinx from the myth of Oedipus in the title of the novel.⁶³ Espina’s interest in the myth of Oedipus was not unique amongst her contemporaries. Indeed, as Leonard Jackson argues in *Literature, Psychoanalysis and the New Sciences of the Mind*, when D.H. Lawrence wrote the semi-autobiographical *Sons and Lovers* in 1912, the author had gained extensive knowledge about the Oedipus complex from his new wife Frieda.⁶⁴ It is also likely that Espina would have been aware of the work of romantic painters of the late nineteenth century who portrayed the sphinx from the Greek myth as a symbol of men’s growing fear of incipient female power.⁶⁵

Undoubtedly, the mother-son relationship is the dominant relationship in *The Last of Summer*. The intensity of Hannah Kernahan’s obsession with her son coupled with direct

⁶⁰ See Leonard Jackson, *Literature, Psychoanalysis and the New Sciences of the Mind* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), p. 76.

⁶¹ See Sigmund Freud, ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’ (1900) in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans and ed, vol. 5, 1900-1901 (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 261-64.

⁶² Ernest Jones, ‘The Oedipus-Complex as An Explanation of Hamlet’s Mystery: A Study in Motive’, *The American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 21, no. 1 (January 1910), pp. 72-113.

⁶³ On his journey to Thebes, Oedipus encountered a Sphinx who would stop all travellers to Thebes and ask them a riddle. If the travellers were unable to answer her correctly, they would be killed and eaten; if they were successful, they would be free to continue their journey. Quick witted Oedipus was the first to solve the riddle and the Sphinx was so enraged she threw herself from the rock and died. For a more detailed account of the Myth of Oedipus see Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth 5th ed.* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), pp. 475-76.

⁶⁴ Jackson, *Literature, Psychoanalysis*, p. 76.

⁶⁵ For example, Gustave Moreau’s depiction of ‘Oedipus and the Sphinx’ (1864). Whereas the Greek myth celebrated the power of the intellect to unravel the mysteries of unrational nature, Moreau was interested in the struggle of male against female. See Powell, *Classical Myth*, p. 693.

references to Freud and the Oedipal theory at intervals throughout the novel has led critics such as Adele Dalsimer to describe *The Last of Summer* as ‘O’Brien’s most explicitly Freudian novel’⁶⁶ This is not the first time that intense parent-child relationships have featured in O’Brien’s novels; she recognises the overwhelming love Anthony Considine displays for his son Denis in *Without My Cloak* and the consuming nature of Teresa Mulqueen’s relationship with her son Reggie in *The Ante-Room*. However, as Walshe identifies:

it is a measure of Kate O’Brien’s development as a novelist that an earlier parent who loved his child unreasonably, Anthony Considine is never interrogated in this way, whereas Hannah Kernahan’s possessiveness is clearly identified for the monstrous egotism that it is.⁶⁷

For example, Hannah’s possessiveness and her lack of consideration for Tom’s feelings is brought to the fore when Dr O’Byrne, the family doctor, tries to persuade Hannah to surrender her hold so that Tom might be free to marry his daughter, Norrie, who grew up with Tom and loves him.

When Dr O’Byrne suggests to Hannah that she has kept Tom from normal expressions of his masculinity, she warns the doctor about intruding on the sanctity of a mother’s relationship with her son: ‘I *have* heard’, she says, ‘of the messes some interferers try to make nowadays of simple natural things’ (*Sum* 141). But what is natural to Hannah is highly unnatural to Dr O’Byrne, who wishes his daughter happily married. He insists that it is not only the modern, post-Freudian world that has labelled ‘unhealthy’ such liaisons as Hannah and Tom’s; such ‘messes’ are ‘older than Sophocles [...] as old as Egypt, or Genesis; and none the healthier for having temples built above them’ (*Sum* 141). Dr O’Byrne reprimands Hannah, ‘What’s the matter with you? [...] Don’t you face life at all here in your watch tower? Don’t you know that a man *must* have the natural gratifications that no

⁶⁶ Adele Dalsimer, *Kate O’Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1990), p. 73.

⁶⁷ Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 94.

maternal piety can blind him to? (*Sum* 147-148). At this juncture, O'Brien relies not only on Hannah to express the malady of a mother's unremitting attachment to her son but she utilises a man of science and wisdom to underpin her condemnation of this character. O'Brien's skilful use of Freudian philosophy shows she was familiar with the Oedipus theory and she again draws on a similar plot in Greek mythology as Angèle imagines herself as Racine's *Phèdre* whenever she recalls her actress mother's rehearsing the line in which *Phèdre* reveals her forbidden love for her husband's son: 'Athènes me montra mon superbe ennemi' (*Sum* 6). These intertextual references serve to compare Hannah to the obsessive incestuous Greek heroine as well as highlighting the misplaced passion of the relationship. Certainly, throughout the storyline, Hannah is unmistakably Angèle's 'superbe ennemi' - her proud enemy.⁶⁸

It is clear that Hannah and Tom both live for Waterpark, as the parish priest tells Angèle that her aunt is a great support to Tom and that he could not run the place without her. There are uncanny similarities between Tom and Espina's Rogelio Terán, as both men are torn between desire and duty; they are tied to the love of their mothers, memories of childhood, and domestic security. Rogelio's father abandoned his heartbroken mother when he was young and he has thus lived with an obsession of being a victim of love and poverty. The realities of life frighten him, and he therefore is not ready to risk his emotional and financial security for love like his mother had. Rogelio romantically defends the pursuit of happiness as a basic right, although he subconsciously realises that his economic situation and emotional infidelity can in no way guarantee Mariflor's happiness. O'Brien's Tom also has romantic ideas about love. His sister Jo describes Tom as an 'innocent dreamer' as he cannot see the difficulties in marrying Angèle (*Sum* 164). Like Espina's Rogelio and Mariflor, Tom and Angèle think their love will endure; it is the other characters and the

⁶⁸ Jean Racine, *Phèdre* (1677), Act 3, Scene 1. For a translated version see Derek Mahon, Racine's *Phaedra* (Michigan: Gallery Books, 1996).

narrator who insist that such love is a fleeting illusion. For example, Martin, the novel's realist, expresses O'Brien's truth most obviously. To Angèle's declaration of love for Tom, he retorts, 'Oh rot! Romantic drivel! We are what we are born and bred and work in – not what we feel in our senses all of a sudden one summer night' (*Sum* 198). Martin studies European history, lived in Paris for a time, and proposes to return to France where he hopes, in spite of war, to continue his education. He has imagination and independence of mind and recognises that if Angèle stays at Waterpark her maverick spirit would be destroyed, as he tells her: 'You are urban [...] You'd die here; long before they buried you [...] you belong to the town and to yourself' (*Sum* 221). It is probable that by naming the second son of the Kernahan household, Martin, O'Brien is again borrowing from *Mariflor*. In Espina's novel, Mariflor's father is also called Martin, but what is significant about this character is that he too is his mother's unfavoured son and also acts as the realist in the novel when he is forced to beg his daughter to marry against her will in order to save the family. Through the character of Martin, Espina asserts that deep, instant love must submit to family and culture as it threatens to undermine the status quo of the group, so too does O'Brien in *The Last of Summer*.

The rendering of the characters of Jo in *The Last of Summer* and Marinela in *Mariflor* reflects O'Brien's and Espina's positioning of the convent as an alternative world where women could achieve their potential and satisfy the need for adventure and spiritual fulfilment. In their respective novels Jo and Marinela are peripheral characters, but it is their positioning in the texts on the edge of self-determination that is of interest for here. Both struggle with the ideological confines and demands of family, and each registers a protest against life within it whilst trying to negotiate an escape. Espina's Marinela wishes to escape the 'slavery' of life in Maragata and secretly dreams of entering the convent of St Clare, where she once visited a young novice. Marinela imagines herself in the community of pure,

aesthetic women dressed in the white habit of the order, growing flowers for the Virgin. The abbess of this particular convent is descended from a long line of intelligent, aristocratic women, one of whom was a female canon, a position of authority held by women only in Castile.⁶⁹ Poverty is chosen, not imposed, in this order, and the nuns devote themselves ‘to keeping long fasts and vigils, to doing penance and making sacrifices’ (*M* 136). In Marinela’s eyes, this particular order represents entrance into a matrilineage that empowers women. However, her dream cannot be realised without money, and fully aware that the required dowry for admission to the convent is well beyond the family’s means, Marinela lapses into a melancholy that puzzles and angers her mother, Ramona.

Jo is the first of O’Brien’s single Irish female characters to choose a life outside the familial and cultural bond, seeking the security of an alternative community. During the summer preceding World War Two, Jo makes her decision to become a nun allowing her to escape her mother and flee from the implications of the forthcoming war. Jo is educated and has an MA, a high level of education which contributes to her protest against the confines of family life. In a similar vein to Espina’s Marinela, there is no indecision with regard to Jo’s vocation. Although she has the chance to continue her studies for another two years Jo ‘was certain that she must ultimately be a nun’ (*Sum* 174). Indeed as she tells Angele, ‘it’s what I really want to do. It is something to be sure of a desire’ (*Sum* 206). The use of the word ‘desire’ reflects Jo’s perception of the nature of the vocation, in that, for her, ‘she saw how real was the persistent claim upon her life’ (*Sum* 175). She had undertaken university life in order to be of better service to God, she wants to be of use to others, and frames her vocation in this way.

⁶⁹ Espina’s portrayal of Marinela brings to mind Saint Teresa of Avila and the Carmelite order which she founded. At the time of her writing *Mariflor* it is likely Espina claimed Teresa as a model in her pursuit of autonomy for herself and her protagonists. However, after her political shift in the mid 1930s, Espina would have viewed the saint through the prism of traditionalist right-wing ideology, which was the polar opposite to Kate O’Brien who favoured a radical interpretation of Saint Teresa

Like Espina's Marinela, Jo is the antithesis of, and has a difficult relationship with her mother. Indeed, as Reynolds points out, Jo 'would never dream of seeking sympathy from her mother, or of confiding in her.'⁷⁰ When the news of Angèle and Tom's engagement is broken, Jo's struggle with her mother's character is particularly dramatised. When Hannah first expresses her insincere congratulations to Angèle, Jo's reaction is telling: 'Jo could hardly believe her ears, but through her astonishment it occurred to her, in spite of her practice of dutifulness, that her mother was giving a truly marvellous performance' (*Sum* 162). As young people, Jo and Marinela do not have the authority to confront their mothers, and moreover, as Catholics, they are obligated to honour their parents, as one of the Ten Commandments directs. Thus, they do not directly challenge their mothers but seek to escape them. By entering a convent, the girls achieve their conception of autonomy in a profession that commands respect and offers them personal fulfilment. In a similar way to Marinela, Jo is in no doubt which order she wants to join: 'and she had visited Sainte Fontaine – and knew that the best part of her soul was waiting for her there, had gone ahead of her to that out-of-date, cold, mediaeval centre of discipline and rigidity and elimination' (*Sum* 175). The Convent of Sainte Fontaine, near Bruges is the novitiate house of the Order of Saint Famille who feature in *The Land of Spices* where O'Brien constructs a self-contained aesthetic world. The communities of women which O'Brien first implies in *The Land of Spices* and then develops in *The Last of Summer* follow the model of *Mariflor* in that they are neither perfect spaces or romantic paradises. What both authors seek through their narratives is a measure of freedom from a constricted, misogynist world, and greater independence for women.

The Land of Spices is comparable to *Mariflor* in that it is a subtly but profoundly feminist book. There is no attempt in either novel to engage in open debate on the rights of women; in fact it could be argued that their equal, even superior status to men is taken for

⁷⁰ Reynolds, *A Literary Life*, p. 81.

granted. In this society inhabited almost entirely by women, Mariflor encounters a natural paradigm that contrasts with the idyllic model of the romance; instead of a union with an idealised male who idolises her in return, she is offered the opportunity to establish genuine ties with her female relatives. In a similar way, *The Land of Spices* also offers an alternative to patriarchy; O'Brien's protagonists are strong-minded women bound together in sisterhood. In her essay 'Something Understood? Kate O'Brien and the *The Land of Spices*', Mary Breen suggests why *The Land of Spices* could be classified as a feminist work:

It explores gender-specific concerns which are centred around the problems of female identity; the narrative foregrounds the position of women and marginalises that of men [...] Relationships between men and women, between husbands and wives, fathers and daughters, and brothers and sisters, are portrayed as ultimately destructive. The only successful and lasting relationships in the novel are those between women.⁷¹

For example, Reverend Mother helps other nuns and pupils; Anna helps Reverend Mother, and even Anna's arrogant grandmother plays her part by paying her school fees because Anna's father is a drunken failure. The most gracious relationship in the novel is between mentor and student: Reverend Mother loves Anna generously, entirely without possessiveness, for the beautiful and independent flowering of her soul. In *Mariflor*, women sustain women in an all-female community that supports and helps one another, working for the good of all its members.

In a further parallel with *Mariflor*, O'Brien contrasts feminist modernism with traditionalism in *The Land of Spices*. The introduction of Old Miss Robertson, a once jailed suffragist, brings the feminist theme closer to the surface and frames the disparity between modernity and parochial Irish nationalism. This character encourages Anna to have a career and has a lively debate with the bishop about the narrowness of Irish nationalist politics and women's rights. O'Brien was aware that due to specific clauses in the 1937 Constitution,

⁷¹ Mary Breen, 'Something Understood? Kate O'Brien and *The Land of Spices*,' in Eibhear Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People Dancing* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), p. 173.

Irish women were irrevocably trapped in domestic life and, thus, for her the only way for single women to get on in life was to relinquish marriage and forge a career in the Church.

As Espina's novel draws to a close a disillusioned Mariflor decides to comply with her duty and accepts an immediate marriage with Antonio. However, the novel's ending does not necessarily represent a defeat and sacrifice on Mariflor's part. Instead her action can be seen as a free and potentially liberating choice. Indeed, once Rogelio disappears from the novel and Mariflor's imagination, the young woman takes charge of her life. She intensifies her work on behalf of her family and decides to marry her cousin who in his own way loves her more than does Rogelio. Mariflor's choice, as Johnson argues, 'is not a contemporary feminist solution to a woman's dilemma but it is a positive and active one.'⁷² Practical Mariflor's solution to her family's plight unites the impoverished rural family to modern commercial enterprise. Significantly, she will move to the city after her marriage. At the turn of the century the cities of Spain offered women far greater freedom and autonomy than they were able to achieve in rural locations. Thus, Espina removes her female protagonist from rural Spanish backwardness. As in Espina's *Mariflor*, the awakening of a character to reality is a major theme in *The Last of Summer*, and, as the novel progresses, Angèle begins to accept if not understand that Hannah worships Tom and realises that she will never allow her and Tom to be happy. Finally, Angèle concedes defeat to Aunt Hannah and like Mariflor accepts that because of familial and cultural restraints she cannot marry the man she loves. At the end of *Mariflor*, Espina provides her protagonist with a measure of freedom; so too does O'Brien in *The Last of Summer*, as she gives Angèle the autonomy to escape the suppression of her family, and the stagnation of a backward-looking and repressive Irish society.

As a consequence of Kate O'Brien and Concha Espina supporting opposite sides in the Spanish Civil War, the possibility of any correlation between the two writers work has

⁷² Johnson, *Gender and Nation*, p. 93.

hitherto been critically overlooked; yet, this chapter has demonstrated that the remarkable similarities in the two writers' narratives confirms that they were not such 'unlikely bedfellows' after all. Espina's pre-Civil War work, and particularly her novel *Mariflor*, undoubtedly influenced O'Brien's development as a fiction writer; especially in regards to women's social entrapment and the right to choose one's own role in life. However, Espina was not the only writer of her generation to confront the issue of freedom for Catholic middle-class women in Spain; the dramatist Jacinto Benavente provided a critique of the restrictions his own bourgeois society imposed on its female members. As the following chapter will demonstrate, Benavente was also a literary model for O'Brien in her fictional pursuit of female autonomy and her rebellion against Catholic conservative tradition.

II

Jacinto Benavente: An observer of manners

Kate O'Brien writes in *Farewell Spain* (1937) that she chose to read Benavente during her time working as a governess in the Basque region in 1922 because he had won the Noble Prize for literature that year.¹ O'Brien reveals little else about which particular work she is referring to other than to say that she translated it to herself 'with pleasure' (*FS* 211). Yet, she does mention a conversation she had with a 'cultured elderly Spaniard' who voiced his concern over her reading Benavente's work: 'he looked grave; said no young woman should read him, and recommended *Hermana San Sulpicio*, which is the novel every Spaniard recommended in those days to every foreign young lady' (*FS* 211-2). In the period spanning 1890-1920, Armando Palacio Valdés' *La hermana San Sulpicio* (1889) (Sister Saint Sulpice) was one of Spain's most widely-read novels and became part of the fabric of popular Hispanic culture.² The simple plot describes the adventures that precede the marriage of Ceferino Sanjurjo, with Gloria Bermudez (Sister Saint Sulpice), a beautiful novice nun. Sanjurjo follows Gloria to Seville where she prepares to take her final vows, but when Sanjurjo declares his undying love for her she relinquishes her religious aspirations and chooses to marry him instead.³ In *La hermana San Sulpicio*, Palacio Valdés promotes local culture through his folkloric narratives, providing accurate descriptions of the Seville scenery and its vibrant, colourful festivals.⁴ The popularity of *La hermana San Sulpicio* stems,

¹ Kate O'Brien, *Farewell Spain* [1937] (London: Virago Press, 2006) p. 211. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *FS*.

² Brian J. Dendle, *Spain's Forgotten Novelist: Armando Palacio Valdes (1853-1938)* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1995), p. 13.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-99.

⁴ Much of the novel is taken up with depictions of the city of Seville and the life and character of its inhabitants. The city's Arabic heritage, its gypsies, flamenco music, song, and traditional houses with their inner patios adorned with flowers present a satisfying, positive view of what many, including many Spaniards, considered the essence of Spain. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

arguably, from Palacio Valdés ability to produce a novel that was not only entertaining, but also morally sound and without challenge to the status quo.

At the end of the nineteenth-century, Spain was in a state of flux, a situation which would continue well into the new century.⁵ In the midst of the political and social instability, the Spanish public found solace in Palacio Valdés' stereotypical representations of Spanish life. Indeed, Palacio Valdés enjoyed extraordinary success both in Spain and abroad, his international fame eclipsing even that of his contemporary Benito Pérez Galdós.⁶ *La hermana San Sulpicio* was also made into a popular silent film in 1927, and in 1934 it was one of several sound films made by Spanish producers that had a bigger box office draw than films made in Hollywood.⁷ In *Farewell Spain*, O'Brien mentions an excursion to Santander's modern new cinema during the summer of 1934; she does not mention which film she saw, but it could quite feasibly have been *La hermana San Sulpicio* as it was released around that time (*FS* 42). Palacio Valdés' success, as critics such as Chandler and Schwartz suggest, was 'largely because of his simple and clear style that is easy to read, because his criticism did not offend,' and because his novels were colourful, romantic and responded to all images deemed typical of the South.⁸ *La hermana San Sulpicio* with its fairytale ending and pleasant superficiality would undoubtedly have entertained many foreign young women; nonetheless,

⁵ In the last decades of the nineteenth century Spain was decimated by civil wars, troubled by the instability of government leaders, confused by the monarchy of Isabel II, chastened by the failure of an attempt at Republican government, and finally humiliated by the loss of its last colonies: Cuba, Puerto Rico and The Philippines in 1898. The instability and conflict would continue as Spain faced the new century handicapped by its international isolation, backward economy and a stagnant and elitist political system. For an overview of the period see Raymond Carr, 'Liberalism and Reaction, 1833-1931' in Raymond Carr (ed.), *Spain: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 205-242.

⁶ A slow seller at first, *La hermana San Sulpicio* was reprinted in inexpensive versions and soon became one of the most popular novels ever written in the Spanish language. By the end of the nineteenth-century most of Palacio Valdés works had been translated into English and French; there were also translations into Czech, Danish, Dutch, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and Swedish. Textbook editions of his works were used by generations of American students. In *La hermana San Sulpicio*, Palacio Valdés presented typical images of a romantic and exotic Seville (and Southern Spain in general) which excited many foreigners and Spaniards alike. See Dendle, *Spain's Forgotten Novelist*, pp. 13-14.

⁷ For information on Spanish cinema at this time see J. Lera, 'Spanish Cinema in the 1930s', *New Orleans Review*, vol. 14, no. 1 (January, 1987), pp. 21-24.

⁸ Richard E. Chandler & Kessel Schwartz, *A New History of Spanish Literature Revised Edition* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), p. 145.

with its excessive idealisation of regional Spanish life and large doses of sentimentality, it is unlikely O'Brien would have been impressed. As previously noted, O'Brien was only interested in the towns and cities of the north of Spain so the fact that *La hermana San Sulpicio* was set in the Andalucian city of Seville would not have fired her enthusiasm. Seville with its strong Moorish influence and vibrant, colourful culture was the antithesis of everything she loved about Spain.

In *Kate O'Brien and the Fiction of Identity*, Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka suggests that the 'cultured elderly gentleman' O'Brien refers to is Dr Enrique Areilza, (the head of the household in which O'Brien lived and worked during 1922), and that the doctor's problem with her reading Benavente, was due to the latter's homosexuality.⁹ Yet, there is nothing signalling homosexuality in Benavente's work, and it is more probable that the doctor was afraid that an unattached Catholic middle-class young lady visiting Spain for the first time, such as O'Brien in 1922, should be influenced by a progressive writer whose work demonstrated a gesture of rebellion against Catholic conservative tradition. For example, the female protagonists in Benavente's *El Hombrecito* (1903) (Little Man) and *Princesa Bebé* (1906) (Princess Bebé) were alienated from their middle and upper-class societies as they were seen to be rebellious and immoral. On the other hand, the themes and character portrayal in *La Hermana San Sulpicio* reflect Palacio Valdés' strong sense of regional identity and his orthodox political and religious sympathies.

As previously demonstrated in Chapter One of this thesis, O'Brien had a technique of signalling to the reader hidden meanings in the narrative of *Farewell Spain*, and the fact she raises Palacio Valdés work as a contrast to Benavente is a further example of this method. Importantly, Spain has a long history of tension between regionalism and centralism, and O'Brien was aware that these two writers represented each end of the political spectrum.

⁹ Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka, *Kate O'Brien and the Fiction of Identity* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2011), p. 201. Mentxaka's study is concerned with the importance of O'Brien's work in the context of political and queer activism and she, therefore, analyses *Farewell Spain* from this perspective.

Politically the country was essentially split into two Spains, with the secular, constitutional, progressive left on one side (Benavente) and the clerical, absolutist, reactionary right on the other (Palacio Valdés); this divide would, of course, eventually culminate in the Spanish Civil War. Palacio Valdés' work is situated within the same nineteenth-century realist tradition as the novels of José María de Pereda, whose work O'Brien found objectionable for, amongst other things, being too regional and sentimental.¹⁰ A strong sense of regional identity existed in many areas of Spain, especially in Andalusia where *La hermana San Sulpicio* is set, and in accordance with literary tendencies of the 1870s and 1880s, authentic regional depictions of Spanish life were the norm.

In his article 'The Realist novel' in Spanish literature, Stephen Miller points out that what was and continues to be especially unattractive to modernists and vanguardists is 'the Realist imperative to create socio-mimetic fictions centered on the typical or representative people, manners, conflicts, and particular times, places, and settings of regional and national life.'¹¹ As a writer with a modernist sensibility O'Brien disliked this genre of Spanish writing, much preferring the work of experimental and forward-thinking writers, such as Benavente, who were aligned to the Generation of 1898.¹² There has always been much critical debate about the existence of the Generation of '98, because the differences between the writers who make up the generation are as great, if not greater than the similarities. O'Brien was aware of

¹⁰ Pereda and the nineteenth-century Spanish realist tradition are discussed in chapter one of this thesis.

¹¹ Stephen Miller, 'The Realist novel,' in David T. Gies (eds), *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 410.

¹² The term 'Generation of 1898' or 'Generation of '98' was used loosely at the turn of the twentieth-century but was soon generally applied to the writers who concerned themselves with Spain's heritage and its position in the modern world. The date which gives the generation its name is that of the war between Spain and the United States, in which Spain lost the last remains of its extensive colonial empire. This disastrous war awakened the conscience and the sensitivity of a group of writers, who, with a keen and penetrating critical outlook, set about analysing Spanish history and culture, while at the same time seeking new forms of artistic expression. This harshly critical attitude toward one's own culture was not new in Spanish literature, but it was sharpened by the loss of Spain's colonies. This period in Spanish literature is also known as the Silver Age second only to Spain's Golden Age of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For more information see Donald Leslie Shaw, *The Generation of 1898 in Spain* (London: E. Benn, 1975).

this diversity and her novel *Mary Lavelle* (1936) includes a summary of the origins and beliefs of the Generation of '98:

[Consuelo] saw serious harm in [Pablo's] despair against the Spanish scene at the opening of the twentieth century. He belonged to the generation now remembered in Spain as that of '98 – a generation so diversely gifted as to include Unamuno, Azorín and Benavente. Startled into attention to Spain's plight by the revelations of the disastrous Cuban war, and encouraged in rebelliousness by the period-vogue for Nietzsche, this outcropping of talent had little in fact to unify it and was perhaps no more than a display of many greatly gifted and highly individualised writers very busily at cross purposes, but the gifts and promises were great, and the beginnings seemed indeed like a profound renaissance.¹³

By raising Nietzsche, she draws attention to the influence his existentialist philosophy had not only on the three Spanish writers which she cites here but also on her own work. As Mentxaka argues 'ninety-eight is often described as the Spanish 'version' of existentialism, a movement with which O'Brien can certainly be aligned.'¹⁴ Thinkers like Nietzsche were a source of support to early twentieth-century modernist artists, including Benavente, who sought to challenge the totalising philosophical and religious frameworks typical of the nineteenth-century middle classes.¹⁵

The modernist influence on Spanish literature at the beginning of the century was of considerable importance; before long, however, the writers of the Generation of '98:

discovered the basic contradiction which existed between what Modernism implied of a materialistic, sensual and unconventional view of life, and the austere and serious spiritual questioning of those of the Generation of '98 ... Once the old idols had been knocked over, the temporary allies, Modernism and the Generation of '98, broke apart, in natural obedience to their very different *raisons d'être*. With this rupture they demonstrated the essence of their differences.¹⁶

In spite of the revolutionary restlessness which united the writers of '98 in the beginning, each one produced his own very personal and unique work, but some, such as Benavente,

¹³ Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* (London: Virago, 1984), p. 60.

¹⁴ Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p. 35.

¹⁵ For more information on Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) see R.J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: The Man & His Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Pedro Salinas cited in Marcelino C. Peñuelas, *Jacinto Benavente* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), pp. 59-60.

chose to fuse the heterogeneous concepts of modernism and the Generation of '98.¹⁷ Walter Starkie, the first Professor of Italian and Spanish at Trinity College, Dublin (who will be discussed in detail later in this chapter), sums up perfectly the aesthetic of Jacinto Benavente:

In him there are two inner voices singing as it were in counterpoint: the Spaniard in him casts longing eyes back to the golden traditions of his mystic race; the European in him tries to discover unity in the disordered chaos of a steel age. At times the two voices clash in conflicting harmony, and from the discord springs drama.¹⁸

Benavente was, undoubtedly, a cosmopolitan writer, and he introduced into Spain attitudes and ideas which sometimes clashed with the traditional. But Benavente, in spite of his formal and thematic innovations, was sympathetic to Spanish national traditions and in-particular to the literature of Spain's Golden Age. As we will see in Chapter Three and Four of this thesis, O'Brien also had a profound interest in the literary culture of medieval Catholic Spain. Arguably, O'Brien's interest in Benavente springs largely from the same struggle in her mind as he had, between the new and the old, liberalism and conservatism.

O'Brien informs the reader of *Farewell Spain* that whilst on a visit to Santander in the 1930s she saw two of Benavente's plays, *Lo Cursi* (1901) (The Thing to Do) and *El Pan Comido en La Mana* (1934) (Bread Eaten from the Hand). Of the latter play, a psychological drama, she found it 'more severe and emotional' than the 'early, lovely satire' of *Lo Cursi*, but she felt 'unable to criticise' the play as it was 'new and still unpublished,' she was unable to read it beforehand, therefore 'the extremely naturalistic style of playing gave my slowness with the language very little chance' (FS 41). However, she describes the performance of *Lo Cursi* as 'delicious' and says that the play was an 'admittedly dated *comédie des mœurs*, but in varying disguises the weaknesses he tilts at in it are carried through the generations and its flow and grace must be forever enchanting' (FS 41). Set in Madrid, *Lo Cursi* is a satire on the artificiality of seeking to create a purely national art and a castigation of exaggerated

¹⁷ Peñuelas' provides an insightful chapter on Benavente in relation to the Generation of 1898 and Modernism. See Peñuelas, *Jacinto Benavente*, pp. 49-61.

¹⁸ Walter Starkie, *Jacinto Benavente* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 5.

nationalism and what Benavente considered the false 'casticismo' (love of purity and tradition) that was then dominant in Spain.¹⁹ For Benavente, the only way to revive the national spirit was by breathing European life into Spanish culture.

Benavente was also concerned that his fellow countryman were being denied the opportunity to see modern European drama, and his views on this, and the consequences of overstated nationalism in the theatre, were shared by James Joyce who faced a similar situation in Ireland.²⁰ 'The Day of the Rabblement', which Joyce wrote in 1901, is a scathing attack on the policies of the newly formed Irish Literary Theatre which he condemned for its parochialism.²¹ Joyce had initially supported Yeats and the literary theatre, as it was Yeats' intention to produce European drama as well as Irish. However, he was dismayed when, with pressure from the Catholic Church and Irish Ireland movements, the Literary Theatre produced plays that were popular with the masses and very nationalist. O'Brien is as equally sceptical as Joyce about the Irish revival and Irish nationalism in *The Land of Spices* (1941), which owes much, as Adele Dalsimer suggests, to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).²²

In *A Portrait* Stephen Dedalus argues that the artist needs to liberate himself from religion, nation and family; in *The Land of Spices* O'Brien considers these forces in Irish life during roughly the same historical period. In nationalist Ireland, the Ireland of a resurgent Home Rule Party and Gaelic League, there is little place for European ideas. Irish nationalism was bound up with Catholicism, and although O'Brien is more accepting of Catholic conservative views in *The Land of Spices* than Joyce in *A Portrait*, she does not follow it

¹⁹ Castizo believes 'real' and 'true' Spain was traditional Spain, with its centuries old religious idea. Twentieth-century traditionalists have tended to present an inaccurate portrayal of Spain's Golden Age society as a sea of conformity, with everyone adhering to castizo ideology.

²⁰ The movement of '98 has many points in common with the Irish Renaissance, such as the aim of regeneration, the quest for authenticity, and the recovery of 'national' motives.

²¹ James Joyce, 'The Day of the Rabblement', in E. Mason & R. Ellmann (eds), *Critical Writings of James Joyce* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), pp. 49-51.

²² See Dalsimer, *A Critical Study*, pp. 59-63.

unquestioningly and constantly asks questions of it, particularly in regard to the narrow and insular religion that Irish society has embraced. A conversation between Reverend Mother and Father Conroy, ‘a country boy, fresh from Maynooth,’ sums up O’Brien’s position on the matter.²³ Reverend Mother announces that the girls at Saint Famille will be spending some time at the novitiate in Bruges, but Father Conroy is not impressed by this suggestion:

“It seems a shame that our own Irish girls have to go off to do their religious training in a barbarous place like that!”

“Bruges is not a ‘barbarous’ place, Father Conroy--- and our novitiate there is one of the most beautiful religious houses in northern Europe.”

“No doubt, Reverend Mother--- but it isn’t Irish. Is it now?”

“No it isn’t Irish.”

Father Conroy seemed to think he had won some point or other (*LS* 9).

O’Brien’s thoughts about Irish nationalism are interspersed throughout the novel; an interesting discussion about Saint Famille between the local Bishop and Miss Robertson, a suffragette, exemplifies the author’s stance:

“I believe that [...] education, for instance should be very nationalistic indeed, even what is called narrowly so, until such a political anomaly is renounced, by the educational process.”

“You must forgive me if I say I disagree with you, my lord.”

“Ah, you’re not the only one, Miss Robertson. This child for instance, is at school at *Saint Famille*” – he touched Anna’s head – “you may have heard of the school. It was a French foundation, and its tradition is certainly very Catholic – but it is, I contend, too European for present-day Irish requirements. Its detachment of spirit seems to me to stand in the way of nationalism” (*LS*, 210).

This dialogue echoes a similar exchange in Joyce’s *A Portrait* when Davin, who describes himself as ‘an Irish nationalist, first and foremost, challenges Stephen for dropping out of the Irish language class and for not having an ‘Irish’ name; ‘Are you Irish at all?’ he asks him.²⁴ For Joyce and O’Brien, the prejudice and type of nationalism espoused by Gaelic revivalists like Davin was damaging to the Irish as it denied the individual the freedom required to become an artist and prevented Ireland embracing other European culture, art and literature.

²³ Kate O’Brien, *The Land of Spices* (London: Virago, 1988), p. 13. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *LS*.

²⁴ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 219.

What O'Brien fails to divulge, in her discussion of Benavente's plays in *Farewell Spain*, is who accompanied her, if anyone, on her trips to the theatre whilst she was in Santander. O'Brien reveals earlier in the chapter that Ruth Whitehead – the teenage daughter of a family friend – had been with her in Santander and that the two of them had attended a bullfight with some English people they had met (*FS* 39-40). O'Brien says that this particular visit to Santander was 'more than two years ago, less than three' (*FS* 21). She also mentions on more than one occasion that the time of the visit to Santander was summer and, given that *Farewell Spain* was written between October 1936 and February 1937, Walshe has suggested that the time O'Brien is referring to is the summer of 1934.²⁵ This date coincides with Walter Starkie's sister, the Oxford lecturer and author, Enid Starkie's visit to northern Spain, and I would argue, given the evidence, that she was O'Brien's companion during part, if not all, of her trip.²⁶

Enid Starkie travelled around Spain during the summer of 1934 for part of what she called her Long Vacation. In a letter written to a friend in September, she discussed what was evidently her first visit:

I simply loved my trip to Spain and I hope to be able to go back. They are a very kind simple people, very like the Irish, much nicer to foreigners than either the French or Italians, and they were very kind and patient with my total lack of knowledge of Spanish [...] I started off with a few days at Santander [...] I saw Burgos, Avila, El Escorial, Madrid, Toledo [...] and I thought I'd like a rest at the sea before going back to France.²⁷

Although the letter is long and detailed there is no mention of whom, if anyone accompanied her, or indeed, if she met anyone there. However, the route that Starkie takes around Castile resembles the journey O'Brien says she makes herself that year in *Farewell Spain*. Moreover, in the paragraph preceding her discussion of Benavente's plays, O'Brien remembers chatting

²⁵ Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press), p. 44.

²⁶ Enid Starkie (1897-1970) was born in Dublin and moved to England in 1916 to study French at Oxford. She became a fellow of Somerville College and successfully published books on Baudelaire and Rimbaud. See Joanne Richardson, *Enid Starkie* (London: John Murray Ltd, 1973).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

to locals and tourists in the hotel: ‘we talked French literature with the cultivated Don Peru’ (FS 36). There is no mention who the ‘we’ is, but given that Enid Starkie was a world-leading expert on French literature this is a telling intertextual link.²⁸

Lorna Reynolds writes in *Kate O’Brien: A Literary Portrait* that O’Brien first met Enid Starkie in 1939 whilst she was living and working in Oxford, and that they maintained a lifelong, if sometimes strained, friendship until Starkie’s death in 1970.²⁹ Reynolds confirms that she met Enid Starkie herself at one of O’Brien’s famous gatherings at her house in Roundstone, Co. Galway during the 1950s; other guests included O’Brien’s close friend, the Irish theatre entrepreneur Micheál MacLiammóir and his partner Hilton Edwards.³⁰ Reynolds recalls that Starkie arrived at the party dressed in a French sailor’s outfit complete with matelot cap, and O’Brien was concerned that the locals would think her illustrious visitor was a laughing-stock.³¹ Eibhear Walshe also states that O’Brien first met Enid Starkie during her time living in Oxford, but he suggests that their relationship was more than platonic.³² Walshe arrives at this conclusion from a comment made by Enid Starkie’s biographer, Joanna Richardson. According to Richardson, Enid Starkie began an affair around this period: ‘For Enid, quite apart from the War, 1940 was a year of much significance. In January, she became involved in a love-affair with another woman.’³³ However, the affair ended suddenly in September 1941 when Enid ‘was abandoned for another woman.’³⁴ As Walshe points out,

²⁸ It is possible that Starkie accompanied O’Brien to see the new film version of *La Hermana San Sulpicio*.

²⁹ See Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O’Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), p. 68.

³⁰ Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards founded the Dublin Gate Theatre in 1928, a theatre dedicated to the presentation of European experimental drama. MacLiammóir was a leading figure in Irish theatre for nearly fifty years, and he was also that most unique of figures within post-independence Ireland: the only homosexual public figure. See Eibhear Walshe, ‘Sodom and Begorrah, or Game to the Last: Inventing Micheál MacLiammóir,’ in Eibhear Walshe (ed.), *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), pp. 150-151.

³¹ Reynolds, *A Critical Study*, p. 69.

³² Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 82. Walshe uses Lorna Reynolds study as a point of reference throughout his biography of O’Brien but fails on this occasion to reveal the source of his information.

³³ Richardson, *Enid Starkie*, p. 124.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

there is no tangible proof that the woman in question was O'Brien, but the dates certainly correspond.³⁵

Although Starkie and O'Brien may have begun a love affair at this time, I would disagree with Reynolds as to the timing of their first meeting and suggest that the two women knew each other prior to this association in Oxford. It is documented that Both O'Brien and Starkie spent time during the 1930s in the company of London-based writers such as Marie Belloc Lowndes, and therefore, given the nature of this literary circle, it is feasible to suggest that O'Brien and Starkie's paths crossed at this time.³⁶ Moreover, during the 1920s and 1930s, O'Brien was a regular visitor to the Bloomsbury-based University Women's Club, a unique private members club for graduate and professional women.³⁷ This period of Starkie's life is not well recorded, but she was 'secret and unpredictable,' and, in an era when professional women were a distinct minority, it is probable that she frequented the University Women's Club and met O'Brien there.³⁸ The name of Kate O'Brien does not appear once throughout Richardson's biography of Starkie, which may seem strange given their lasting friendship. The suggestion that two well-known middle-class Irish Catholic women had an intimate relationship, however, would have caused immense scandal, particularly for Starkie's professional reputation at Oxford and would have brought shame on both families. Therefore, given both women's wish to keep their private lives secret, and to limit possible speculation, the omission could be deliberate or, it may be that there is simply no reference to O'Brien in any of Starkie's surviving papers, letters or diaries.³⁹

Until now the timing of Enid Starkie and O'Brien's first meeting has not been disputed. Lorna Reynolds was a respected academic and a close friend of O'Brien, and as

³⁵ Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 82.

³⁶ See Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 61; Richardson, *Enid Starkie*, p. 120.

³⁷ Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 69.

³⁸ Richardson, *Enid Starkie*, p. 95. The archivist at The University Women's Club was unable to confirm whether Enid Starkie was a member during the 1930s.

³⁹ The limited availability and access to Kate O'Brien's personal correspondence is discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis.

such the dates and detail she quotes in her study are unlikely to be questioned. However, as a former lover of O'Brien it is not surprising that she was somewhat disingenuous about her former partner's other love interests, and as a consequence crucial links may have been lost. Additionally, as Emma Donoghue points out, 'during her life and after it, Kate O'Brien, her family, biographers, critics, and friends all colluded to keep her in the closet.'⁴⁰ Reynolds can be included here as a literary critic who avoided the lesbian issues in O'Brien's life and work, maybe in part to protect herself from recrimination.

As discussed previously in this chapter, O'Brien's familiarity with Benavente's work is evident in *Farewell Spain*. Significantly, O'Brien began her professional career as a playwright and her first attempt at writing for the stage, *Distinguished Villa: A Play in Three Acts* (1926), was a commercial success. The first production played successfully in London's West End for two months during the summer of 1926 and toured the provincial theatres of England in 1927.⁴¹ Walshe states in his biography of O'Brien that *Distinguished Villa* played in Dublin at the Abbey Theatre in January, 1929.⁴² However, I have not been able to trace any conclusive evidence to confirm this, and an entry in the journals of Lady Gregory would suggest otherwise: 'There were letters for me from Kiernan in which he said Miss K. O'Brien said she had sent us a play about three years ago and it had never been returned. But Perrin got out the books and we found it had been returned all right.'⁴³

Distinguished Villa is set in Brixton, England and is based on her experience of boarding-house life whilst she was working for the *Manchester Guardian*.⁴⁴ The play is an attack on English lower middle-class conventionality and the limitations that this society places on the individual. This theme, particularly when she applied it to her own Irish middle-

⁴⁰ Emma Donoghue, "'Out of Order" Kate O'Brien's Lesbian Fictions,' in Eibhear Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People Dancing* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), p. 37.

⁴¹ See Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 38.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Lady Gregory Diary Entry (26 March 1929), in D.J. Murphy (ed.), *Lady Gregory's Journals: Volume Two, Books 30-44, 21 February 1925 - 9 May 1932* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), p. 512.

⁴⁴ Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 25.

class milieu, became a central issue in her work and, as will be discussed later in this chapter, her creativity originated from her engagement with Benavente's plays. However, although drama was the means by which she became a writer, it did not sustain her. A subsequent play, *The Bridge*, opened in London in May 1927, but proved unsuccessful, and her next play, *The Silver Roan*, was never staged.⁴⁵ In an interview for the *New York Times* in 1949, O'Brien stated that it was because her plays were not being staged that she initially began writing novels but confirms: 'I'm rather addicted to novels now, you can carry them on your back.'⁴⁶ The success of *Distinguished Villa* meant that she became recognised as a professional writer, and in 1927 she was invited to join PEN, the writer's association. In 1929, she began writing her first novel *Without My Cloak*, and fiction writing became her mainstay for the next thirty years. Arguably, the influence of Benavente's drama would remain at the forefront of her creativity.

In the mid 1920s the only full-length critical study of Benavente written in English was Walter Starkie's *Jacinto Benavente*, published in 1924. Like Kate O'Brien, Enid Starkie's brother Walter, fell in love with Spain and its literature after he visited the country for the first time in the early 1920s.⁴⁷ On the recommendation of W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, he became a government-appointed director of the Abbey Theatre in 1927.⁴⁸ Starkie's lifelong passion for the theatre began as a boy when he attended the opening performance of J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey in 1907.⁴⁹ In his autobiography, *Scholars and Gypsies* (1963) he recalls that he 'was thrilled by it' and was delighted to meet Lady

⁴⁵ Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 38.

⁴⁶ Harvey Breit, 'Talk with Kate O'Brien', *New York Times* (4 December 1949), p. 22.

⁴⁷ Although he had regularly visited France, Hungary and Italy, Starkie's first visit to Spain was on honeymoon in 1921. In 1940, Starkie moved to Spain to take up the post of first Cultural Representative at the British Council in Madrid. For information on Walter Starkie's life and work in Spain, see *A True Friend of Spain: Professor Walter Starkie and the early years of the British Council in Spain* (Autumn, 2010) <http://www.britishcouncil.org/british-council-spain-anniversary-publication.pdf>. (Accessed 31 Oct. 2012).

⁴⁸ See Lauren Arrington, *W.B. Yeats, The Abbey Theatre, Censorship, and The Irish State: Adding the Half-Pence to the Pence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 104-106.

⁴⁹ For details of Starkie's early years see Walter Starkie, *Scholars and Gypsies: An autobiography* (London: John Murray, 1963).

Gregory afterwards in the Green Room.⁵⁰ Given his close association with the cultural intelligentsia of Dublin, Starkie would have been instrumental in the promotion of Spanish drama, and particularly Benavente's plays, to the Dublin Drama League. Formed in 1918, the Dublin Drama League was W.B. Yeats and Lennox Robinson's imaginative solution to their perceived gap in Irish theatre.⁵¹ At its inception Robinson described the aims of the venture:

Here in Ireland we are isolated, cut off from the thought of the world, except the English world and from England we get little in drama, except fourth-rate. I ask you, for the young writers' sake, to open the door and let us out of our prison. Seeing foreign plays will not divorce our minds from Ireland [...] but brought into touch with other minds who have different values of life, suddenly we shall discover the rich material that lies to our hand in Ireland.⁵²

Through his work, Benavente reacted against the romanticism of his youth, and in the 1890s took the lead among Spanish modernists. As a dramatist who devoted his life to trying every experiment on the Spanish stage, Benavente fitted Robinson's model for the Dublin Drama League perfectly.

Benavente's *The Passion Flower* (1913) was first produced by the Drama League on the 9th and 10th November 1924, and revived on 7th and 8th December 1924, at the Abbey Theatre.⁵³ The opening night review was favourable:

Last night's crowded house saw the Dublin Drama League's production of "The Passion Flower" – a three-act tragedy by the greatest of modern Spanish dramatists, Jacinto Benavente [...] "The Passion Flower" last night proved to be, as to stagecraft, a wonderful demonstration of Benavente's mastery; but the interplay of thought and motion was so indecisive that the effect was that of a very intense melodrama. It resembled the Irish peasant plays, and yet contrasted

⁵⁰ Starkie, *Scholars and Gypsies*, p. 37.

⁵¹ The Abbey Theatre, under the constant surveillance of a vociferous, nationalistic, bourgeois audience, could make no commitment of its own to a project devoted to non-Irish work, and avant-garde to boot but it did make available its stage and company to the part-time Dublin Drama League, which performed on Sunday and Monday nights. The plan permitted the Abbey to continue its dedication to a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature whilst introducing to Dublin a variety of European plays of the time. One of the Dublin Drama League's major players, Denis Johnston, recorded that the League did remarkable work in 'introducing to Dublin all the avant-garde plays of the time [...] [the league] taught us and showed us Stringberg, Pirandello, Benavente, Schnitzler – people whose plays we would have never seen – and maybe not even have read, if it hadn't been for the drama league.' See Harold Ferrar, *Denis Johnston's Irish Theatre* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1973), pp. 9-10.

⁵² Lennox Robinson speaking in 1919, cited in D.E.S. Maxwell, *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama: 1891-1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 91.

⁵³ For a cast list see R. Hogan and R. Burnham, *The Years of O'Casey, 1921-1926: A Documentary History* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe: 1992), p. 371.

with them. There was a greater subtlety of passion, and a greater variety of colour, than is seen in the somewhat monotonous Abbey plays.⁵⁴

The producers of the Drama League must have considered *The Passion Flower* a success as on 1st February 1925, directed by Lennox Robinson, Denis Johnston made his acting debut in Benavente's *The School of Princesses* (1909) in the role of King Gustavus Adolphus of Almania.⁵⁵ *The Irish Times* noted that the play was generally well received by a 'fairly large audience' at the Abbey.⁵⁶ The interest in Benavente's plays amongst Dublin's theatre circle coincided with the publication of Starkie's seminal study of the Spanish dramatist, *Jacinto Benavente*, a point noted by the reviewer in *The Irish Times*:

Mr Walter Starkie's study of Jacinto Benavente comes at an opportune moment; for Dublin playgoers have had their interest stimulated by the recent production of "*The School of Princesses*" by the Drama League. "*The Passion Flower*," "*No Smoking*," and "*His Widows Husband*," have also been acted over here, and in every case the crowded theatre has shown that the name of Benavente is a force to be reckoned with. Nobody is better qualified than Mr. Starkie to make such a study; for not only is he a fine Spanish scholar and well versed in Spanish literature, but his knowledge of comparative literature has enabled him to bring really valuable criticism to bear on his subject. He is not concerned so much with Benavente the Spaniard as with Benavente the playwright, studied in relation to European dramatists. The whole work, no less than the bibliography published at the end of the book, shows how thorough has been Mr. Starkie's research.⁵⁷

The 'thorough' bibliography includes a reference to a small series of Benavente's plays that were first translated into English by J. Garrett Underhill in 1919 (the four plays listed in the above review are amongst those translated in this series).⁵⁸ *No Smoking* (1904) and *His Widows Husband* (1908) do not appear to have been reviewed in the Dublin press and are not

⁵⁴ *The Irish Times* (10 November 1924), p. 4.

⁵⁵ Hogan and Burnham, *The Years of O'Casey*, p. 376.

⁵⁶ *The Irish Times* (3 February 1925), p. 3.

⁵⁷ *The Irish Times* (6 February 1925), p. 3.

⁵⁸ J. Garrett Underhill, *Plays by Jacinto Benavente* (New York: Scribner, 1919). For a list of the sixteen plays in the four series see Starkie, *Jacinto Benavente*, pp. 214-215. Hogan and Burnham confirm Underhill's translation of *The Passion Flower* and *The School of Princesses* as the source used by the Drama League, see *The Years of O'Casey*, pp. 371, 376. *The Passion Flower* is cited under different names by critics. Peñuelas, for instance, uses the title *The Ill-Beloved* and Underhill (and Starkie) refers to the same play as *La Malquerida*.

included in Hogan and Burnham's list of notable foreign plays produced by Dublin theatre groups of the period.⁵⁹

There is no direct evidence to prove whether O'Brien was acquainted with Walter Starkie but they moved in similar literary circles, they both had a close relationship with Enid Starkie and had mutual friends in Michael Macliammóir and Hilton Edwards.⁶⁰ However, Starkie was a member of the Centre International d'Etudes sur le Fascisme, based in Lausanne, and therefore perhaps the reason for obscuring any relationship she had with Walter Starkie was due to his fascist sympathies.⁶¹ O'Brien was, nonetheless, familiar with his work. In her recent biography of Starkie, Jacqueline Hurlley points out that in relation to his travel book, *Spanish raggle-taggle: Adventues with a fiddle in Northern Spain*, 'favourable criticism' was received in Ireland from the writer Kate O'Brien.⁶² Indeed, O'Brien's review of the book appeared in the *Irish Independent* in November 1934:

The book is written with great verve [...] A worthy contribution to literature. [...] He [Starkie] lived the life of a real Bohemian, but one who was observing closely as he went from place to place [...] We feel his heart in the country of the troubadours, the Spain of Goya, and El Greco, and the poets and singers of the past.⁶³

O'Brien clearly related to Starkie's account of his travels around Old Castile, which is not surprising as she had made a similar pilgrimage the previous summer, possibly in the company of his sister, Enid. It is apparent from his travel book that northern Spain represented a destination of infinite possibility for Walter Starkie as he sought to escape from what he perceived as the straightjacket of modern, utilitarian society. From his readings of Spanish literature and his own observations, Starkie outlined 'a composite image of the

⁵⁹ See Hogan and Burnham, *The Years of O'Casey*.

⁶⁰ When Walter Starkie resigned from the Abbey in 1942 he immediately accepted the invitation of Hilton Edwards and Micheál Macliammóir to be on the board of directors at Dublin's Gate Theatre.

⁶¹ For more detail of Starkie's fascist sympathies, see Michael Cronin, 'The Blueshirt Movement, 1932-5: Ireland's Fascists?', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 30, no. 2 (April 1995), pp. 311-332.

⁶² Jacqueline Hurlley, *Walter Starkie 1894-1976: An Odyssey* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), p. 222.

⁶³ Kate O'Brien, 'A fiddle in Spain. Dr Starkie's latest book of adventures', *Irish Independent* (6 November 1934), p. 4.

Spaniard as innately individualistic, anti-authoritarian, polite, loyal, honour-bound and pious.’⁶⁴ From her own experiences and analysis of Spanish literary culture O’Brien came to a similar conclusion regarding the ‘astoundingly individualistic’ Spanish character, and she too appreciated the pre-modern austerity of ‘Spain’s native taste’ (*FS* 182, 224). Given O’Brien’s enthusiastic review of Starkie’s travel book and the parallels which can be drawn it could quite feasibly suggested that *Spanish raggle-taggle* inspired O’Brien to write *Farewell Spain*.⁶⁵

Although O’Brien was absent from Ireland for varying periods of time, her network of personal and cultural relationships meant she still had strong ties with the avant-garde in Dublin. In her travelogue, *My Ireland*, O’Brien fondly recalls her many visits to see the productions of the Abbey Theatre between 1917 and 1919 whilst she was a student in at UCD.⁶⁶ What is most important in this account is O’Brien’s awareness of the Abbey’s key players, and its triumphs and controversies, long after she lived in England. In a radio interview towards the end of her life for RTÉ, she admitted that she had ‘always loved the theatre’ not just Ireland or England but ‘everywhere’, and she cites John Gielgud and Noel Coward as ‘good friends.’⁶⁷

Given O’Brien and Starkie’s love of European theatre and Spanish literature they may have both attended the Drama League performances of Benavente’s plays.⁶⁸ What is almost certain is that O’Brien read Starkie’s *Jacinto Benavente* and used it as a point of reference. When Starkie published his seminal study in 1924, Benavente had written over a hundred plays, and to consider them all would have taken more than one volume. Given the

⁶⁴ Lou Charnon-Deutsch, *The Spanish Gypsy: The History of a European Obsession* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2004), p. 144.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ See Kate O’Brien, *My Ireland* (London: Batsford, 1962), pp. 116-119.

⁶⁷ Kate O’Brien in conversation with Francis Russell. ‘John Bowman’s Weekly Archive Programme,’ RTÉ Radio Broadcast (10 August 2014).

⁶⁸ After she separated from her husband Gustav Renier in April 1924, Kate O’Brien continued to live and work in London. However, there are few details of her movements between 1924 and 1926. Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 37.

similarities discussed below Starkie's interpretation of Benavente's *El hombrecito* (*Little Man*) (1903) and *Princesa Bebé* (1906), served as a mediating text between Benavente's Spanish and O'Brien's translation. Before considering the impact of *El hombrecito* and *Princesa Bebé* (and Starkie's reading of them) on O'Brien's novels, a brief biography of Benavente will provide a useful starting point in illustrating how the Spanish dramatist would have appealed as a literary model to O'Brien.

Jacinto Benavente was born in Madrid in 1866, the son of a celebrated paediatrician. As a young man he became a regular frequenter of the theatres of Madrid and developed an unbounded admiration for the work of the great dramatists, particularly Shakespeare.⁶⁹ During the late nineteenth century, theatre became a flourishing enterprise in Spain and for the middle-classes trips to the theatre provided a reliable and respectable source of pleasure. It was a space reserved for the nation's self-representation as a collective body, a forum in which national concerns, myths, and memories were celebrated, debated and exposed. During a career spanning sixty years (1894-1954), Benavente wrote over one-hundred and seventy plays and, as noted in the introduction to this chapter, won the nobel prize for literature in 1922.⁷⁰ In the introduction to his study of Benavente, Starkie describes the Spanish dramatist as 'not only the master builder of modern Spanish drama, but also the mirror of the society of his time. For it is in the plays of Benavente that we can study the virtues and vices of Spanish society.'⁷¹ Starkie's description of Benavente as 'the master builder of modern Spanish drama' is significant as he is comparing him to Ibsen, the founder of modernism in the theatre.⁷²

⁶⁹ For information on Benavente's early life see Starkie, *Benavente*, pp. 21-28.

⁷⁰ For a comprehensive list of all Benavente's plays and other works see Marcelino C. Peñuelas, *Jacinto Benavente* (New York: Twayne, 1968), pp. 163-174.

⁷¹ Starkie, *Benavente*, p. 19.

⁷² *The Master Builder* (1892) was one of Ibsen's (1828-1906) most influential plays. For more information see James McFarlane (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

The première of Benevente's first play *El nido ajeno* (*The Intruder*) in Madrid in 1894, signalled the beginning of modern theatre in Spain, and, in the many plays which he subsequently produced, became renowned for his candid scrutiny of the bloated, complacent bourgeois society which had evolved during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁷³ In *A New History of Spanish Literature*, James Fitzmaurice Kelly refers to Benavente as a 'shrewd observer of manners,' a label that the playwright himself would have considered justified.⁷⁴ Indeed, in an article of 1945 he wrote: 'in my plays I have, perhaps, managed to capture some aspects of life in Madrid, particularly of its middle class, which I have known best and in which I live... Madrid has a lot of character, with great virtues and great defects, and it must thus be judged.'⁷⁵

Benavente's plays can be loosely categorised into two groups: the satirical and the psychological.⁷⁶ The plays of satiric intent are the most numerous and deal with Spanish social life and issues central to bourgeois identity: money, politics, the theatre, the function of marriage and family, morality, and the individual's role in society. *Lo Cursi*, which is assessed earlier in this chapter, can be included in this corpus.⁷⁷ The psychological plays deal with similar issues and also have a satirical tone, but the central theme is love, whether familial or romantic, from a female perspective.⁷⁸ In Marcelino C. Peñuelas' 1968 study of

⁷³ The century that followed the death of Ferdinand VII in 1833 was marked by rapid demographic expansion, significant economic growth and far-reaching social change. In the political and economic spheres, liberalism took hold, the structures of absolutist rule were dismantled and the administrative and legal framework of a modern, centralised state was established. However, the demise of absolutism was not accompanied by sweeping political reform. Instead, a new oligarchy came into being, comprising the liberal bourgeoisie and the traditional landowning class which, while committed to ordered progress, was determined to resist any attempt to introduce fundamental political or social reforms which might ultimately undermine its privileged position. See Simon Barton, *A History of Spain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 172.

⁷⁴ James Fitzmaurice-Kelly, *A New History of Spanish Literature* (Oxford: Humphrey Milford, 1926), p. 492.

⁷⁵ Cited in Peñuelas, *Jacinto Benavente*, p.74.

⁷⁶ Critics place the majority of Benevente's plays in either/both of these two categories. However, there are others (such as a small number of rural plays and romantic comedies) which could form their own group. See Starkie, *Benavente*, p. 7; Peñuelas, *Jacinto Benavente*, pp. 64-67.

⁷⁷ Kate O'Brien's opinion of *Lo Cursi* is discussed on page 60 of this chapter.

⁷⁸ O'Brien's assessment of *El Pan Comido en La Mana* which is categorised as a psychological play is also discussed on page 60.

Benavente's life and work the author emphasises the importance of women in Benavente's art:

He [Benavente] portrays feminine love in all its facets: the love of mother, wife, sweetheart or mistress. At times, he expresses the resignation and sacrifice of the woman caught between emotion and duty; at other times, he examines [...] her strong desire to stand out in society, or her vigorous attempts to dominate.⁷⁹

Women occupy the centre of many of Benavente's plays but in the two plays of interest here - *El hombrecito* and *Princesa Bebé* – his female protagonists 'seemed in Benavente's day much more rebellious, alienated and even immoral.'⁸⁰ Nené in *El hombrecito* and Princess Helena in *Princesa Bebé* rebel against convention and social pressure in a society molded and suffocated by moral and ethical norms and would have seemed in the period in which they were written extremely amoral and cynical.

The central themes of both these plays - the function of marriage and family, morality, and duty versus desire, mainly from a female perspective - are issues pivotal to O'Brien's oeuvre: furthermore, her first novel, *Without My Cloak* (1931), was clearly influenced by Benavente's method of dealing with these issues. Moreover, O'Brien employed his insubordinate female protagonists Nené (*El hombrecito*) and Princess Helena (*Princesa Bebé*) as models for her rebellious characters Caroline and Denis in *Without My Cloak* and Ana De Mendoza in *That Lady* (1946). In the dual plots of the unhappily married Caroline and her nephew Denis, O'Brien ignites the sparks of rebellion that will grow in her later novel, *That Lady*, into a fully-fledged personal revolt.

Without My Cloak has much in common with the nature of Benavente's plays and is open to a reading as a social commentary as well as an exploration of the human psyche. This particular novel, therefore, provides a useful paradigm in which the extent and nature of Benavente's influence on O'Brien's themes and writing style can be assessed. The Spanish

⁷⁹ Peñuelas, *Jacinto Benavente*, p. 78.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

dramatist's satire is essentially social but, as Walter Starkie points out, his drama was not concerned with social problems such as hunger, poverty, or the violence provoked by social injustice or class struggle.⁸¹ Benavente avoided subjects that his comfortable audience would find unpleasant, so his theatre appeared to be essentially bourgeois and self-satisfied. However, his primary intention, particularly in his early plays, was as Starkie writes, 'to satirize the corrupt society of Madrid.'⁸² In his plays Benavente would offer his audiences the pleasures of seeing their fears and fantasies played out on stage but would then exact the price of brutal self-recognition, yet he was always very careful not to say things clearly enough that they would provoke uncomfortable controversy. O'Brien's witty dialogue has much in common with the satirical tone of the Spanish dramatist, as the following passage from *Without My Cloak* illustrates:

Being Irish, Teresa obviously couldn't be a Conservative, but being a woman she was spared the necessity of knowing for certain which party was which. In any case, political feeling never ran high in Considine blood. The destiny of mankind, or of any race of it, mattered only in so far as it furthered the interests of an established family. Teresa was inclined to regard politics as she regarded firearms – things that shouldn't be left about the house.⁸³

In a further parallel with Benavente, it is life within a specific social group – Catholic bourgeois society – that is the theme upon which O'Brien's satirical irony is focused. Indeed, as Dalsimer argues:

In *Without My Cloak* Kate O'Brien sympathises with the Considines as she satirises them in loving but ambivalent detail. She ridicules their pettiness, their contemptuousness, and their materialism; she denounces their possessiveness and their all consuming loves; and she quietly scathes their moral and social codes that doom women to loveless marriages, to too many pregnancies, to emigration, to death.⁸⁴

O'Brien emphasises their privileged detachment by concentrating entirely on the Considines, who represent the highest standing amongst the bourgeoisie and dwell in lavish isolation

⁸¹ Starkie, *Benavente*, p. 67.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 43

⁸³ Kate O'Brien, *Without My Cloak* (London: Heinemann, 1931), p. 32. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *WMC*.

⁸⁴ Dalsimer, *A Critical Study*, p.6.

from the Anglo-Irish gentry and the Catholic peasantry. Thus, like the society depicted in Benavente's plays, the Considines are blindly isolated from the wider world around them.

Without My Cloak relates the vicissitudes of the leading members of an Irish Catholic bourgeois family, similar to the author's own.⁸⁵ Like Benavente, O'Brien wrote for and from within her own class and, in a further parallel with the Spanish dramatist, she writes of this class not as an outsider but from within, as an admirer and observer of its customs and manners. Importantly, in *Farewell Spain* O'Brien acknowledges Fitzmaurice Kelly's study of Spanish literature, and it is likely his comment that Benavente was a 'shrewd observer' of the manners of the middle-class would have certainly resonated with her (*FS* 100). O'Brien was born into a family that was able to live in ease and comfort, employed servants, and dressed its ladies in the finest silks. She was an unapologetic member of the Irish bourgeoisie, and as her friend Lorna Reynolds remarked, 'she expected people to be what she called agreeably civilised.'⁸⁶ Certainly, as Eavan Boland writes, 'Kate O'Brien was bourgeois in the good French sense. She felt that wine and a fire and silver and well-presented food made the world somehow a more solid place.'⁸⁷ In *Without My Cloak*, O'Brien evokes the comfortable lifestyles of the wealthy with descriptions of quality clothes and furnishings, conveying the lavishness of good food and wine:

At two o'clock on the following Sunday, twelve Considines sat around the dining-table at River Hill, and addressed themselves to clear soup and an excellent sherry. Mahogany, serge hangings, Turkey carpets, gilt-framed oil paintings; no opulent fitting of the 1860 convention was absent from this new dining room. (*WMC* 23)

⁸⁵ *Without My Cloak* tells the story of the Considine family who from humble beginnings grow to a position of prominence and wealth in Mellick. The new freedoms of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century had given Catholic merchants the opportunity to acquire wealth, and consequently, a dramatic rise of a new merchant class, as dramatized by the Considine family, occurred in Ireland. In *Without My Cloak* Kate O'Brien uses the story of her own family's rise from post-famine poverty to Limerick merchant respectability. For information on O'Brien's family background see Walshe, *A Writing Life*, pp. 3-4.

⁸⁶ Reynolds, *A Literary Portrait*, p.28.

⁸⁷ Eavan Boland, 'Introduction', in Kate O'Brien, *The Last of Summer* (London: Virago, 1989), p. vi.

O'Brien and Benavente were very much at home in the Catholic bourgeois societies they came from, but they each direct attacks, softened by humor and irony, at their own complacent, self-interested class – a society where standards were rigorously imposed and correct behaviour was more essential than the understanding of human beings.

Without My Cloak is set between 1860 and 1877 in Mellick (O'Brien's fictional Limerick); a review in *The Irish Times* described the successful novel as a family narrative on the model of Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* (1906-1921).⁸⁸ Like Galsworthy, O'Brien develops themes of family loyalty, romance, and the individual's role in bourgeois society, so understandably critics have continued to draw parallels between them.⁸⁹ As a newspaper with a middle-class readership, it is unsurprising that *The Irish Times* focuses on the bourgeois values of the Considines and finds a comparison with Galsworthy. However, Dalsimer argues that although the Considines mirror their English counterparts in social position, orthodox tastes, and conventional politics, they differ from them profoundly in the way their Catholicism circumscribes their lives.⁹⁰ For example, Irene Forsyth transgresses the conventions of her day by divorcing her husband and finding freedom. No such path is open to O'Brien's Irish and Benavente's Spanish protagonists whose codes of behaviour are controlled by an enduring ideological conservatism vigorously perpetuated by the Catholic Church. Thus, given the way that the directives of the Church ensure the Considine's entrapment, it could be argued they have more in common with the Spanish bourgeoisie than their English counterparts. O'Brien clearly found a stimulus within Benavente's work that was, for her, missing in Irish and English literature.

In *Without My Cloak*, the struggles of Caroline and Denis against their environment recall those of Benavente's Nené in *El Hombrecito*. Nené is the daughter of a wealthy bourgeois family, who is frowned upon for having an affair with Enrique, a married man. On

⁸⁸ Review of 'Without My Cloak,' *The Irish Times* (26 December 1931), p. 2.

⁸⁹ See Reynolds, *A Literary Portrait*, pp. 42-43; Dalsimer, *A Critical Study*, pp. 7-8.

⁹⁰ Dalsimer, *A Critical Study*, p. 7.

discovering Enrique is married, Nené initially renounces him but temptation has been too strong for her, and she continues to meet him. Nené is eager to rebel against society so she asks Enrique to go away with her and will face the consequences of her action by his side. However, at the end of the play her courage leaves her, and she realises that the sacrifice of her good name is too great. When Caroline and Denis try to resolve their problems, like Nené their moral code asserts itself, and family life oppresses them. They remain, as does Benavente's protagonist, no matter how ambivalently or reluctantly, tied to the ideals of marriage and family.

While the focus in *Without My Cloak* is on the male line of descent (Honest John, Anthony and Denis Considine), Anthony's beautiful sister, Caroline Lanigan, is an important presence in the text. Caroline's marriage is typical of the bourgeois patriarchal marriage that is arranged between families and concerned with money, property, status and legitimate procreation. Caroline's father, Honest John, takes great pleasure in securing her betrothal to Jim Lanigan, a lawyer, 'a fine fellow, of distinguished appearance, and coming of dignified middle class stock' (*WMC* 30). The only concern for Honest John is whether the marriage would enhance the Considine's status, his daughter Caroline's happiness is immaterial. Nonetheless, O'Brien soon informs the reader that Caroline is unhappy being married to Jim, simply because she does not love him. We are told she wanted to marry her first and only love, but this was not deemed a suitable match and, as the years pass, the lack of love in her life makes her increasingly miserable. Jim has no idea how to resolve the problems within his marriage and is aware that his wife does not desire him, as he recalls one occasion when he heard 'the heartbreaking revulsion' in her voice as she asked him in despair not to touch her again (*WMC* 67).

Despite Caroline's inner unhappiness, she appears to the outside world as the dutiful Catholic wife, and the Lanigans maintain the appearance of the modern, civilised middle-

class couple. A negative attitude towards marriage runs through the core of O'Brien's fiction, a perspective which stems, in part, from personal experience but also from an ingrained awareness of the stark realities of marriage for many middle-class women in Ireland. Thus, in *Without My Cloak* the wives are constrained by social and religious mores and fated to endure loveless marriages, continuous pregnancy and death. Caroline Considine, then, is representative of a group of women who married 'suitably,' firmly rooted in the public mores of family, Church and society, but whose private experience of marriage ranged between sorrow and resignation, with only fleeting moments of happiness and love.

Only Caroline's brother, Eddy (who O'Brien uses as an authorial mouthpiece), notices that Caroline is unhappy and knows the reasons why. Eddy is the facilitator for the revelation of Caroline's inner life story and his is also the view with which the reader is asked to identify. Although sympathetic to her plight, Eddy advises his sister against any thoughts of leaving her husband and joining him in London. Her duty, he tells her, is in Mellick with Jim and the children, and when Caroline questions her brother's reasoning he reminds her that as a Considine, 'the whole lot of us, Caro, are tarred with the same brush of respectability' (*WMC* 42).

As a bachelor, Eddy lives in London and is vague about his friends and lifestyle, which puts his Mellick family on edge. He is thirty-five, effeminate, and, despite the best efforts of his matchmaking sisters, unmarried. The family knows his life must hide some secrecy or sin, but they are reluctant to confront him about it. In a passage where his sister Teresa speculates, O'Brien uses satire to demonstrate the idiosyncrasies of her own class:

And still there remained something about this brother that dimly frightened the shrewd Teresa in her heart of hearts. Something vague and unfamiliar about his ways. He positively ought to marry. There had even once been a rumour, vehemently hushed up by charitable Tom, that Eddy did not always go to Mass on Sunday. But that was sheer slander, Teresa said. (*WMC* 31)

After a protracted narrative in which there are substantial hints that Eddy is gay, the reader is left with the anti-climax of his small crime. The irony is that it is far worse for the Considines to acknowledge that their own brother is neglecting his religious obligations than to consider the details of his secret life in London. Eddy knows that the rest of the family, with their myopia, failed to notice Caroline's restlessness: 'She was a good comedy player, better than ever nowadays [...] so now Teresa, turning to her in the carriage and catching a look of something almost like anger on the face that she had never given up envying, expressed good humoured surprise' (*WMC* 110). Plain, sensible Teresa, in her ignorance, believes that the cause of Caroline's irritation is the weather, but Eddy's life in London has moved him far away from Mellick and its values, so his detachment enables him to see what the rest of the family fails to observe.

Caroline is increasingly aware that there is something missing in her life and makes a brief bid for freedom by running away from her husband. She goes to London to stay with Eddy, and as the saga develops, Caroline's inner struggle between her own desire and loyalty to the family will come to the fore, yet at this juncture O'Brien makes clear the societal implications of such a move, as irony and disapproval underlay the unfolding of Caroline's thoughts:

It was an unheard-of thing, a ruinous, preposterous, inconceivable thing, a sin, a disgrace, a family shame, a scandal, a ringing mockery, a butchering of all their pride to make a Mellick holiday. Torture for Jim, and the jibings of the town [...] What a joke for the Junior Club and the Law Society and all the whist parties! Wherever was Jim to hide his head? (*WMC* 116-117)

The Considines are thrown into chaos predominantly because of the damage the scandal of Caroline's disappearance may have on the possibility of the marriage between Millicent Considine who is being courted by the eminently suitable Gerard Hennesey:

Wasn't it common knowledge in Mellick that no Hennesey had ever been allowed to take a wife from where the breath of scandal passed? [...] Teresa pointed out to Anthony that a jilt from Gerard Hennesey – and it would amount to a jilt since he had got as far as red roses- would not merely mean a disappointment for poor

Millicent and her mother, and heaven knew that was bad enough, with the girl so hard to get off. Nobody wanted another old maid, but being one man's leavings wasn't going to help her with the others, Teresa thought, and the poor child's looks were never the strong point [...] But the real sting was that the Considines had begun to accept the Hennesey alliance and that Mellick knew this [...] It it fell through now, therefore, Mellick would laugh.... (WMC 124)

Here, the family's reputation and status is positioned as the most important aspect of the situation; and as such Caroline's dilemma is irrelevant.

The way in which O'Brien deals with the familial reaction to Caroline's situation has many points in common with Benavente's treatment of a similar state of affairs in *Princesa Bebé*. Like Caroline, Princess Helena (the title character of *Princesa Bebé*), was forced to marry someone she did not love because it suited the family, and to fill the void in her life she searches for happiness in the form of an extra-marital affair. Her uncle, the Emperor, expresses his anguish that the respectable family dynasty is going to be overthrown because their subjects are disgusted by the scandal of her affair with her husband's secretary. Again the primary consideration in the thoughts of the senior family members is the reputation and status of the group and not the feelings of the protagonist. Like the Considines the emperor is concerned only with 'the indelible blot which [the scandal] has cast upon the good name of our house.'⁹¹ O'Brien's preoccupation here, as with Benavente in *Princess Bebé*, is the encroachment of social position on emotions and human relations.

Although class fears undercut much of *Without My Cloak*, O'Brien is also aware of the discriminations women of the period had to face, and through the character of Teresa, O'Brien demonstrates the gendered double standards of the time:

It was beyond the span of Considine thought that a wife should leave a husband. A husband might conceivably desert a wife-but-oh, well, what was the good of raving? Caroline, their sister, one of themselves, Irish, Catholic, rich, respectable – had run away from her home two days ago. That was the inconceivable thing they had to face. (WMC 124-125)

⁹¹ The translation of *Princess Bebé* used in this thesis is by J. Garrett Underhill. See *Plays by Jacinto Benavente*, (New York: Scribner, 1919), p. 36. Hereafter cited in the text parenthetically as *PB*.

Teresa's ruminations echo an earlier passage in which O'Brien exposes the moral inequalities that her female characters were conditioned to accept. Caroline's brother Anthony is married to Molly, and although Molly loves her husband absolutely, his love for his wife is not exclusive; on the evening that he hears of her ninth pregnancy he has returned from a visit to Amsterdam and an encounter with a Dutch woman that he found so enjoyable, he foresees it will not be the last. As Lorna Reynolds suggests, the irony resides in the bare accounting of the facts. No authorial comment is made, no obvious contrast between the confinement of the woman and the freedom of the man.⁹² The absence of authorial comment is a comment in itself and implicit in the juxtaposition.

In *El hombrecito* Benavente attacks the dual standard of morality prevalent in Spanish society; the same action may be condemned as immoral in one instance and praised in another merely because it is cloaked in acceptable standards of conduct. For example, Nené was castigated for having an affair with a married man, but no comment was made concerning her brother's extramarital affair. *El hombrecito* is Benavente's attack on marriage in Spanish bourgeois society as a hypocritical and false institution. The character of Nené loathes the shallow hypocrisy prevalent in her middle-class society; she makes a stance by refusing to attend her brother Carlos' wedding because he is marrying without love to increase his fortune, whilst at the same time having an affair. In many ways Benavente highlighted the extra obstacles women had to overcome to gain any kind of autonomy in an orthodox, patriarchal society. In *Princess Bébé*, for instance, during an exchange with her cousin Stephen, who has also been banished by the emperor for insisting on marrying a woman deemed as unsuitable, Helena declares that her cousin has less constraints imposed on him simply because he is a man:

I consider myself much more heroic than you. You are a Prince and I a Princess,
but you had the advantage of being a single man. I had three tyrannies to

⁹² Reynolds, *A Literary Portrait*, p. 44.

overcome- my rank as a Princess, marriage, and the disability of being a woman.
I do not need to tell you what a valiant spirit I had in me. (PB 65)

Undoubtedly, O'Brien would have sympathised with Helena's proclamation and been impressed by the strength and audacity that Benavente gave his protagonist, but she knew that given the repressive, narrow society in which the Considines resided, she could not allow Caroline, an Irish Catholic middle-class mother of six, a similar licence.

Once she arrives in London, Caroline meets Eddy's friend, Richard Froud; the couple fall in love but since she has chosen to flee from her old life, Caroline is faced with a moral dilemma, similar to the one faced by Benavente's Nené in *El Hombrecito*. Should she carry on with her liaison and satisfy her heart or surrender to the demands of family and society? Nené is certainly tortured by an internal debate. As an individual she feels she has the right to make an informed personal choice, but equally she is aware of societal pressure and does not want to disappoint her family. Starkie argues that, in his female protagonists, Benavente accentuates 'this inner struggle as if it were two opposing demons,' and it is telling that nearly all O'Brien's characters have a similar internal battle.⁹³ As she wrote in a letter to her friend and critic Vivian Mercier: 'I am a moralist, in that I see no story unless there is a moral conflict, and the old-fashioned sense of the soul and its troubling effect in human affairs.'⁹⁴ In his plays, Benavente places the individual in the world and in society, alone, isolated and closed up with his own conscience. His only guides are his feelings and instincts. As Peñuelas points out: 'In Benavente's view it is only within himself that man seek some light in the darkness, a certain order in chaos. If he finds it, it is always inside of him, almost always in conflict with established social norms.'⁹⁵ Rather than religious doctrines Benavente preferred the philosophical doctrines of Plato, St Augustine and Nietzsche. The affirmation of

⁹³ Starkie, *Benavente*, p. 69.

⁹⁴ Cited in Vivian Mercier, 'Kate O'Brien', *Irish Writing*, vol.1 (1946), p. 92.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

his individuality, of his feelings, he seems to say, is the struggle of man as a social being. Benavente's themes are almost always based on this psychological struggle.

Both Benavente's Nené and O'Brien's Caroline initiate a course of action, prepare to make a sacrifice which is above their powers, and in the end have to give way to the constraints of their social codes.⁹⁶ Although initially adamant that now she has escaped she will never return to Mellick, after a couple of days Caroline has a crisis of conscience when she reflects on the anguish she has caused Jim and the children. Caroline's recoil and refusal to consummate her relationship with Richard illustrates that her own moral code is firmly moulded by her upbringing. She also shares with her family the horror of gossip and is concerned that her behaviour will have resulted in the cheap and spiteful bandying of the Considine name. She tells Richard that she must return to her husband and family because it is all she knows: 'I'm crushed by them, Richard. I'm owned by them' (*WMC* 156). Thus, she resists the temptation of a passionate liaison with Richard by surrendering to 'her filial and maternal and herd instincts,' which deem that she returns to a loveless marriage in Mellick (*WMC* 154).

Anthony leaves for London almost at once to retrieve his sister, after the family decides that Caroline's swift return is the only way to silence the gossips. By the time Anthony arrives, as Reynolds points out, Caroline is 'ready to return, to duty and habit [...] but in fact to increasing unhappiness.'⁹⁷ When Caroline arrives home, the entire family, including her husband Jim, behaves as if nothing had happened, and Millicent marries Gerard in an extravagant wedding as planned. Although Benavente allows Nené in *El Hombrecito* more autonomy than O'Brien affords Caroline (Nené takes flight with a married man and is a more determined character), neither woman can find the inner strength to break free as they are ultimately tied to the codes of their societies. Both women, vanquished by overwhelming

⁹⁶ Starkie, *Benavente*, p. 69.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

pressure, finally accept their lot, put on the mask of convention and follow the accepted game of pretence. Walter Starkie argues that, after pulling Nené's soul to pieces, Benevente 'forces her to creep back maimed and cowed to join in the farce of society.'⁹⁸ Much the same can be said of Caroline who realises that as a Catholic she has no option to divorce, cannot leave the family, and will thus continue to perform her own charade in Mellick. Caroline would, undoubtedly, have identified with Nené's acknowledgement at the end of the play in which the Spanish woman finally complies with what is expected of her by her family and society: 'I have learnt how to live – as all of them do. Now you see, I accept life.'⁹⁹ It is for the next generation to attempt another rebellion against the oppressive conformity of the Considines.

O'Brien retells Caroline's story with some variation in the plot that surrounds Denis Considine, his father's obsession with him, his own first love for Christina, and his later love for Anna Hennesy. Denis belongs to the next generation of Considines, and he rebels more acutely, more consciously against his family's values. At the time of her writing *Without My Cloak* in the late 1920s, Irish society was firmly gripped by the Catholic nationalist conservatism of the Free State government. After the turmoil of the Anglo-Irish War of Independence and the Civil War, political and ecclesiastical leaders argued that to secure the stability of the family, the State, and a Catholic society, women needed to be returned to their place within the home. Respective governments brought in gendered legislation that restricted women's access to the public sphere and increasingly curtailed their liberty.¹⁰⁰ O'Brien was not only perturbed by the sanctions placed on women in independent Ireland, but like many intellectuals of her generation was disillusioned by the constraints to artistic freedom brought about by the instigation of the Censorship of Publications Act (1929). When she wrote

⁹⁸ Starkie, *Benavente*, p. 70.

⁹⁹ Cited in Starkie, *Benavente*, p. 70.

¹⁰⁰ For example, the 1924 and 1927 Juries Acts – restricted women's right to serve on a jury. The 1925 Civil Service Regulation (Amendment) Bill – curtailed women's right to sit for all examinations in the Civil Service; by 1932 compulsory retirement for married women teachers had been introduced. See Maryann Valiulis 'Neither Feminist nor Flapper: The Ecclesiastical Construction of the Ideal Irish Woman,' in Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart (eds), *The Irish Women's History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 152-158.

Without My Cloak O'Brien was an independent and confident young woman who had exiled herself in England. However as Walshe points out, she was 'not yet ready to break with the conformities of her Irish middle-class world.'¹⁰¹ Thus, in the Catholic patriarchal domain of the Considines O'Brien's most candid and rebellious character could not be female. With the exception of Matt Costello in *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938), Denis is O'Brien's only male protagonist.¹⁰²

In keeping with family tradition, when Denis Considine was eighteen he was expected to join the family business, and as he could not refuse his father and was anxious to be dutiful, he started work at Considines as a junior clerk. However, as a 'dreaming, heedless poet' who loved reading classics and being outdoors, Denis is miserable stuck in an office and craves the freedom to escape and see the world (*WMC* 184). After the build up of family history in the first part of the novel, O'Brien brings in her central plot: the story of Denis falling in love with Christina and their secret affair in the countryside. Christina is a disreputable woman without money or property and therefore not a suitable match in the eyes of Denis's family. Christina calls Denis 'sir', and when he tells her to stop she retorts: 'We're different classes, after all' (*WMC* 237). However, they continue their affair but soon realise they have committed a mortal sin as they discuss how, according to the priests, their souls are blackened. To overcome the problem Denis asks Christina to marry him, but she explains that it would never be allowed because of his class. As reality takes hold: 'each saw, however dimly, that religion and society waited behind this forbidden joy for a grave reckoning' (*WMC*, 249).

¹⁰¹ Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 53.

¹⁰² A similar philosophy is behind O'Brien's deployment of a male protagonist in *Pray for the Wanderer*. This novel is O'Brien's critique of Irish society as she saw it in 1937. However, given the codification in the 1937 Constitution of the Irish Catholic values to which the majority of the population subscribed, and that *Mary Lavelle* (1936) had recently been banned, O'Brien is careful not to upset the status quo, albeit paradoxically. In this novel the inhabitants of Weir House embody the new Constitution's social ideas, and as a woman's role in Irish society is now officially that of homemaker, the novel witnesses a complete shift by O'Brien as she deploys a male as the central character.

When Denis falls in love with Christina, O'Brien entices the reader with the hope that she will be the means of his escape, as would be the case in the fairytale ending of a romance novel. Then, in a conversation between Denis and Christina's aunt, O'Brien shocks the reader with a reminder that as a member of the Irish upper-middle class, Denis is just as unlikely to marry an illegitimate peasant girl as Caroline is to leave her husband: 'I know, that your father would rather see you dead in your coffin than married to the likes of my niece' (*WMC* 280). The main obstacle to the affair is Christina's lower status, which is seen as a threat. Father Tom sees Denis kissing Christina, and his reaction of shock and astonishment is a characteristic one: 'his nephew, aged nineteen, kissing a peasant girl, an illegitimate charity child, one who had been in service as a scullery maid! And kissing her like a ploughboy, under a hedge by moonlight!' (*WMC* 271). In harmony with her aunt, Tom sends Christina to live in New York and informs the family who have gathered at Anthony's house for a game of whist of Denis's dishonourable behaviour. Here O'Brien uses the trope of whist to illustrate the antiquated mind-set of the older Considines.¹⁰³ Denis is furious that Tom has interfered in his personal business and deemed it appropriate to send Christina away; he demands to know where she has been sent.

Like Benavente's Nené, Denis is a young, modern, strong-willed individual who defends the right to live life according to his own free choice and, also like Nené, is determined to defend the right to love and happiness in the face of a hostile and hypocritical society. The other members of the family, stunned by the latest revelation, fully agree that Tom has done the right thing. Only Denis's father Anthony, has sympathy for the boy's plight, 'You were in the hell of a hurry, weren't you? In such a hurry, by God, that the very fact of Denis's existence on the map escaped your notice! Who are you, will you tell me, that

¹⁰³ Whist is an English card game which was played widely, particularly in the drawing rooms of the middle and upper classes, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. There are numerous literary references to the game of Whist in novels of the period. For example, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874) the game of Whist is located as an aristocratic pursuit. Eliot's *Middlemarch* is discussed in the context of O'Brien and Teresa of Avila in Chapter Four.

you have the right to handle the private affairs of every living being in this god-almighty style?’ (WMC 296). Here O’Brien condemns didacticism which is a common theme throughout her oeuvre. Equally, in his work, Benavente acts as a witness, an observer; there is no attempt to moralise or impose a dogma on his readers, a stance which is clearly evident in the plays featured in this chapter. A further example of O’Brien’s moral standpoint is displayed in her later novel *The Land of Spices* (1941), as Mother Superior says to Anna: ‘And be the judge of your own soul; but never for a second, I implore you, set up as the judge of another. Commentator, annotator, if you like, but never judge.’¹⁰⁴

As the Considine family comes to terms with the day’s events, what follows is a scene of exasperation and alarm, and O’Brien again treats the female members’ response with wit and irony as each reacts in horror to Denis’s admission that he and Christina have been lovers:

...it was to be gathered that they were suffering from shock.
 Sophia went into straightforward hysterics and swayed back and forth on her chair, giving out a staccato series of gasps and giggles.
 Agnes’s face was buried in her hands. She sobbed and prayed aloud with violence. That she should see such wickedness and live seemed like a miracle
 [...]
 She’s learnt [Aunt Agnes] so much about to-night, poor woman, that it’s brought on flatulence. (WMC 301, 307)

By adopting a similar method to Benavente, O’Brien satirically exposes the family’s moral outrage, and the hypocrisy and snobbery of bourgeois society, but she softens the attack with a generous dose of coarse humour. In Benavente’s *Princess Bebé*, the Emperor cannot comprehend that his nephew Stephen has chosen to marry a woman from a lower social class: ‘A Prince of Suavia married to a comic-opera singer! It seems incredible’ (PB 31). The setting of the play in Suavia could be a further satirical attack on bourgeois society as the term suave can mean pretentious or insincere, which is arguably how Benavente and O’Brien viewed some aspects of their own class. Stephen is told if he goes ahead with the marriage

¹⁰⁴ O’Brien, *The Land of Spices*, p. 284.

he will be forced, like his cousin Helena, to leave Suavia and lose all his worldly privileges. However, Stephen feels that his situation is being unfairly compared with Helena's as, unlike his cousin, he has not committed adultery nor is he seeking a divorce. With echoes of Denis Considine's frustration at his family's interference over his choice of partner, Stephen retorts: 'Frankly, I do not believe that any intelligent person could take exception to my marrying for love the woman I adore' (*PB* 24). Stephen points out that it is only the courtiers and conservatives that disapprove of his liaison; liberal opinion, he protests, is on his side. Nonetheless, the Emperor's opinion is not going to be swayed. The shock of two scandals in three months is too much, he says, for any family. As in the case of the Considine women, the double blow results in hysteria amongst the female family members, which Benavente mockingly captures in the reaction of the Empress: 'The Empress has collapsed [...] then her nerves gave way!' (*PB* 29).

Denis Considine follows Christina to America, still determined to marry her. But when he finds her she tells him that she cannot go back to Mellick and marry him because his family would never accept her, and therefore they could never find peace. Back in Mellick, Denis spends a lonely, miserable time working at the family business; he is driven mad with boredom and is stifled by his father's love. Once more he upsets the family, this time by refusing to attend his cousin Marie-Rose's wedding to Vincent de Courcy O'Regan. The reason for his absence is that, like Benavente's Nené, he loathes the shallow hypocrisy of his class, particularly when it comes to the falseness surrounding love and marriage. The Considines had climbed up another rung on the social ladder by securing the betrothal of Marie-Rose to the heir of the De-Courcy Regans, a family 'who possessed every kind of temporal virtue and advantage' (*WMC* 345). However, Denis's knew that it was Marie-Rose's younger sister Agnes who was in love with Vincent, but that had gone unnoticed by the family who were only concerned, typically, with their own self-interests. On his twenty-

first birthday, the family give Denis expensive gifts and money, and Father Tom wishes him a long and happy life. The family is cold towards him because of his trip to New York and want to make amends, but Denis feels this is hypocritical. He rebels once more by deciding, like his Aunt Caroline, to flee from his claustrophobic family. Denis rebels against the sacrifice of his inner self, of his real ambitions, to the conventions of his time and place; he tells himself in the field by the stream where had met Christina, he is free.

Denis misses the party given in his honour, but he realises before he leaves Mellick that he must apologise to his father. On his way home he meets Anna Hennessey, the daughter of a long-established Mellick family, who is about to become engaged to Denis's cousin Victor, a man she does not love. As the pair talk, they seem to find the answer to their problems in each other. Denis sees in Anna a reflection of himself, his female likeness, and he decides they are each other's destiny. In the closing moments of the novel, the demands of passion and the dictates of family concur. In his analysis of the novel, Walshe argues, 'in resolving this deadlock between communal values and individual emotional life, Kate has a failure of nerves.'¹⁰⁵ Walshe may be correct in his observation as instead of allowing Denis to continue his revolt, O'Brien chooses the 'safe' option by allowing him to fall in love with Anna, the daughter of a suitable Mellick family. However, instead of a 'failure of nerves' I would argue that she uses a literary device that provokes a response in readers who disagree with the resolution. Again, she appropriates Benavente's technique of avoiding didacticism. Certainly, O'Brien chose, in deciding on the fate of Denis and Christina, the example set by Benavente's Nené, who after a painful internal battle eventually puts the dictates of family and society before her own gratification. It would not be until O'Brien wrote her seventh novel, *That Lady*, published fifteen years later in 1946, that she allowed her protagonist a comprehensive revolt, like Benavente's *Princesa Bebé*, against the conventions and

¹⁰⁵ Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 53.

hypocrisies of society, when the genre of historical fiction allowed some form of protection from accusations of dissidence and the threat of censorship.

Until now scholars have claimed that O'Brien first conceived the idea for *That Lady* in January 1940.¹⁰⁶ This is in part based on O'Brien's statement in the 1963 issue of the *University Review*:

One very bad wet night in January 1940, I was working hard in my flat in Bloomsbury – and I went out in the rain in the blackout to the letterbox at the corner. I imagine that I was in a dull and non-receptive mood – and certainly nothing was further from my upper brain than thoughts of Spain and Spanish history. But suddenly, just as I was putting the letters through the slot, I was invaded by what seemed to be an entire novel, which I was one day to write, and which was to be called *That Lady* [...] The woman, the Princess of Eboli, had been visiting and revisiting me for years as interesting, but not my cup of tea. All of a sudden, she and her history took clear possession of me – by that letterbox in the rain [...] Yet I did not begin to write *That Lady* until five years later in 1945.¹⁰⁷

Given her representation of this moment as a Joycean epiphany and, more crucially, the timing of it, the nexus of critical opinion has gravitated towards *That Lady* being O'Brien's response to the Second World War and her experience of censorship. Indeed, as Lorna Reynolds points out: '*That Lady* was written in 1945. As we have seen, it was conceived in 1940. We cannot but feel that the state of Europe at the time, the Nazi despotism and brutality, is reflected in the brutal despotism of Philip II.'¹⁰⁸ As discussed previously in chapter one of this thesis, Walshe argues that O'Brien's wartime writing was in part a response to censorship and to war. Dalsimer is of a similar opinion, as in her critical assessment of *That Lady* she argues: 'Writing as the author of two books banned in Ireland, Kate O'Brien retaliates through Ana.'¹⁰⁹ Undoubtedly, O'Brien was deeply affected by the Second World War and was distressed by the banning in Ireland of her second novel *The Land of Spices* in 1941. Although O'Brien describes herself as 'a pacifist' in *Farewell Spain*,

¹⁰⁶ See Reynolds, *A Literary Portrait*, p. 70; Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 102.

¹⁰⁷ Cited in Reynolds, *A Literary Portrait*, p. 70.

¹⁰⁸ Reynolds, *A Literary Portrait*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁹ Dalsimer, *A Critical Study*, p. 86.

as Clair Wills argues, her ‘despair over Franco’s triumph in Spain, convinced her of the need to support Britain against the fascists in Germany’¹¹⁰ (*FS* 220). Indeed, O’Brien is always aware of the political landscape in both neutral Ireland and war-torn Europe, and undoubtedly, some of her concerns surface in *That Lady*.¹¹¹ Yet, as the popular critical reaction to the novel demonstrates, O’Brien’s claim that the inspiration for, and the writing of, the novel happened in 1940, considerably influenced the significance and reception of the book.

Importantly, in a letter to Charles Evans, her publishing editor at William Heinemann Ltd, in January 1939, O’Brien states that she had been planning to write *That Lady* long before her apparent epiphany:

I am very anxious to write a novel about the Princess of Eboli, - indeed, I have been thinking over this subject for a long time, and have made a beginning. But, as you know, when it comes to finishing off the work, I just have to away quietly and give my whole time and mind to it.¹¹²

O’Brien spent most of the war years living away from London but remained in regular contact with Evans. Writing in early 1943 from the solitude of her friend E.M. Delafield’s Devonshire home, O’Brien informed Evans that her first historical novel, *That Lady*, was underway: ‘I am working at the Spanish novel, which is entirely different from anything I have ever done, and is therefore rather refreshing to me. I hope it will work out as well as I want it to.’¹¹³ These contradictions may not, at first, be considered crucial but given that O’Brien had been thinking over the subject for a ‘long time’ and ‘had made a beginning’ before the war in Europe broke out in September 1939, a consideration of the impact of pre-war influences on the writing of *That Lady* are long overdue.

¹¹⁰ Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), p. 67.

¹¹¹ For an excellent appraisal of Kate O’Brien’s stance on Irish neutrality in the Second World War see *Ibid.*, pp. 61-67.

¹¹² Kate O’Brien to Charles Evans (7 January 1939) in papers held at The Random House Group Archive and Library of the University of Reading. Permission granted by the The Random House Group Ltd.

¹¹³ Kate O’Brien to Charles Evans (18 February 1943) in papers held at The Random House Group Archive and Library of the University of Reading. Permission granted by the The Random House Group Ltd.

Set in sixteenth-century Spain, *That Lady* centres on the power struggles within the court of Phillip II. The Princess of Eboli (Ana de Mendoza), the widow of Philip's prime minister and a woman of vast independent wealth, is at the centre of this power struggle. As Dalsimer points out, O'Brien portrays more starkly than ever in *That Lady* the central conflict in her writings: 'the struggle between personal freedom and social compliance.'¹¹⁴ Ana is a Castilian with centuries of noble ancestry behind her, and significantly, she is the first of O'Brien's heroines who was not a member of, or hailed from, the Irish bourgeoisie. The material used to embody the idea for *That Lady* is taken from history, and the main characters are historical figures, yet the real story of Ana de Mendoza and Philip II was largely irrelevant to O'Brien's purposes for, as she wrote in her introductory note to the novel:

What follows is not an historical novel. It is an invention arising from reflection on the curious external story of Ana de Mendoza and Philip II of Spain [...] All the personages in this book lived, and I have retained the historical outline of events in which they played a part; but everything which they say or write in my pages is invented, and – naturally – so are their thoughts and emotions.¹¹⁵

The incident on which the novel is based is one of the most notorious and mysterious events in the reign of Phillip II: the murder, in 1578, of his secretary Juan de Escovedo. After Ana de Mendoza was widowed she became the mistress of Antonio Perez, another of Philip's secretaries. When Escovedo discovered the affair he threatened to report them, whilst the lovers conspired to convince the King, wrongly in fact, that Escovedo was engaged in treachery. Philip ordered that Escovedo be executed, but when he learned the truth, he resisted trying the lovers in case he incriminated himself; the rumour in court was that Ana had been the King's mistress before her husband, Roy Gomez, had died. Because of his jealousy, Philip jailed Ana de Mendoza for fourteen years until her death, aged fifty-two.

¹¹⁴ Dalsimer, *A Critical Study*, p. 86.

¹¹⁵ Kate O'Brien, *That Lady* (London: Virago, 1985), p. xiv. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *TL*.

It was in the letters of Teresa of Avila that O'Brien first became aware of the Princess of Eboli.¹¹⁶ From this introduction she developed an avid interest in the Spanish princess, but disparities between the legend and *That Lady* suggest a recasting of Ana's character by the author.¹¹⁷ Prominence and strength of will are common to the Princess's many historical portraits, but that is where the similarities end as Ana is often presented as an indiscreet, capricious and volatile woman.¹¹⁸ O'Brien created in *That Lady* an emblematic figure of an aristocratic, resistant woman who is also honourable, stoic, and loving. As we shall see, O'Brien's revision of Ana's character into an unyielding individual bears a striking resemblance to Benavente's autonomous Princess Helena.

As discussed previously, Benavente almost always seeks to give his female characters a measure of autonomy whilst highlighting their struggle between public duty and private morality. However, in *Princesa Bebé* he gives his eponymous character, Princess Helena, the self-confidence to uphold her beliefs and the freedom to speak her mind. What is most notable about this character, however, is that Benavente proceeds to give the Princess more courage to emancipate herself than he gave Nené in *El Hombrecito*. Significantly, Benavente allows his royal heroines more freedom than his middle-class protagonists, and O'Brien follows suit in *That Lady*. Benavente and O'Brien were more comfortable giving characters from a different background than their own more autonomy to revolt, as neither writer wished to upset the status quo amongst their own middle-class. Undoubtedly, Ana is, in her stand against the King, the most daring of all O'Brien's heroines.

Although they each have status and wealth, as women in patriarchal societies Ana and Princess Helena are without autonomy. As a widow Ana is expected to regard herself as a

¹¹⁶ Kate O'Brien recalled this information during a programme for RTÉ, first televised in 1962, called 'Self Portrait.' See Reynolds, *A Literary Portrait*, p. 70.

¹¹⁷ O'Brien's papers include a notebook with the names of the sources she used in her research for *That Lady*, these include scholarly accounts of the lives of the Princess of Eboli and Phillip II. For example, Marañón, *Vida de la Princesa de Eboli* (Madrid, 1877), The Kate O'Brien Papers, UL, MS Collection List P12, MS 186.

¹¹⁸ See J.H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain 1496-1716* (New York: Mentor, 1963), p. 257.

ward of the King and is not free to dispose herself. As an authoritarian monarch, Philip sees no dividing line between public and private life. Equally, Helena has to answer to her uncle, the despotic Emperor, who forced her into marrying a man she did not love because it gave the family additional wealth and prestige. When Ana and Helena make the decision to assert their individualism, they do so by initiating clandestine affairs with men closely connected to their husbands. As members of the aristocracy both women are the subject of scandal at court and this serves to exasperate the situation.

In *Princesa Bebé*, Helena asks the Emperor to grant her a divorce so she can marry her lover, but he angrily reminds her of the scandal she has created amongst his subjects and maintains that she deserves an exemplary punishment – banishment from Suavia and the loss of all her wealth and privileges. Her only chance of a pardon her uncle informs her is if she declares herself insane and confines herself to one of the royal residencies for an indefinite period. Helena tells her uncle that she is happy to take responsibility for her actions, even though in her eyes she has done nothing wrong. Supported by her cousin Stephen she refuses to accept her uncle's demands. Helena, however, is more vociferous than her cousin, and in a dialogue with the emperor she makes clear her determination to act against the hypocrisy and insincerity of royal society with its laws, its morality and its lies.

Yes, we are banished because we live our own lives in the sincerity of our affections [...] You are right; I was a fool to appeal to you and your laws, when all I had to do was to satisfy my own conscience [...] From this hour forth, I give you warning: I Princess Helena, have become a ferocious anarchist. The world, your Empire, your precious society, the whole of it, with its laws, its morality and its lies – well you can have it, it is good enough for you; let it remain as it is; there are people who do not know how to live in any other way. (*PB* 37)

Here by having Helena refer to herself as a 'ferocious anarchist,' Benevente gives his character the agency to rebel against royal society and brings to mind Ana's dogged stance against tyrannical power in *That Lady*:

I have done no criminal wrong, and I won't be bullied out of my country [...] In this mad issue I have seen a principle, and I shall stay and hold it. Castile is

crumbling under the curious, cautious tyranny of this king [...] I think the best I can do is show them that I have regard for the free dignity of Castile. (TL 296)

Ana has been told that unless she agrees to never see Antonio Perez again then she will lose her liberty, thus like Helena her freedom will only be granted if she agrees to certain conditions.

Rather than groups or ideological systems, Benevente and O'Brien were interested in an individualist anarchism where, as Benjamin Tucker argued, 'all external government is tyranny.'¹¹⁹ In *That Lady*, Ana de Mendoza articulates O'Brien's ideal of a woman who wishes to be autonomous and independent, and like Princess Helena she is worldly enough to decide her actions and obligations for herself. The scene where Ana stands up to Philip is the strongest in the novel, dramatizing the clash between public and private morality. When Philip confronts her with the evidence of her sexual misconduct, Ana presents him with a clear and unambiguous account of the inviolability of personal morality:

There have been, Phillip as long as I can remember, thoughts, and even acts in that private life, which, presented to the world, would seem to injure this or that [...] If I do wrong in it, that wrong is between me and heaven. But here below, so long as I don't try to change it into public life, I insist that I own it. (TL 236)

By insisting that Philip has no right to control her personal life, Ana, in much the same way as Helena, maintains the political stance of the individual opposed to control by monarch or state. Both women insist on making their own moral definitions and making their own choices against the teachings of their culture. In a remarkably similar exchange Helena argues with her uncle: 'I am merely a woman, like any other woman, who is in love, who wishes to be happy, to be forgotten, without being responsible for her conduct to anybody' (PB 56).

Helena is unwilling to be bribed and her first obligation is to her lover, Albert. In the following passage she tells him that she is happy to give up her privileged life for him:

I had a soul, I had my life to live, which was not that life, and it was my duty to fight to rebel. Life is either accepting the conditions and environment in which we

¹¹⁹ Robert Hoffman (ed.), *Anarchism as Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Aldine Transaction, 2010), p. 109.

find ourselves, without protest, without rebellion, and living on peacefully and quietly, resigned to our fate, as if we were already dead- ... or otherwise it is protest, it is struggle, rebellion against the world, and there is one but virtue in a rebel, which is courage; the others, no matter how impressive their names, are nothing but ghosts of cowardice and fear – which are all that prevent us from running to meet happiness with a light heart, when happiness calls to us in our lives in the name of love. (*PB* 68)

That Lady is O'Brien's idealisation of a woman who lives according to her beliefs, who will sacrifice prestige, power and liberty, defending her right, as Dalsimer argues, 'to effect her life in action.'¹²⁰ Ana's resistance to Philip's authoritarian rule is successful, even though it leads to her immediate incarceration and the loss of family, wealth and freedom. When she is again told, this time by the Duke, that all she needs to do to secure her freedom and have her privileges reinstated is to inform the King that she will never see Antonio again, she retorts: 'I should be obliged to tell him that he had no right to ask it – or at least to make it a condition of my free citizenship' (*TL* 300). As a result of Ana's refusal to rescind her lover she is shut away in prison and left to die; even her name is expunged from public life and she is known only as 'That Lady.' In spite of this, her stand against the king can be seen as a moral victory for individual conscience in the face of state control.

By the end of Benavente's *Princesa Bebé*, Helena realises that she has made a mistake in her choice of partner, but she remains in exile happy that she exerted her individuality in the face of tyranny. What is apparent in *Princesa Bebé* and *That Lady* is that the authors' interest is not centred on love, it is freedom. In O'Brien's novel, Ana makes it clear that her refusal to bow to the King's demands had 'nothing to do with being in love' (*TL* 301). Although the love between Ana and Antonio Perez, and Helena and Albert is not entirely convincing, what is authentic is both women's independence and spirit, calm repudiation of the monarchs attempt to control, and later their equally calm and eventually heroic defiance of the King and the Emperor's despotic behaviour. Both stories demonstrate

¹²⁰ Dalsimer, *A Critical Study*, p. 86.

that social position and great wealth do not guarantee a woman personal freedom. Ana de Mendoza is O'Brien's most compelling portrait of the individualist, and, of all her heroines, the one who speaks loudest and most passionately for the author's commitment to self-expression.

O'Brien's own Irish Catholic middle-class culture with its myopia and cultural philistinism frustrated her, and it is not surprising that Benavente's sardonic treatment of a similar innate ideological conservatism appealed to her or that his work became a model in her fictional pursuit of female autonomy. However, works containing satirical criticism of the Church and middle-class society were not new phenomena in the Spanish literary canon, indeed, an engagement with these issues can be traced back to the writers of the Golden Age. In *Don Quixote*, Cervantes not only exposed the hypocrisy and corruption in Spanish society, he explicitly attacked a culture which blocked the development of the individual. *Don Quixote* influenced generations of Spanish writers including Benavente and the Generation of 1898, and, as the following chapter will demonstrate, Cervantes' seminal work of fiction was also a major influence on Kate O'Brien.

III

Don Quixote: A deadly book?

‘I read stories from it in English when I was a kid, and I thought they were deadly.’

- Mary Lavelle¹

‘It’s an absolutely deadly book – I don’t care what you say.’

- Una Costello²

These lines from *Mary Lavelle* and *Pray for the Wanderer* are just a two of many references to *Don Quixote* that Kate O’Brien made during her lifetime and that can be found throughout her work. For example, in *Farewell Spain* she mentions having bought, read and discussed *Don Quixote* during her time working as a governess in Bilbao from 1922-1923:

I bought *Don Quixote*, too, and though it was long before I could read it with real pleasure – I have said that then, as now, I was lazy – already when I was only struggling wearily with it, it gave me delight and considerable enlightenment in approach to it, to listen to Spaniards talk together of that book. They really know it, really like to talk of it, and quote it, and chuckle, and cap each other’s quotations. Certain unpretentious conversations which I half followed that winter taught me much about *Don Quixote*.³

These ‘unpretentious conversations’ were utilised by O’Brien over a decade later in her semi-autobiographical novel *Mary Lavelle*. In a discussion between Milagros and Mary Lavelle, the latter is a version of the author herself, the young Spanish girl tells her ‘Miss’ about the family’s passion for *Don Quixote*: ‘Father and Juanito and I were once all reading *Don Quixote* at the same time, I remember – we all three read it very often – and we used to have great fun at dinner, talking like the barber and the curate and Sancho and everyone!’ (*ML* 136). This passage is drawn from O’Brien’s memory of conversations she had been privy to during that first visit to Spain. In a letter to José María Areilza, the son of the family she

¹ Kate O’Brien, *Mary Lavelle* [1936] (London: Virago, 1984), p. 136. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *ML*.

² Kate O’Brien, *Pray for the Wanderer* (London: Heinemann, 1938), p. 286. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *PW*.

³ Kate O’Brien, *Farewell Spain* [1937] (London: Virago, 1984), p. 212.

worked for and one of her former pupils, she reiterates the importance of the time she had spent living and working in Bilbao: 'My short stay in your family home is printed indelibly in my memory.'⁴ We know that O'Brien made the decision to become a professional writer sometime whilst she was in Spain in 1922-23 and, as this chapter will demonstrate, the importance of *Don Quixote* in her formation as a novelist should not be underestimated.

In O'Brien's fiction it is her intellectual and artistic characters who appreciate *Don Quixote*. Denis Considine (*Without My Cloak*, 1931), Don Pablo Areavgas and Milagros Areavgas (*Mary Lavelle*), and Matt Costello (*Pray for the Wanderer*) have all read the novel. However, in *Mary Lavelle* and *Pray for the Wanderer* there is a contradiction between the reception of *Don Quixote* by Mary Lavelle and Una Costello, and the one by Milagros and Matt. By referring to the novel in a negative manner, Una and Mary emulate the rhetoric of the conservative, censorious, insular Irish Free State whilst the positive reaction of Milagros and Matt is more attuned to liberal intellectualism. For example, in *Mary Lavelle* it is one of Mary's Spanish charges, Milagros, the most cultured and well-read of the Areavgas children, who encourages the young Irish governess to read it. It is also Milagros who challenges Mary's claim that the stories from *Don Quixote* are deadly: 'Stories from anything are deadly, but you know Pilár does think it's a deadly book, and mother has never even tried to read it [...] But I really do believe it must be the most important book in the world' (*ML* 136). Milagros's enthusiasm for *Don Quixote* echoes O'Brien's, so why do Mary Lavelle and Una Costello use the adjective 'deadly' in reference to Cervantes' novel? This chapter will examine this disparity.

Before discussing *Don Quixote* in relation to O'Brien's work it would be useful to consider the use of the word 'deadly' in the fiction of her Irish literary predecessor, James Joyce. In *Dubliners* (1916), Joyce's antipathy towards the Irish Catholic Church and the

⁴ O'Brien wrote the letter in 1950 congratulating her former charge on his appointment as Spanish Ambassador to the USA. See José María Areilza, 'Kate O'Brien: a personal literary portrait', in J. Logan (ed.), *With Warmest Love* (Limerick: Mellick Press, 1994), p. 38.

paralysing consequences of its stringent dogma on the people of Ireland pervades his writing. In the opening paragraph of 'The Sisters', a young boy reflects on the impending death of his friend, Father Flynn. As he passes Father Flynn's window each night the boy has an instinctual but not a conscious understanding of the sexual implications of his interactions with the priest. The word paralysis goes round in his head: 'It had always sounded strangely in my ears like the word gnomon in the Euclid and the word simony in the catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to look upon its deadly work.'⁵ In his study of *Dubliners*, Garry Leonard refers to the significance of the last sentence:

Here is the invitation and the warning of *Dubliners*: come closer, look for where it fades, where it is illegible, but know that what remains unsaid is often what we fear to say, or even think, and yet, at the same time, might wish to hear shouted aloud – longing and the fear that accompanies genuine insight unadulterated by self-delusion or wishful thinking: deadly work indeed, but perhaps an antidote to the 'moral paralysis' Joyce identifies as one of the subjects of this work.⁶

By using the word 'deadly' in a similar context to Joyce, O'Brien posits *Don Quixote* as her antidote to the moral paralysis that she, like Joyce, recognised as a consuming, dangerous component of Irish Catholic life. In O'Brien's first novel, *Without My Cloak*, the limitations of middle-class life in Mellick thwart any fleeting attempts by her characters to develop their own voices and break free. The Considine family's introspection and sexual repression as well as its insistence on tradition and its crushing of individuality become representative of what she saw as the insularity and claustrophobia of Irish life. In O'Brien's later novels *Mary Lavelle* and *Pray for the Wanderer*, her protagonists Mary Lavelle and Matt Costello are allowed some degree of autonomy but have to move away from Ireland, as the author moved, to Spain and to London to attain it.

⁵ James Joyce, *Dubliners* (London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), p. 3.

⁶ Garry Leonard, 'Dubliners', in Derek Attridge (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 89-90.

Reading books profoundly changed Don Quixote's life and Cervantes' novel certainly had a similar impact on O'Brien. This is suggested in *Mary Lavelle* when Milagros insists that Mary reads *Don Quixote* as soon as she learns enough Spanish; 'It'll transform you', she tells her.⁷ By developing an intellectual and aesthetic affinity with Cervantes, O'Brien aligned herself with the nineteenth-century French writer, Gustave Flaubert, whom she later acknowledged in her lecture 'The Art of Writing.'⁸ It was *Don Quixote* that helped Flaubert reconceive his method of writing and led him to write his first novel, *Madame Bovary*, published in 1857.⁹ O'Brien greatly admired Flaubert, which is apparent from her praise of his: 'When he said: "*Emma Bovary c'est moi!*" the man in the street took him literally, and gave a knowing laugh. But writers, especially those who have studied his method, know what he meant, imaginatively, creatively. He was a novelist born.'¹⁰ The writers O'Brien refers to here include herself and, most probably, Joyce. There are striking parallels between Joyce and Flaubert which are examined in Scarlet Baron's recent comparative study of the two writers.¹¹ Flaubert's admiration for Cervantes led *Don Quixote* to become the definitive model of his career, and it is possible O'Brien was aware of this. What is important about Flaubert's relationship to *Don Quixote* is that it is the first work he imitated profoundly. Turning his attention to the novelistic technique of *Don Quixote* was a logical and practical step in his search for an aesthetic route that would allow him to create a singular work of his own. Flaubert's experience with the novel form enabled him to recognise that the answers to his greatest literary quandaries were at his disposal in Cervantes' novel. This was also the

⁷ O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, p. 135. *Mary Lavelle* is set in 1922-1923, the same period that Kate O'Brien spent as a governess in Bilbao, northern Spain, and the heroine is the same age, twenty four, as O'Brien was at the time. Bilbao becomes the fictional Altorno.

⁸ Kate O'Brien, 'The Art of Writing', *University Review*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Spring, 1964), pp. 6-14.

⁹ See Soledad Fox, 'Flaubert and Don Quixote', *New England Review*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2006), p. 166.

¹⁰ O'Brien, 'The Art of Writing', p. 12.

¹¹ For an analysis of Joyce's intertextual engagement with Flaubert see Scarlet Baron, *Strandentwining Cable: Joyce, Flaubert and Intertextuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

case in O'Brien's *Pray for the Wanderer* where she borrowed Don Quixote's narrative technique and appropriated it for her own use.

Published in 1938, *Pray for the Wanderer* was O'Brien's quickly issued response to the banning of *Mary Lavelle* and is her critique of Irish society as she saw it in 1937. In this novel we have the most demonstrable instance of identifiable authorial politics in all of O'Brien's fiction. As Lorna Reynolds writes, 'The author herself is present [...] as a man, a famous author back in Ireland on a visit to his brother and sister-in-law.'¹² Through Matt Costello's voice O'Brien registers her protest against modern Ireland's censorship legislation and the 1937 Constitution. Although censorship criteria in Ireland was framed in terms of sexuality, O'Brien knew that a sustained attack on Éamon de Valera and his cultural ideology would encounter difficulties, and she therefore had to find a method of critique that enabled her to address the issues but was subversive enough to escape the censor's eye. Through her identification with Cervantes, O'Brien adopted a similar technique to the one he had used centuries earlier in his quest to challenge the Spanish status quo.

In *Don Quixote*, Cervantes confronted what he considered to be the flaws of late sixteenth-century Spanish society and, in doing so, produced a revolutionary document in its own time and a courageous piece of writing. However, this important dimension is lost unless some consideration is given to the social context in which it was produced and to which it refers. Cervantes was born in 1547 in Alcalá de Venares, Spain, amongst a society still reeling from the drastic changes to its composition brought about after the Spanish Reconquest of 1492, when the 'Catholic monarchs', Ferdinand and Isabella, conquered the Moorish kingdom of Granada, and declared uniformity of religion throughout their domains.¹³ For the Jewish and Muslim population of Spain this meant either converting to

¹² Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), p. 76.

¹³ During a period of Catholic revival throughout Europe, the Council of Trent (1545-64) had vigorously affirmed traditional Roman Catholic doctrine and practices in the face of Protestant heresy, and Spain was the official champion of Roman Catholic orthodoxy in Europe. For more information on Spanish history during this

Christianity or facing exile. However, New Christians or *conversos* (including Cervante's forebears) were excluded from positions of authority and influence, and the centres of power were firmly in the control of the Old Christian majority. The effects of these attitudes was perhaps most palpable in the paralysis of intellectual activities, which were seen as a Jewish pursuit. With this in mind the Old Christian approach was to shun scholarship and, to some extent, literacy: a condition not dissimilar to the cultural and religious ethos of the Ireland in Joyce's *Dubliners*.

The publication of literature in Spain was controlled by the Holy Office of the Inquisition, a powerful and efficient guarantor of conformity, which exercised absolute control over what could and could not be published.¹⁴ No piece of writing could be circulated unless it had passed a rigorous ecclesiastical censorship and had been certified to contain nothing 'against the faith and good customs.'¹⁵ These measures demanded that the population conform and left no room for dissidence. Indeed, as Carroll B. Johnson points out, 'this situation had immediate and important consequences for Cervantes, the kind of art he could create, and the ways he could be read.'¹⁶ The ideological constraints imposed by his society precluded the open expression or even the suggestion of dissent. Cervantes was one of the first writers to have combined entertainment and a didactic value in his work, but he had to find a balance between a pleasure-seeking public and the dogmatic authorities of the Spanish Inquisition. The narrative technique that Cervantes used, based on irony and masking himself within the text which O'Brien imitated in *Pray for the Wanderer*, will be discussed later in this chapter.

period see Felipe Fernández-Armesto, 'The Improbable Empire', in Raymond Carr (ed.), *Spain: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 116-151

¹⁴ The Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, more commonly known as the Spanish Inquisition, was established by Ferdinand and Isabella, to maintain Catholic orthodoxy in their kingdoms. For more information on the Spanish Inquisition see Joseph Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition: A History* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2006).

¹⁵ See Carroll B. Johnson, *Don Quixote: The Quest for Modern Fiction* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), p. 10.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Importantly, although Cervantes and O'Brien wrote in periods and places that were altogether different, there were some significant cultural parallels between their historical contexts as writers. O'Brien published her first four novels during the 1930s, a period when the fledgling Irish Free State, in its preoccupation with attempting to define and understand itself, had closed Ireland off from much of the modern world.¹⁷ The official ideology of the state expressed a concern to preserve the supposed purity of a mainly rural and Catholic society from the caustic effects of liberal individualism and social modernisation. As was the case in Cervantes' Spain, the moral fervour created by this obsession with national purity led to widespread public and private censorship. The dogmatic but popularly supported Censorship of Publications Act was formed in 1929 in response to concern over 'the devil's influence' which was creeping into Ireland from Britain and America. High on the list of evils were 'bad' books, which were regarded as potentially threatening to the purity of the state.

The worlds in which Cervantes and O'Brien lived were fundamentally hostile to artists and their work. The insubordinate nature of creative literature clearly posed a threat to the very fabric of society in the provincial, Catholic, and conservative worlds of La Mancha and the Irish Free State. A major theme in *Don Quixote* is the power of literature to exist despite society's official desire to use it only as a tool to regulate morality. In *Don Quixote* the romances in the protagonist's library are ultimately burned in an inquisitorial ritual. It is believed that if the evil books are committed to the flames, Don Quixote will regain his sanity. The ideology in Cervantes' Spain that eroticism, madness and immorality come from works of literature or art was the same as in 1930s Ireland. If Mary Lavelle's behaviour had been influenced by reading 'deadly' foreign books such as *Don Quixote* the censors made sure O'Brien's account of a young Irish woman communicating her secrets and acting out her

¹⁷ For more information see Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002*, 2nd ed. (London: Harper Perennial, 2004).

desires would not be allowed to corrupt Ireland's population. Furthermore, in *Mary Lavelle*, O'Brien chose the setting of Spain to play out her struggle with sexual dissidence.¹⁸ Yet, despite the attempt at aesthetic distancing, the novel was the first of her books to be banned by the Irish Censorship Board. *Mary Lavelle* was banned on the grounds that it was 'indecent and obscene', the criteria for such an action. The implications of censorship took its toll on O'Brien with immediate effect, particularly in regard to the stigma attached to it and reduced financial gain from the sale of her banned works. Her next novel, *Pray for the Wanderer*, would reflect O'Brien's anger and frustration at the increasing moral restrictions and parochialism in the Ireland of her day.

Pray for the Wanderer is narrated by Matt Costello, an internationally successful author who has repeatedly been banned in Ireland and is back in Mellick for the first time in sixteen years. Matt, a worldly, cultured man, retreats to his ancestral home, Weir House, after ending a passionate affair with a married actress in London. Temporarily seduced by the peace and tranquillity of home, Matt begins to wonder: 'Could he live in de Valera's Ireland, where the artistic conscience is ignored?' (PW 98). Ultimately, he rejects the legislative and religious narrowness of the new state and returns to London. Throughout the novel, Matt has several long discussions with Tom Mahoney, a cousin of the Costello family and Tom's friend, Father Malachi, a Franciscan monk, about the social and religious atmosphere of de Valera's Ireland.¹⁹ The discussions between the three men echo O'Brien's dispute with the Irish Free State, and as Matt speaks for the author he argues for the merits of individualism, art and the freedom to live as one chooses. Likewise, within *Don Quixote*, Cervantes gives his protagonist the autonomy to live the life of his own choosing and constantly questions adherence to blind faith and outdated social conventions.

¹⁸ O'Brien's sexuality will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

¹⁹ The significance of Father Malachi will be discussed later in this chapter.

O'Brien viewed the impending 1937 Constitution as emblematic of the nation and, thus, as symbolic of much of what was wrong with Ireland. The state, following Church dogma, enshrined the family rather than the individual in the Constitution that was deemed necessary by Taoiseach Éamon de Valera. The parameters set for women in the Constitutional model were a contributory factor to the lack of women from the public sphere and played a part in the consolidation of the 'ideal role' for women as one who worked solely in the home. In 'Neither Feminist nor Flapper: The Ecclesiastical Construction of the Ideal Irish Woman', Maryann Valiulis describes the idealised role for women:

The self-sacrificing mother whose world was bound by the confines of her home, a woman who was pure, modest, who valued traditional culture, especially that of dress and dance, a woman who inculcated these virtues in her daughters and nationalist ideology in her sons, a woman who knew and accepted her place in society.²⁰

In its social dimension the Constitution of 1937 was a codification of the Irish Catholic values to which the majority of the population subscribed and which the inhabitants of Weir House in *Pray for the Wanderer* exemplify. The Constitution is a frequent subject of discussion amongst the characters in this novel. The core of Weir House is the family; at the head is Matt's brother, Will, and his wife Una, who are expecting their sixth child. In *Pray for the Wanderer*, the Constitution is depicted as tying Irish women to the Catholic Church in irreversible and detrimental ways that will impinge upon their freedoms. However, the character of Una is portrayed as anything but a martyr; she has servants who help with the children and a cook who prepares dinner. As Dalsimer points out, 'she is the traditional ideal, a wife completely subservient to her husband', yet 'her arms are always waiting for him,' she loves him and her life is fulfilled.²¹ Una is focused solely on her husband, children, and home, and thus represents the idealised middle-class wife and mother as prescribed in the Constitution.

²⁰ Maryann Valiulis, 'Neither Feminist nor Flapper: The Ecclesiastical Construction of the Ideal Irish Woman,' in Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart (eds), *The Irish Women's History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 158.

²¹ Dalsimer, *A Critical Study*, p. 49.

On first reading, O'Brien's implicit approval of Una contrasts strongly with the denouncing of marital bonds and domesticity in her earlier novels. For instance, O'Brien's apparent endorsement of Una's large brood of children is at odds with her criticism of large families, suggested by Molly's death in *Without My Cloak*. Equally, the author's positive portrayal of the traditional domestic role of women, as described in the 1937 Constitution, is in complete contrast to Caroline's marital despair in *Without My Cloak* and Mary Lavelle's desire to escape from the role of wife and mother which is preordained for her. Dalsimer suggests that O'Brien's approval of Una testifies to her uncertainty following the censoring of *Mary Lavelle* and to her intention that *Pray for the Wanderer* reflect Ireland's prevailing social ethos.²² Similarly, Brad Kent argues that the novel offers a critique of censorship that is not entirely coherent:

Indeed, while *Pray for the Wanderer* makes an equally impassioned and intellectual case against censorship, the novel's arguments are flawed and in fact work back on themselves to maintain support for censorship. These flawed arguments, coupled with elements of the story that cast aspects of an ideal Ireland in a positive light, in the end helped protect it from the censor's wrath. The situation was thus a mixed blessing: positive in that the novel was not banned and that the author's response was allowed to enter the public realm, but negative in that it was impotent and self-defeating in its intent.²³

However, for O'Brien betraying the self through conforming is worse than the denigration and punishment that society can inflict. In *That Lady* (1946), for example, even though Ana de Mendoza is incarcerated for refusing to agree to the despotic demands of Phillip II, O'Brien supports Ana's stance. Rather than it being compliant as Dalsimer suggests, or 'impotent and self-defeating in its intent' as Kent argues, *Pray for the Wanderer* is a powerful, effective appraisal of the confessional Ireland of the time, which in its ingenious attempt to foil censorship owes much to *Don Quixote*.

²² Dalsimer, *A Critical Study*, p. 49.

²³ Brad Kent, 'An argument manqué: Kate O'Brien's *Pray for the Wanderer*,' *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2010), p. 285.

Cervantes, one of the first professional writers of prose fiction to emerge from Spain, was also one of the first to have combined entertainment and a didactic value in his work, but he had to find a balance between a pleasure-seeking public and the dogmatic authorities of the Inquisition. In order to circumvent the restrictions imposed on the writer in Inquisitorial Spain, Cervantes adopted a rhetorical strategy based on pervasive and systematic irony. For instance, the same text can be interpreted to support or to subvert the dominant ideology, depending upon the reader's own ideological orientation. Cervantes' irony tends not to demolish but attack indirectly and by adopting this strategy he assured the publication of a body of works with a dangerous subversive potential in their own time. By imitating the manner of Cervantes, O'Brien rose to the challenge of expressing herself under the restrictions imposed on writers in 1930s Ireland and *Pray for the Wanderer* escaped censorship. Una is not as sympathetically drawn as it would appear and is in fact deliberately modelled on the 'ideal role' of the homemaker, rendered in the 1937 Constitution in order to 'expose' the implications of ideological parameters on women's role in the family and Irish society. Therefore, although O'Brien may appear to 'hold back' by giving a positive portrayal of Una, she actually does the opposite and denounces the subjugation of women in Ireland.

O'Brien's seditious condemnation of Una is apparent throughout the novel and is particularly evident in Matt's analysis of his sister-in-law. He observes that Una, 'loved her husband and, deriving from him, her children, with an unheeding, unaware strength of generosity such as Matt had never before observed in an adult. He had never before met in normal worldly life someone who quite precisely lived for others' (PW 88). Here O'Brien draws attention to the rarity and what she perceives as the absurdity of women who seem to be fulfilled by Una's mode of living. The use of the word 'adult' in this context suggests the infantilising of the cosseted bourgeois woman. Una is privileged, over-indulged and has no need to work or concern herself with matters outside her home. Her husband, Will, is the

breadwinner, he is firmly at the head of his household, and we are told he loved his wife 'with the contentment of mastery' (*PW* 27). However, freedom for women is a key issue throughout O'Brien's oeuvre and is emotively addressed in *Pray for the Wanderer*. Una is 'completely subservient' to her husband, Will, and she does not see the need for independence or freedom for women (*PW* 89). Of freedom for women, she questions Matt:

'Do you think there's any point in it?' Una asked gaily.
'I hold with freedom for everyone. I think it's a terrific point! Personal liberty. Never was it so much in danger' [...]
'But what nonsense you talk! With the whole world doing exactly as it chooses! Or so I understand from Will, when he puts his paper down every evening.' (*PW* 24)

In this passage O'Brien reiterates that Una's behaviour is childlike in that she accepts the authority and wisdom of her husband unquestioningly. As the conversation with Matt develops Una voices her opinion on Irish politics; to this Will retorts: 'In God's name, Una, what do you know about it?' (*PW* 25). Unperturbed by her husband's interruption, she simply replies: 'Nothing at all, dearest, I freely admit' (*PW* 25). This shows how, although Una appears to be located in the novel as a positive symbol of the selfless woman rendered in the Constitution, O'Brien is in fact mocking middle-class women for allowing themselves to be treated as chattels and Irish hegemonic masculine discourse for dictating that its female population spend their life tied in the chains of domesticity without a voice. Given that Una is categorised in terms of 'innocence,' it is not surprising that she has admitted to Matt that she does not generally like his writing and that she cannot understand why much of it is so sad. In a conversation with Matt, Una tells him that she has a happy life and 'cannot see why millions of others' are not the same (*PW* 206). Matt points out to his sister-in-law the harsh realities of life, informing her that factors such as homelessness, slavery and mental illness impinge on people's ability to be as contented as she is. To this, Una simply replies: 'But these things needn't be. No decent person wishes it to be so' (*PW* 206). Here Una is exposed

as ignorant and naïve; she has no interest in or knowledge of life outside of Mellick, and her thoughts are only ever focused on her family and their concerns.

Much of O'Brien's criticism of Irish society is channelled through the person of Tom Mahoney. Tom is a lawyer, the son of an influential widow and a respected member of society. Yet, as Dalsimer points out although Tom is 'very much a man of Mellick, he is nevertheless its most cynical critic.'²⁴ As he professes to be a fair-minded man, Tom mocks the hypocrisy of respectable Mellick, a town that permits two conspicuous brothels but nonetheless punishes the men who visit them. Tom appears to resent the restrictions that Mellick society imposes on individual freedom, but when Matt tells him that he appears to be 'free enough - in your talk anyway' he replies that his free speech is only audible: 'Within these four walls' (PW 67). Tom feels he can talk openly and honestly to Matt but makes it known that he would not contemplate the rest of the family hearing him speak in these terms.

Tom is interested in Matt's career, and he buys and defends all his books. In effect, he aligns himself with Matt in suggesting that they will not be cowed into reading and writing certain materials merely because they are prescribed by either the political or the religious authorities. It is Tom who cites *Don Quixote* as one of the great works of literature as he expresses his concerns about the aesthetic value of Irish writing:

the language we're now digging out of the grave has left the world nothing. Nothing like *The Canterbury Tales*, or *The Divine Comedy*, or *Don Quixote*. No, we've only produced one native giant so far- because you can't call Swift a native- we've only got Joyce to measure against the immortals up-to-date. (PW 70)

For O'Brien, Ireland was a Catholic country which, because of centuries of repression under colonial rule, had been estranged from Catholic tradition, and through Tom she voices her resentment by complaining that 'we've created no art in Ireland, such as the other great Catholic peoples have' (PW 49). *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Divine Comedy*, and *Don*

²⁴ Dalsimer, *A Critical Study*, p. 54.

Quixote were written centuries earlier by authors who played a key role in the formation of the illustrious literary canons of their native countries. In O'Brien's opinion Ireland's indigenous literature could only be written by someone like Joyce, who could lay claim to a specifically Irish, Catholic heritage.

Given O'Brien's deployment of Tom as a cynical and mocking spokesman from within Irish society it is not surprising that Una's 'innocence' is a central topic of conversation between him and Matt. Whilst the two men are discussing the merits of poetry, nature and imagination over a picnic lunch, Tom remarks that Una is 'very nearly my favourite study,' and to Matt's inquiry as to why, he replies: (*PW* 46)

Happiness, Matt. Happiness you novelist, you! Happiness as innocent as our picnic. Have you ever seen it before, Matt? Will you ever see it again? If I were a novelist, I'd write a Victorian three-decker all about Una. And it wouldn't be censored either! It wouldn't as much as bring a blush to my mother's ageing cheek! (*PW* 47)

Superficially, Tom's comment may seem to support contemporary Irish ideology, but it is in fact a satiric condemnation of the type of literature that had the approval of the guardians of the Free State. By the mid 1930s, because of both official and unofficial censorship, the supplies in libraries and bookshops had dwindled until the books available to the Irish reader consisted of religious works and those that celebrated Irish culture. This scenario is similar to the one in *Don Quixote*'s library when the priest and the barber come to the conclusion that the only type of reading *Don Quixote* should be allowed is religious. As in the Spain of the Inquisition reading certain types of books provoked a sense of angst in censorial Ireland. As a result of this anxiety over what constituted suitable reading material virtually no serious contemporary fiction was on the shelves; however, cheap novels, weekly newspapers and periodicals were sold in abundance. Elizabeth Russell in her essay 'Holy crosses, guns and

roses: themes in popular reading material’ notes that the content of the novels was uniformly ‘guns and roses’, which were essentially either westerns or fairy tales.²⁵

Mirroring the ideal Irish woman of the 1937 Constitution, the model Victorian woman was pure, chaste, refined and modest. In a further parallel between the two eras, women who had sexual contact with a man – other than her husband – was seen as ruined or fallen. Victorian literature was full of examples such as Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1877) and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857) where women paid dearly for straying from moral expectations. Whilst some writers showed sympathy towards women’s subjugation, there was an increasing demand for works that were didactic and reinforced the cultural norm. Reading was a common social family activity inside the middle-class Victorian home with each member taking a turn to read aloud. The content, therefore, had to be deemed suitable for all. As a result ‘The censorship of prudery,’ as Thomas Hardy termed it in an angry article of 1890, ensured that realistic depictions of ‘the relations of the sexes’ – ‘the crash of broken commandments’ that formed the necessary accompaniment to the catastrophe of a tragedy – had, right through the century, to be glossed over, if not completely concealed.²⁶ For O’Brien this type of innocuous literature was dangerously repressive, but she makes the point that because of Ireland’s own censorship of prudery the ‘Victorian’ novel was what the majority of the Irish population, including Tom’s mother, wanted to read.

Tom’s reference to his mother in this context is decisive and from it we get an idea of the purpose her character will serve in the novel. Mrs Hannah Mahoney, is a wealthy widow and Tom refers to her as one of the ‘female pillars of Mellick’ (*PW* 67). She is well thought of by the local clergy and she genuinely believes her obvious donations to worthy causes in the parish will contribute to securing herself a place in heaven. Hannah Mahoney is

²⁵ Elizabeth Russell, ‘Holy Crosses, guns and roses: themes in popular reading material’, in Joost Augusteijn (ed.), *Ireland in the 1930s* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), p. 11.

²⁶ Cited in Kate Flint, ‘The Victorian novel and its readers’, in Deirdre David (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 20.

opinionated, suffocating, critical of others and obsessed with outward appearances. This insulated, hostile female character is similar to as Hannah Kernahan in *The Last of Summer* (1943), discussed in chapter one.

Matt's alienation from Irish society is encapsulated in his relationship with his family and is most evident in the moments that the book directly confronts the issue of censorship. At dinner, Tom's mother, Aunt Hannah, makes Matt feel extremely unwelcome and tells her guest that 'his literary work was a disgrace to Ireland, and that she had never read a word of it, she was happy to say' (PW 56). She trusts the censors as moral guardians, believing their judgements are representative of Irish values, which allows her to make such damning commentary on Matt's writing without ever having read it. During the meal Matt notices that Tom talks less whilst in his mother's company and he also makes a telling observation concerning Mrs Mahoney's dining room which he describes as 'a prosperous, Victorian setting' (PW 55). O'Brien's use, yet again, of the term 'Victorian' in relation to Mrs Mahoney is important. The influence of British Imperialism and culture had been powerful throughout colonial rule and O'Brien was outraged that, after fighting for centuries for independence, Ireland had chosen to retreat to the Victorian morality of the colonial power.²⁷ Matt clearly felt he had been forced back to Victorian times in Mrs Mahoney's house, as in amazement he thought: 'Continuity indeed! Was it still possible to ask your fellow-creatures to race up and down four flights of stairs with your roast lamb and green peas?' (PW 55)

Matt feels increasingly isolated and knows that he could never discuss his life in Europe with his family. Matt's experiences abroad were in complete contrast to life at Weir House and he looks back nostalgically at:

the abandoned, senseless, exhibitionist life of London, Berlin and Paris in the late nineteen-twenties [...] The details, memories and remorse of these lives [...] were too crude and small to be considered by the ancient and snobbish

²⁷ One of the legacies of colonialism in Ireland was that Victorian morality would become crucial in the formation of the identity of the Irish Free State. See Chapter's One and Two of Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex & Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile Books, 2010).

sophistication of Catholic Ireland. A sophistication which has produced, but would by no means read, *Ulysses* – the most awful outcry ever raised about the powers of darkness. (PW 106)

This passage catches exactly the mood of the author with regard to independent Ireland's treatment of its writers. The main resistance to new literature was coming from a conservative middle-class who, as the new ruling class, embodied the remnants of British rule through their superior, condescending moral stance. This same Catholic bourgeoisie, O'Brien's own class, had produced a talent such as Joyce yet because of their puritanical narrow-mindedness could not or would not see that *Ulysses* (1922) was one of the most important works of twentieth-century modernist fiction.

However, despite his protestations Matt is resigned to censorship and realises he is out of step with Irish tastes. When Una mentions that she wants to see his latest play, Matt simply remarks that she will not like it. If she were curious, he suggests, she could read the play when it is published in a few weeks' time. However, he adds, 'it will probably be banned in this country,' to which Una responds, 'I wish you weren't always censored [...] What's the fun of having a famous relative if he's got to be so embarrassing' (PW 18). Una hopes that if Matt stays in Mellick he will settle down and 'become a respectable Irishman again and start writing books for which his relations need not blush' (PW 115). There are biographical parallels here with O'Brien's treatment by members of her own family in Limerick on the banning of *Mary Lavelle*. Having a censored relative upset and embarrassed O'Brien's Limerick relations and her brother-in-law Stephen O'Mara was particularly troubled by certain aspects of the novel. Previously a great admirer of her novels, O'Mara wrote a strongly worded letter to his sister-in-law objecting to the adulterous sexual liaison between Juanito and Mary, and to the portrayal of Agatha Conlon as an 'Irish' lesbian.²⁸ As Walshe argues, O'Mara's reaction is not surprising given that he was 'a devout Catholic [...] very

²⁸ Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p. 68.

much a man of the new Ireland of the twentieth century and a close friend of Eamon de Valera.²⁹ Indeed, as Walshe continues ‘his objections to *Mary Lavelle* give a significant insight into contemporary Irish unease with the radical elements within Kate O’Brien’s work.’³⁰ *Mary Lavelle* was banned on the grounds of obscenity for the adulterous liaison between Mary and Juanito. However, the censors would have reacted in much the same way as Stephen O’Mara and took great exception to the pious Agatha Conlon declaring her love for Mary Lavelle.

O’Brien’s philosophy on censorship echoes that of Cervantes, in that an individual should have the right to read whatever he or she chooses and be guided as to what is right and wrong by his or her own integrity, and not by a set of despotic rules. For Matt in *Pray for the Wanderer*, the purpose of art is to raise a conflicting voice that challenges people’s opinions and makes a case for the individual spirit. his artistic vision is clarified in relation to censorship and politically utilitarian aesthetics in his conversation with Father Malachi and Tom which extends late into the night. O’Brien’s stipulation that Father Malachi is a Franciscan monk is arguably a further nod to Cervantes. Sixteen years before *Don Quixote* was published, a Spanish Franciscan monk published a chivalric poem, *El Caballero Asisio* (The Knight of the Assizes) of which the hero was the patron of his order. Cervantes acknowledges the artistic vision of the unorthodox monk in an adjunta to *Don Quixote* (*El Buscapié*) which was not discovered until the late eighteenth century and was first reproduced in an 1801 biography of the Spanish novelist.³¹ Given the hostility towards chivalric literature in Inquisitorial Spain, the fact that a member of a religious order had written such a poem would have caused a furore.

²⁹ Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 68.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Charles Jarvis, ‘Memoir of Cervantes, With a Notice of his Works’, in Miguel Cervantes, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, translated by Charles Jarvis (London: J. Thomas, 1840), p. xxxv.

As Dalsimer argues, Father Malachi is ‘the embodiment of the purest virtues on which the Free State is founded. A thoroughly scrupulous and logical defender of censorship and the Irish way of life.’³² Yet, we are told that Father Malachi has read Matt’s books, which along with his comment that they are ‘elegant and powerful’ suggests he possesses some degree of tolerance; therefore, although he is not as unorthodox as the Spanish monk, he is, as a cleric in de Valera’s Ireland, an exception to the norm (*PW* 181). He does, however, note that ‘they certainly are “news” to us here in Ireland, even if news of an unfortunate or unwelcome character’ (*PW* 181). In response to the monk’s query regarding what function his books serve, Matt is unapologetic; his job, he says ‘is not to moralise but to demonstrate’ (*PW* 184):

Any books ... exist solely to demonstrate the artist’s desire and ability to write them. They are a fruit of the creative function, as irresponsible, if you like, as other fruits of creation. Father Malachi may say what he likes, but men get their children in gratification of themselves, and the Church does not tell them, so far as I know, to pause and consider the chance that the fruits of that ‘pride of life’ may be criminals, murderers, perverters of youth, scandalisers of the little ones. The Church tells them to have their children and stop moralizing [...] If Father Malachi insists that I must have a function, a social duty, all right. I believe that now as never before it is the duty of those who can refrain from meddling *not* to meddle. I believe that it is useful at present to be an individual, to be non-doctrinaire. (*PW* 182)

By broaching the dangers central in Matt’s art, Father Malachi articulates the view that the Church provides its people with appropriate guidance as to what is good and evil, and as such writers should adhere to the same guiding principle. Matt defends himself protesting that these issues are of equal concern to him: ‘It’s my stuff- only my terms of reference are individual, not an imposed code’ (*PW* 183-184). Matt refuses to be regulated by the Church just because de Valera thinks that he and his fellow artists are ‘dangerous fellows’ (*PW* 187). He protests further: ‘I am not controlled - I am by nature a member of the Church Militant [...] and amenable to my own natural moral law’ (*PW* 188).

³² Adele Dalsimer, *Kate O’Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1990), p. 55.

Unsurprisingly, Matt resents the rationale behind the banning of his books. In a further conversation with Father Malachi, where Matt explains why he is aggrieved that his books are banned, he calmly explains that censorship is:

A confession of failure. It is a denial of human judgement and understanding, and a gross intrusion of liberty. If you, Tom or Nell Mahoney may read my books and sit in judgement on them – by what right do you decide that it is not for others to do so? [...] Man is born free. (*PW* 190-191)

In this passage Matt touches upon one of the main arguments against censorship – that people have a right to knowledge and need to be exposed to different perspectives not merely to evolve and progress in their thinking, but also to reinforce that what they believe in is significant and right.

In *Don Quixote*, Cervantes recurrently endorses the right of every individual to pursue information from all points of view and without restriction. For instance, in Part 1, chapter XXII Don Quixote and Sancho have an encounter with a chain of galley slaves. The majority of the slaves turn out to be thieves and vagabonds, but there is one who catches Don Quixote's eye who is fettered and restrained more harshly than the others, apparently because he had committed more crimes than all the others put together. When Don Quixote enquires as to this man's crime it transpires that he is the famous author Gines Pasamonte who has been incarcerated because of the forthright comments in his life story. Don Quixote tells Gines that he thinks he is a very clever fellow, to which Gines replies that although this may be true he is an unfortunate one: 'for misfortunes always pursue men of talent.'³³ Upon seeing the men detained against their will, Don Quixote charges the officers and helps to free the slaves:

These poor men have committed no wrong against you. Let everyone answer for his sins in the other world. There is a God in Heaven, who does not neglect to punish the wicked nor to reward the good, and it is not right that honourable men

³³ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, translated by J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950), p. 177. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *DQ*.

should be the executioners of others, having themselves no concern in the matter.
(*DQ* 178)

Episodes such as this are Cervantes' response to the tyranny prevalent in Spain at the time and which he had personal experience. Cervantes was the first writer to offer the option of freedom for the development of the intimate self, and at various junctures in *Don Quixote* we see the main protagonist trying to 'free' other characters. The novel was unique in its time as it represented the appearance of a pulling away from society and the Church into a private world of the individual.

The notion of 'interiority', that a person could have an inner spiritual life, independently of the social and Christian fabric of the Inquisition, was a radical idea for the time.³⁴ Erasmus had been the main proponent of this type of spirituality and his writings had been banned in Spain during the 1530s, before Cervantes was born.³⁵ During the early part of the sixteenth century, before it had become dangerous to own or cite his books, the writings of Erasmus had proved popular with Spanish intellectuals, and his influence continued to be passed down. Indeed, Cervantes had at least one year of formal schooling under the tutelage of the renowned Erasmian scholar Juan López de Hoyos, and it is thought that one of the main sources for Cervantes' use of irony were the writings and thought of Erasmus.³⁶ Although there is no mention of Erasmus in any of Cervantes' works, Bloom argues, 'Cervantes was almost certainly a disciple of Erasmus', whose writing on Christian

³⁴ With interior or contemplative prayer the focus is on internal prayer as opposed to external actions.

³⁵ Erasmus (1466-1536) was a Dutch Renaissance humanist, proponent of religious toleration and Catholic Priest. A leading intellectual figure of the early sixteenth-century, he used humanist techniques to work on texts and prepared important new Latin and Greek editions of the New Testament. In his most influential work *Enchiridion* (1501) (Handbook of a Christian Knight), individualism permeates his ideal of the Christian life. For Erasmus, religion must be experienced inwardly rather than in formal ceremonies and must be expressed in daily living rather than in dogmas and liturgies. Committed to reforming the Church without breaking away from Rome, Erasmus laboured to find a compromise that would restore Christian unity and make the Church, led by a new generation of educated clergy dedicated to serving the needs of the people rather than to the accumulation of power, wealth and personal prestige. After his death in 1536 and the triumph of conservative leaders over moderates in the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church, Erasmus' reputation in Catholic Europe declined rapidly. In strictly orthodox countries like Spain, where his works had been frequently translated and widely admired in the 1520s, the growth of Protestantism and fears of heresy meant Erasmus' writings were placed on the Spanish Inquisition index of prohibited books. For more information see Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus: His Life, Works and Influence* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

³⁶ Soledad Fox, *Flaubert and Don Quixote* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), p. 21.

inwardness appealed greatly to the *conversos*, caught between a Judaism they had been forced to abandon and a Christian system that made them second-class citizens.³⁷

Don Quixote is not a work of heresy - it would never have been published if it had been - and throughout there is an obvious device by Cervantes to respect the orthodoxy of the Church and to avoid offending. In Book II, chapter III of *Don Quixote*, Book I is characterised as a 'story', 'the most delightful and least harmful entertainment ever seen to this day, for nowhere in it is to be found anything even resembling an indelicate expression or an uncatholic thought' (*DQ* 490). Despite Cervantes' nods to authority, his apparent loyalty to the Church and its doctrines seem to be for appearance sake. In *Don Quixote*, the exterior practice of religion, unaccompanied by an intimate spirituality, is cunningly devalued. In Part I, chapter LII, Don Quixote confuses a procession of cloaked penitents (transporting a religious statue) for a group of kidnappers. In an amusing dialogue the knight insists that the beautiful lady which they have captured should be set free. For Cervantes, the Inquisition which imposed a stringent dogma, instead of faith based on reason, had indeed 'kidnapped' the Virgin Mary. In Erasmus's philosophy, outward manifestations of religious belief were meaningless and all that counted was interior spirituality. This is quite the opposite to the Catholic world of Spain, where appearances were everything and everyone's behaviour was subject to scrutiny.

This emphasis on interiority as the basis of true Christian virtue is one of the elements that give *Don Quixote* its 'modernity,' and is key to why it was such an important text for O'Brien whose religious philosophy was influenced by the humanist tradition of Erasmus. Walshe has acknowledged that O'Brien's version of Catholicism 'allows her Catholic characters possession of their own souls. Her Irish Catholics have independence of belief and

³⁷ Harold Bloom, 'Cervantes: The Play of the World', in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Interpretations: Don Quixote* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2001), p. 146.

confidence in their right to moral self-determination.’³⁸ Walshe argues that O’Brien’s move away from the dogmatic Irish Church owes much to the Roman Catholicism of her friends in England. Yet, the origin of O’Brien’s version of Catholicism can be situated in the religious thought of Erasmus, which permeates the work of the Spanish Golden Age writers she admired.

In *Pray for the Wanderer* it is clear that Erasmus articulates O’Brien’s attitude to Catholicism. The author’s views on the commingling of Church and State are expressed in a conversation between Matt and Tom. Matt is angry that the new constitution has strengthened the Church’s dictatorial powers, and Tom is explicit about the role of the Church in Irish society, saying: ‘Religiosity is becoming a job in this country [...] A threat and a menace. A power in the land’ (PW 68). O’Brien is critical of the Church wielding too much control over the lives of its parishioners, yet through the voice of Tom she, like Cervantes, respects the historical Church as an institution and celebrates the independent, interior spirit:

I support the Eternal Church, which I detach with exactitude from all this new parish ignorance and darkness [...] I never go to church or chapel, but I’m nothing if I’m not an upholder of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolical. And I bet you anything you like, Matt, that I’ll die in the order of sanctity, fortified by all the rites. (PW 72-73)

Tom is also critical of the interference of self-righteous lay persons in the lives of others, and his sarcasm towards secular religious societies clearly echoes the author’s opinion: ‘What are they at? The Church has been with us for two thousand years approx. – but now all of a sudden in the last ten years it’s occurred to these gentry to reinvent it for us!’ (PW 73). At this point, although O’Brien does not imply that the Virgin Mary has been ‘kidnapped’ as Don Quixote does, she agrees with Cervantes in so far as inward spirituality is preferable to contrived displays of devotion and obligatory acts of charity. On the matter of Church directed lay groups, Tom tells Matt: ‘the thing is wrong philosophically – this amateurish

³⁸ Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 86.

impudence is not a sane way to redeem the world' (*PW* 73-74). Nell Mahoney, Tom's cousin and former fiancé, is a member of such organisations and the conversation between the two men quickly turns into a lengthy discussion of her character.

Nell Mahoney is introduced as the antithesis of her sister, Una Costello, and is the object of both Tom and Matt's affections:

She was probably about the same height as her sister but was so slim and sat with so straight a grace [...] Her face was difficult to assess, and quite unlike her sister's [...] She would never, like her sister, appear to be at the heart of any warm, open, intimate moment – but she did not seem shy. Certainly she was neither gauche nor nervous, but had a tranquillity which differed from Una's in that it was non-voluptuous and probably rose from a habit of reflection. (*PW* 12)

Nell is a modern woman, intelligent and self-sufficient; she has an MA, teaches history, smokes, and has learnt to drive. Una cannot understand why Nell wants to have a career and own a car when she has a generous personal allowance and access to a male relative's vehicle: 'Rubbish this teaching,' said Una, 'Look at how thin the creature is! Quite unnecessary too' (*PW* 23). Nell is also described as 'more than common tall', and with a 'queer, thin face' which according to Matt 'suggested itself as a possible mask for a number of comically contrasted people' (*PW* 12). Matt concludes that this 'number' could include Madame du Deffand, Saint Catherine of Siena or Sappho. The reference to these women - a society hostess, a mystic and a passionate, accomplished writer respectively – brings O'Brien's interpretation of Teresa of Avila to mind.³⁹ Teresa was a key figure of female autonomy for O'Brien and here she suggests that a woman such as Nell has many possibilities open to her but it is the culture which surrounds her which will ultimately control her destiny. The physical features which Nell displays, however, coupled with the 'visor down' expression of her eyes allude to the physical appearance of Don Quixote. Early in the novel Cervantes' describes his protagonist as 'lean-bodied' and 'thin-faced,' and there is an

³⁹ In her monograph, *Teresa of Avila* (1952), O'Brien compares Saint Catherine of Siena and Sappho with Teresa; the significance of which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

amusing episode when Don Quixote makes a visor for his helmet out of ‘pieces of pasteboard’ (*DQ* 31, 33).

Cervantes’ character has intrigued illustrators from the moment the novel first appeared at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The tale of *Don Quixote* - a courageous, retired fifty year old country gentleman who is adamant that the days of chivalry are not over and his peasant squire Sancho who combines ignorance and gullibility with common sense and a instinct for self-preservation – is a quick succession of graphically described humorous incidents that cry out for visual representation. The original edition (First Part, 1605; Second Part, 1615) included a small number of woodcuts, but from 1618 on, *Don Quixote*, which was quickly translated into several European languages, could boast of editions with original title page illustrations and increasingly large numbers of plates.⁴⁰ Outstanding eighteenth-century illustrators of Don Quixote were Antoine Coypel and Daniel Chodowiecki; in the early nineteenth century, Thomas Stothard and Eugène Lami were perhaps the most successful illustrators of the work.⁴¹ Yet, all of these contributions have for the most part been neglected since Gustave Doré’s sympathy to Cervantes’ satire was so comprehensive that his illustrations to a French translation of Don Quixote published in 1863 have become standard.⁴² Doré’s images of Cervantes’ character portray him wearing the armour of a knight including a vizor which is worn down in battle; moreover, the height of Don Quixote in the illustrations is always exaggerated, and he is depicted as very thin. By contrast, Sancho Panza is depicted as short, fat and with a round face which is sympathetic to Cervantes’ description of the squire as possessing ‘a big belly, a short body and long shanks’ (*DQ* 64). It is very probable that Doré’s popular visual interpretation of Don Quixote was a model for Nell

⁴⁰ See the publishers note in *Doré’s Illustrations for Don Quixote: A Selection of 190 Illustrations by Gustave Doré* (New York: Dover, 1982).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Gustave Doré’s illustrations for *Don Quixote* were based to a great extent on his own travels in Spain. They were commissioned by the Parisian firm L. Hachette which originally published them in 1863 within the framework of a complete annotated French translation of Cervantes novel by Louis Viardot. See Ibid.

Mahoney in *Pray for the Wanderer*, which, as will be discussed later in this chapter, is not the first time O'Brien has used this technique.

As we have seen Nell is portrayed as possessing a number of quixotic characteristics and when she defends her independence arguing that without her job she would not be able to 'do half the things I like to do,' she displays another one – self-determination (*PW* 23). As Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka argues, 'O'Brien often seeks to illustrate inner conflict/harmony and to this ends, she sometimes splits a character.'⁴³ Thus, the use of 'half' in this context, coupled with Matt's observation that she is 'difficult to assess,' emphasises the duality of Nell's character and suggests that only part of her persona - the idealistic half - resembles Don Quixote. Although Nell purportedly represents the independent Irish woman, her support of de Valera's policies and religious zeal aligns her with traditional social values, thus demonstrating the opposing side of her personality. The intertwining ethos of Church and State are similarly blended in Nell's school of thought, as Matt describes:

You believe in all the mysteries of the Catholic Church and in its absolute moral authority. You also believe in a whole tissue of minor taboos and obligations and prohibitions which derive from your central belief, and also from being a citizen of Dev's Free State [...] I believe in none of those things. (*PW* 240)

If we substitute Inquisitorial Spain for 'Dev's Free State' this testimony could have been made by Don Quixote to his faithful squire Sancho. Of Nell's values, Tom observes that 'she's for the law, for order, and decency and obedience, and the great white chief in Leinster House!' (*PW* 74). In Nell's character, as in the behaviour of Don Quixote and Sancho, we have an iconic fusion of ideal and real. The notion that Cervantes' traditional and modern characters can be merged together in this way originally stems from Salvador De Madariaga's *Don Quixote: An Introductory Essay in Psychology*, in which the author argues that as the book progresses there is a 'Quixotization' of Sancho and a 'Sanchification' of Don

⁴³ Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka, *Kate O'Brien and the Fiction of Identity* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2011), p. 110.

Quixote: 'For, while Sancho's spirit rises from reality to illusion, Don Quixote's descends from illusion to reality.'⁴⁴ However, De Madariaga points out that critics of Cervantes' novel have usually interpreted the Don Quixote-Sancho pair:

as a 'contrast' and their characteristics converted into two series of antagonistic values. From Don Quixote is drawn the series 'valour-faith-idealism-utopia-liberalism-progress', while the Sancho series is made to develop in the opposite direction as 'cowardice-scepticism-realism-practical-sense-reaction'.⁴⁵

Whilst each character, particularly at the beginning of the novel, appears to display a unique set of traits, de Madriaga suggests that this 'antithesis' between the Knight and the Squire is, in fact, 'superficial.'⁴⁶ De Madariaga continues that by insisting that Don Quixote is, explicitly, a valiant knight and idealist, and, Sancho a matter-of-fact and cowardly rustic, critical commentary fails to comprehend that this design, which on first impression, 'is based on contrast, resolves itself into a complicated and delicate parallel [...] *Sancho is, up to a point, a transposition of Don Quixote in a different key.*'⁴⁷ As discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, O'Brien was an avid reader of De Madariaga's work and it is probable, given how she skilfully blends the two sides of Nell's character, that she would have been influenced by his study of *Don Quixote* published in 1935.

Nell's complicated personality is analysed by Tom and Matt. At Tom's insistence that she is something of a lost cause, Matt questions him: 'you don't surely think that the way to get Nell to mature into decent happiness is to madden her with what she regards as indecencies?' (*PW* 85) To this Tom replies:

Oh, I don't madden her. She's not innocent, you know. She's only too darn well read and aware. It's an intellectual theory she has of behaviour – that we should all behave alike, and only say what everyone wants to hear [...] that there are no privileges for anyone, that social duty demands certain taboos of speech and action, and that is that! I don't madden her at all nowadays. She just despises my anti-social individualism and my insistence on what she calls privilege. She

⁴⁴ Salvador De Madariaga, *Don Quixote: An Introductory Essay in Psychology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), pp. 120.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96. Emphasis in original.

despises it in you too, my boy. She has read your books, and says they are anti-social, myth-creating and unnecessary. (*PW* 85)

The repeated use of ‘madden’ emphasises Nell’s quixotic side and, in a further nod to Cervantes, draws attention to the ideology that reading the wrong kinds of literature can lead to madness or folly (which will be discussed later in this chapter). This passage also illustrates that although Nell appears to have personal freedom and a fulfilling career, she is far from free as she is in thrall of self-regulating and unyielding discourses. Despite her external independence, she accepts and comprehends the rules of Church and State. The view of Nell on Matt’s work thus reflects the contemporary but traditional opinion prevalent in Ireland.

As Tom appears to quietly rebel against Irish norms and mores, he willingly reveals the hypocrisy of Irish society hidden behind the smokescreen of respectable middle-class Catholicism. Cervantes seized upon the inverted values of the ‘Old Christian’ class, and O’Brien does the same with the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie. Hurt and jealous Tom verbally attacks Nell when she returns home in tears after rejecting Matt’s offer of marriage. Tom meets her at the top of the stairs and is described as ‘powerful and censorious’ (*PW* 253). Taking her into his study, he casts judgement on her for having been seen publicly with Matt, the dangerous banned writer, on several occasions. Tom confronts her in a manner that undercuts all of his earlier pretences to liberalism. To her refusal to accept that she has become the object of gossip and her wilful ignorance of the realities of Irish life, he lectures her:

How the hell do I know what they’re saying? But can’t you guess? You know – you’re the very one who knows – what’s thought of the gentleman’s books in Mellick, and what his private reputation is worth here, for that matter! Indeed, I think he can count himself lucky that his return wasn’t celebrated by a public demonstration and the public burning of all available copies of his works in front of the Father Matthew Memorial. (*PW* 261)

Here O'Brien is probably referring to the earlier experience of Brinsley MacNamara whose novel *The Valley of The Squinting Windows* (1918) so enraged his Westmeath rural neighbours in Delvin that the book was publicly burned, its author humiliated, and his father, a local schoolteacher, driven into exile.⁴⁸ Like MacNamara, O'Brien fictionalised the characters and lives of the people of her hometown and she would have empathised with her literary predecessor. The 'Father Matthew Memorial' referred to in the text was in fact erected in Cork city and not in Limerick; however, monuments are designed to project an image that expresses specific character, and in this case the 'Memorial' is used symbolically to represent a society that is obsessed with providing fellow citizens with a good perception of personal moral conduct.⁴⁹ It is not beyond the realms of possibility that O'Brien was told by a relative or neighbour that she should count herself 'lucky' that Limerick had not been as hostile towards her as the residents of Delvin had been to MacNamara. She would have had Cervantes' novel in mind as the priest and barber – respected citizens of Don Quixote's hometown - tried to burn the Inn's collection of chivalric literature as they deemed this kind of reading dangerous to the wider society. Despite Tom's defence of Matt's books throughout *Pray for the Wanderer*, he attacks them in the end, revealing that he is just as censorious as the members of Mellick's sodalities.

At the end of the novel Matt decides to reject Ireland for reasons not dissimilar to the set of circumstances that saw Don Quixote leave La Mancha: the abandonment of society's attendant norms and the embracing of new cultural forms in their stead. The final thoughts in the novel are attributed to Matt as he prepares to leave Mellick, and they are about Nell. At his final dinner with the Costello family, which Nell has not attended, Matt 'looked at her

⁴⁸ For more information see Padraic O'Farrell, *The Burning of Brinsley MacNamara* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1990).

⁴⁹ Father Matthew (1790-1856) launched a national crusade to convert the entire Irish population to the doctrine of total abstinence. To achieve this, the movement crafted a distinctly Irish crusade, laden with pietistic and patriotic flavour. For more information see Paul A. Townend, *Father Matthew, Temperance, and Irish Identity* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002).

empty chair and thought of her grave, strange face. Nell knew the touch of the sword and was a little mad' (PW 286). The implicit reference to *Don Quixote* suggests that had Nell lived in another time and place she could have fulfilled the potential that her intellectualism promised. By choosing to reject Matt's proposal of marriage but accept Tom's, she chooses the traditional over the modern. Like Don Quixote who has a final sanity-inducing illness that brings him to his senses, the distress and confusion Nell suffers at the end of the novel over her choice of suitor makes her retreat from modern life, give up her independence and, like her sister, Una, become the dutiful wife and mother as her society dictates.

The last lines of *Pray for the Wanderer* are about *Don Quixote*. Asked if she has read it Una replies: 'No, and please don't give it to me. Tom did once. It's an absolutely deadly book – I don't care what you say' (PW 286). Una believes this to be true of *Don Quixote* as the novel embodies a modern yearning to shape one's life according to one's desires, together with the confidence that such a thing is possible by an act of will undeterred by familial and societal determinations. Expressions of women's desire for self-determination were demonised as individualistic, selfish and socially destructive because a woman defining herself outside the patriarchal family threatened its foundations. Therefore, women like Una had to remain ignorant to maintain the status quo, and exercising 'free will' was not an option. Thus, for Una, and the guardians of the Irish Free State, *Don Quixote* was indeed a 'deadly' book.

Don Quixote is a recurring presence in O'Brien's early novels and the transformative power of fiction - a central concern in Cervantes' work - is a major theme in *Without My Cloak* and *Mary Lavelle*. For Don Quixote, and O'Brien's Denis Considine and Mary Lavelle, the act of reading is essential. All three, the protagonists in their relevant novels, lead monotonous lives, are stuck in the provinces and have a great deal of time to spend reading. Don Quixote's addiction to reading reaches such a point that he cannot sleep anymore:

In short, he so buried himself in his books that he spent the nights reading from twilight till daybreak and the days from dawn till dark; and so from little sleep and much reading, his brain dried up and he lost his wits. He filled his mind with all that he read in them, with enchantments, quarrels, battles, challenges, wounds, wooings, loves, torments and other impossible nonsense with tales of love and its torments, and all sorts of impossible things. (*DQ* 32)

The first of O'Brien's characters to read *Don Quixote* is Denis Considine in *Without My Cloak* (1931). Denis spends the long summer evenings alone in the countryside reading and although he had been preoccupied lately with his father's gardening books we learn that he is:

A zealous buyer of books, many of which still lay unread. He turned to them eagerly now, filled the well of his gig with them and exposed them to all the chances of Spring weather [...] Reading under the oak tree he somehow discovered the unimportance of circumstances when weighed against the divine importance of life on any terms.⁵⁰

Denis develops an inner calm from his reading and yearns to develop his sensitivity and creativity; he would rather pursue art and beauty than work in the family business as his father and grandfather have ordained:

May passed. He grew very happy. He found his work hardly a burden, so lively and stimulated was his mind and so was it detaching itself from impatience and from the windy arguments and debates of the elder Considines. Always he stayed under his oak tree until the sky was given over to night. When the light was too thin for reading, he would lie at peace, remembering what he had read [...] Always in this sense of peace he had a sense of tranquil waiting – for he knew not what.⁵¹

For her part, Mary Lavelle discovers books thanks to the library provided for her brothers, who as males were encouraged to study and go to university: 'As a child reading the same books as Jimmy and Donal, she had dreamt as perhaps they had, on the breakfast-room window-seat, until her heart was near bursting with her desire, her intention, to go everywhere one day, know everything, try everything, be committed to nothing' (*ML* 27). These passages are remarkably similar. Something in all three character's immediate environment drives them to immerse themselves in escapist literature, to the point of losing

⁵⁰ Kate O'Brien, *Without My Cloak* (London: Heinemann, 1931), p. 222.

⁵¹ O'Brien, *Without My Cloak*, p. 224.

grip on reality. They abandon or attempt to abandon stability and routine and throw themselves into consuming new plans or ventures that, within their own particular contexts, may be characterised as foolish, crazy, or most precisely, quixotic. Don Quixote does not go mad because he reads too many romances of chivalry, but his madness is motivated by a need to escape from the monotony of his restrictive environment. The dullness of Don Quixote's home life, in tandem with the repressive social system in which he is imprisoned, drives him to seek relief in the books of chivalry. The books will provide a script, or at least a scenario, on which he can base his life. In other words his life will become an imitation of art. Centuries later, O'Brien's Denis and Mary, as well as Matt in *Pray for the Wanderer*, follow the example of Don Quixote in their quest to escape from the stifling restraints imposed on their freedom by their family, society and religion.

In *Without My Cloak*, O'Brien promulgates the influence of reading on an individual. Almost immediately after Denis loses himself in his books he meets Christina and falls in love. Purportedly, as a result of all this reading, he has an idealistic, romanticised view of love and thinks if he marries Christina, he will be able to escape from the Considines and live happily ever after. In the midst of these impulses, however, he underestimates the furore his actions will cause amongst his relatives and in the end capitulates to the wishes of his father by remaining in Mellick and marrying a suitable girl.⁵²

Mary Lavelle's transformation begins when she decides to take the opportunity to spend a year in Spain working as a governess. Mary, the daughter of a doctor, is engaged to an appropriate, unexciting man back home in Mellick and even though she knows her role in society is that of wife and mother, she has always fostered a desire for self-determination, a notion which worries and confuses her:

⁵² The major themes in *Without My Cloak* and the class issues surrounding Denis and Christina's relationship are discussed in chapter two of this thesis.

To go to Spain. To be alone for a little space, a tiny hiatus between her life's two accepted phases. To cease being a daughter without immediately becoming a wife. To be a free lance [...] to achieve that silly longing of childhood, only for one year, before she flung it with all other childish things upon the scrapheap. (ML 34)

O'Brien's use of the phrase 'free lance' in this context is a further example of the symbolism which she relies on in her work. Iconic images of Don Quixote depict a mounted knight with a lance in hand, a symbol of courageous idealism. Mary longs to reinvent her life and recalls the chivalric tales and adventures she read as a child. Thus, the hidden reference to Cervantes' protagonist illuminates her quest for freedom. *Mary Lavelle* is a novel that charts the development of an individual figure and ends with existential awareness. As a result of her brief time in Spain Mary's life and plans change dramatically and as Lorna Reynolds succinctly points out: 'She will not now dwindle into a mere wife: she is now a young woman confronting that destiny.'⁵³ At the end of the novel Mary rejects the traditional patriarchal authority of life in Ireland in favour of the authority of individual experience; the catalyst for this growth is *Don Quixote* or more precisely the author's interpretation of it.

In the opening pages of the novel we see a girl full of uncertainties, but as Mary settles into her new life in Spain she soon outgrows her Mellick identity. Milagros, although she is only fourteen years of age, has an enormous influence on Mary. The young Spanish girl teaches Mary a great deal about Spanish art and culture, and not only encourages her naïve Irish 'Miss' to read *Don Quixote* but to attend a bullfight and visit the Prado Museum in Madrid. Cervantes' novel pervades *Mary Lavelle* on many levels which is evident in O'Brien's portrayal of the secondary characters Agatha and Rosie as she clearly presents them 'through their looks and sparkling banter, as female versions' of Don Quixote and Sancho.⁵⁴ Agatha and Rosie are two of a group of Misses who meet up with Mary on their

⁵³ Reynolds, *A Literary Portrait*, p. 61.

⁵⁴ Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p. 33.

day off in a cafe in the town. The three Irish women seem to be closer and get along better than with the other governesses and spend time together away from the cafe.

Agatha Conlon is described as ‘tall’ and ‘thin’ with a ‘pale’ face and thus, like Nell in *Pray for the Wanderer*, bears a physical resemblance to Don Quixote (*ML* 84-85). Rosie, on the other hand, is described as having a ‘weather beaten, lively face,’ was ‘girlish seeming,’ wore makeup and sported a low cleavage which is in complete contrast to austere Agatha who wore a blouse buttoned up to the neck (*ML* 79). Rosie admits to Mary that she likes Agatha as she is a ‘great sport’ and although Mary finds some of the repartee between the two of them to be rude, it is always good natured (*ML* 84). For example, when the three women are smoking together, Rosie gently mocks Agatha as she picks up her embroidery frame: ‘Another altar cloth? God help us [...] you’re mad’ (*ML* 98). This affirmation of madness, alongside the above examples from the text, suggests that the character of Agatha is, like Nell, an adaptation of Cervantes’ protagonist.

There are more direct references to *Don Quixote* in the narrative of *Mary Lavelle* than anywhere else in O’Brien’s fiction, which is indicative of the impact Cervantes’ novel had on the author during her own formative period as a governess in Spain. For instance, as already discussed, Milagros is an avid reader of *Don Quixote* and likes nothing more than to talk about the adventures in the book; she tells Mary that her own ‘naïve common sense’ is like that of her favourite hero Sancho Panza (*ML* 135). Towards the end of the novel, as Mary prepares to leave Spain, Milagros presents her ‘Miss’ with an old, illustrated copy of *Don Quixote*, in which she ‘marked her own favourite passages’ (*ML* 290). Mary is shocked to learn that Milagros’ father, Don Pablo, allows her to read anything she chooses, which is a point of emphasis on the attitude towards literature in censorious Ireland. O’Brien presents Milagros as a duplicate of her father, as like him she is a fearless and independent thinker. We are told that Don Pablo, Mary’s employer, is also a frequent and lifelong reader of

Cervantes' novel and it is through him and his daughter that the numerous references to *Don Quixote* are made.

In her analysis of *Mary Lavelle*, Mentxaka makes a strong observation regarding Don Pablo Areavaga, noting that despite being a secondary character, there is a full chapter 'devoted to his biography and family history, as well as to an exposition of his political beliefs and evolution.'⁵⁵ Rather than him being tangential, Don Pablo is in fact a major player in the novel. O'Brien based *Mary Lavelle* on her own experiences in Bilbao, where she worked as a private live-in tutor for the Areilza family and Mentxaka argues that the head of the household, Dr Enrique Areilza (1860-1926), was the model for Don Pablo.⁵⁶ Dr Areilza was a well-respected European intellectual and reformer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and O'Brien taught English literature to his children, José María and Eloisa. According to José María, *Mary Lavelle* was 'set upon the stage of my adolescence, described with remarkable skill and realism and presenting many characters, half real and half fictional, built of fragments from life and ingredients from fiction.'⁵⁷ As with Nell in *Pray for the Wanderer* the character of Don Pablo is divided into two but in this case is half real and half fictional; the real half displaying character traits derived from Dr Areilza and *Don Quixote* providing the source for the fictional half.

Mentxaka argues that according to photographs and portraits, Dr Areilza bears a physical resemblance to Arthur Griffiths.⁵⁸ This observation is accurate in so far as both men appear smartly dressed, with dark hair, a moustache and wearing spectacles. However, it could be suggested that Griffiths is not the model for Don Pablo since the description of O'Brien's character in *Mary Lavelle* barely exhibits the same features:

He had broad, sagging shoulders and a heavy, greying head. His eyebrows bushed somewhat wildly over far-sunk heavy lidded eyes. His nose was a broad, strong

⁵⁵ Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p. 168.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 169.

⁵⁷ Cited in Ibid., p. 169.

⁵⁸ Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p. 170.

promontory [...] His chin had a shadowy, unshaven look and his black clothes, untidied by cigarette ash, hung too loosely on him. (*ML* 38)

The person described here displays more of a likeness to Doré's ubiquitous illustrations of Don Quixote.⁵⁹ Indeed, in a further passage the narrator declares that there was 'perhaps something even Bohemian' about Don Pablo's 'shaggy head' which again brings to mind the unconventional lifestyle and popular images of Cervantes' chivalric knight (*ML* 51). O'Brien also reveals a great deal about the personality of Don Pablo. There are important occurrences of embedded narration that serve to reveal his story, and although he is not the protagonist we are aware of his interiority. The glimpses into Don Pablo's inner world suggest his importance in the text and highlight the influence of Dr Areilza on O'Brien's thinking and aesthetic. Additionally, given the recurrent references to *Don Quixote* in *Mary Lavelle* it is extremely likely that it was Dr Areilza who introduced O'Brien to Cervantes' novel. O'Brien describes Don Pablo as an intellectual who was unprejudiced in his reading, the books on his bedroom shelf included a variety of works ranging from Saint Augustine, Goethe, Aquinas, Saint John of the Cross and Mark Twain to Marx, Ronsard, Cervantes and Unamuno. The latter, Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), was a native of Bilbao, a major figure in the Generation of 1898, and a close associate of Dr Areilza.⁶⁰ O'Brien's interest in the Generation of 1898 is discussed in chapter two of this thesis, however, the direct references to Unamuno in *Mary Lavelle* are pertinent to any discussion of Don Pablo and *Don Quixote*. We are not told which of Unamuno's works are on Don Pablo's book shelf, but in the text he reflects on 'Man of Flesh and Bone,' a chapter in *The Tragic Sense of Life* (1913), which clearly influences his beliefs.⁶¹ Importantly, one of Unamuno's most popular works was *The*

⁵⁹ For example see *Doré's illustrations for Don Quixote*, pp. 20, 122, 150.

⁶⁰ See Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p. 176.

⁶¹ *The Tragic Sense of Life* (1913) is a discussion on the relations between the immortality of the soul, the existence of God, and man's own views and wishes, conscious and unconscious, on these important matters. From the outset Unamuno boldly puts man, man concrete and complete, 'the man of flesh and bones', at the centre of his enquiry. Unamuno endeavours to free man from all intellectual veils and trappings, to accustom him to the contemplation of his own naked self-standing before God. This universal message, essentially of a

Life of Don Quixote and Sancho (1905) in which the author transforms Don Quixote and Sancho from fictional into real historical figures and thus breaks away from Cervantes and creates his own fictional universe. Throughout the text Unamuno exalts and venerates Don Quixote whose character assumes the virtues of Christ and Unamuno's distrust of dogmatic theology: 'Cure yourself of the affliction of caring how you appear to others. Concern yourself only with how you appear before God, concern yourself only with the idea that God may have of you.'⁶² We will never know if O'Brien or Dr Areilza read *The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho* but given the hypothesis that it was Dr Areilza who encouraged O'Brien to engage with Cervantes' novel, and coupled with his admiration of Unamuno it is extremely probable.

Don Pablo is referred to as an idealistic man who loves his country but believes in human justice. Echoing the philosophy of Unamuno: 'He was a loather of institutions, but believed in the human spirit; he regarded the existent Catholic Church with profound suspicion, but he accorded to its ideal and to much of its tradition an unwithholdable inbred devotion' (*ML* 61). What is significant about Don Pablo is that, like Cervantes and O'Brien, he valued individualism over collectivity every time and was particularly opposed to Church interference in secular government. Importantly, the individual's right to freedom and the struggle to attain it within an oppressive social order is a major theme in *Don Quixote* and the novels of O'Brien which are discussed in this chapter.

Dr Areilza was in his early sixties when O'Brien worked for him, but the character of Don Pablo is forty-nine, a similar age to Don Quixote at the start of his adventures. The

religious character, was neither national nor political. Yet, precisely because of its universality and also because it lays so much stress on the individual and on his relation to God, Unamuno's message appealed deeply to the Spanish. Virtually, it amounted to a restatement of the theme of Christian unity in a modern and liberal setting. For more information on Unamuno's philosophy see Salvador de Madariaga, *Spain* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1942), pp. 82-86.

⁶² Miguel de Unamuno, *Our Lord Don Quixote: The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho, with related essays*, translated by Anthony Burgess with an introduction by Walter Starkie (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 22.

protagonist of Cervantes' novel is a fifty year old bachelor undergoing a mid-life crisis and O'Brien's Don Pablo is also experiencing a similar kind of disturbance.⁶³ The stultifying routine of Don Quixote's humdrum life is usually considered to be the catalyst for his madness, but there is another possibility to consider. Carroll Johnson argues that, even though there is nothing in the text to suggest this, his psychosis is connected to a lust for his twenty year old niece who lives at his home.⁶⁴ Thus, Don Quixote's sudden flight into psychosis is caused by the massive pressure exerted on him by his niece's emergence as a desirable young woman at precisely the worst time in his life, when he is reliving the unresolved psychosexual conflicts of an earlier period. When Don Pablo falls in love with Mary his desire is similarly thwarted and ungratified; under the strain of his situation he suffers a massive angina attack and dies. If we analyse the interior thoughts of Don Pablo there is a parallel between his sexual quandary and that of Don Quixote.

Importantly, before Don Pablo meets Mary, we are told that he is celibate; he sleeps in his own room and has done since the birth of his youngest child, yet 'he was no middle-aged fidget with a sexual grievance' (*ML* 52). This is clearly a reference to the character of Don Quixote and is another example of disguised symbolism within O'Brien's work. It would appear that Don Pablo is not happy with certain aspects of his life, we are informed that he 'found middle age lonely and cold' (*ML* 165). He compensates for his private unhappiness by reading books (including *Don Quixote*) and immersing himself in the café culture of Cabantes; in fact he was becoming 'more and more addicted to a gentle life of escapist individualism' (*ML* 59). Don Quixote does not go mad because he reads books; he reads the books in an effort to keep him sane. The same can be said of Don Pablo who reads to escape from environmental pressure.

⁶³ A male midlife crisis is often categorised by psychologists as an attempt to deny the fact of advancing age by engaging in behaviour appropriate to much younger men. For more information see Peter A. O'Connor, *Facing the Fifties: from denial to reflection* (NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1990).

⁶⁴ See Carroll B. Johnson, *Madness and Lust: A Psychoanalytical Approach to Don Quixote* (London: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 81-81.

Unbeknown to his family Don Pablo had been diagnosed with angina and told to avoid emotional excitement, something which he had managed to achieve until the night he met Mary: ‘Yet, this evening, strolling without premonition on to the terrace to see the ferry depart for Torcal he had encountered that against which he believed no man, however old or wise or tired, can be adequately armed. He had met beauty, mythical, innocent and shameless’ (ML 66). Don Pablo is surprised and appalled at his own reaction. Her brilliant beauty had in fact ‘rendered a sceptical and easily mannered elderly man, her respectable employer, unable to utter more than one or two banal sentences, before he hurried away in fear from his own sudden senile folly’ (ML 67). Here Don Pablo acknowledges the unsettling effect on seeing Mary for the first time and O’Brien’s choice of the word folly within this framework provides a further connection to Cervantes. Soledad Fox argues that the character of Folly in Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly* can be seen ‘as a precursor to the mad/foolish figure of Don Quixote.’⁶⁵ The character of the mad or foolish person is a mask for the author, as the character is always outside of society – a position with many disadvantages for the character – emotionally, economically and physically – but with many advantages for the author in terms of point of view and freedom of expression. As discussed previously in this chapter, Cervantes was heavily influenced by Erasmus and his adaptation of madness or foolishness as proposed by the Dutch philosopher was used as a critical mechanism to offset accepted and absolute beliefs.⁶⁶ O’Brien, arguably, adopts this strategy with the lust induced ‘foolish’ behaviour of Don Pablo.

⁶⁵ Soledad Fox, *Flaubert and Don Quijote: The Influence of Cervantes on Madame Bovary* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), p. 22.

⁶⁶ Written in 1509, *In Praise of Folly* is a vehement satire which provides a good example of Erasmus’ technique in diagnosing society’s moral and religious state. The narrator, Folly, declares the action of many different types of people to be foolish and commends them for it. See Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, translated by Betty Radice and with an introduction by A.H.T. Levi (London: Penguin, 2004). For a useful critical interpretation of *In Praise of Folly* see Margaret Mann Phillips, *Erasmus and The Northern Renaissance* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1981), pp. 69-76.

There are intervals throughout *Mary Lavelle* where the nameless narrator's long omniscient digressions remind the reader of Don Pablo's 'foolish' thoughts. For example, in a passage where he observes Mary's interaction with his son's attractive wife, Luisa, he uses a passage from Don Quixote to compare, metaphorically, the two women's beauty: 'this girl [Mary] exploded his daughter-in-law as thoroughly as Quixote the wine-skins. Amusing and moving truth – like many of Cervantes' (*ML* 169). Reflecting on the extent that his mind is occupied with thoughts of Mary's beauty, Don Pablo is 'afraid' that this 'senile meditation' had taken him too 'foolishly far' (*ML* 170). This self-interrogation reaches a climax towards the end of the novel when Don Pablo attempts to come to terms with Mary's sudden decision to leave Altorno. O'Brien's narrator, taking a full chapter to reflect on Don Pablo's predicament, goes over and over possible interpretations of his thoughts and feelings:

Perhaps when to-morrow was over, when she was gone with her strange girlish trouble [...] and her enchanting face was no longer near to arouse *idiotic*, senile tenderness – perhaps then this sense of physical pain would be alleviated [...] There would be no more glimpses or chance meetings to look for then, and he would pull himself out of his *folly* by a long and honest meditation on his weakness of character, and duties of his state and age. (*ML* 325) (Emphasis mine)

In this passage Don Pablo appears to be almost relieved that Mary is leaving as he is convinced that her departure will signal an end to his 'idiotic' desires. Cervantes' Don Quixote was able to retreat into psychosis at the age of fifty as a 'last, desperate defence against intolerable and forbidden libidinous urges,' however, as a pillar of society and family man this option is not available to O'Brien's character who knows he will have to find another way to escape from 'his folly.' Don Pablo's anguish increases when he finds a postcard to Mary from Juanito and realises she is leaving because she is in love with his married son. Horrified and visibly shaking he reassures himself that it was 'madness' to think that Mary and Juanito could be together; as Catholics both had 'high morality' and Juanito was committed to his wife and child (*ML* 321). However, Don Pablo is clearly tortured by his

obsession with Mary which is described in psychotic terms; he repeatedly questions whether he is 'going crazy' is 'madly thinking' or is 'half-crazed with fear' (*ML* 322).

O'Brien's narrator reflecting on Don Pablo's mental and physical pain encourages the reader to be sympathetic towards his distress:

He was ill and much agitated, afraid of death and pain, afraid of life and over-indulgent of sick fantasies. This was one of them. Ah! How he trembled still. This threat in his breast – all his folly came from that [...] He wiped his cold, wet forehead, lighted another cigarette somewhat fumblingly, and tried again to lift his wine glass. (*ML* 322)

As Don Pablo finally takes a sip of wine, he sees Mary run past the café window. This will be the last time that he sees her, and as he again admires her beauty he makes a remark which unambiguously links his lust induced madness or folly to that of Don Quixote. 'No wonder, he thought, a sentimentalist goes mad and makes up crazy tragedies' (*ML* 323). Don Pablo's self-acknowledgement that his turmoil is similar to that of Cervantes' chivalric knight seems to comfort him, and he becomes calmer. The chapter reaches a climax when Don Pablo, suffering an angina attack that will prove fatal, returns home and retreats to his library. His final thoughts centre on how he had 'foolishly' learnt to care for Mary and is resigned to the fact that 'Love is the folly of follies' (*ML* 326). Don Pablo is a prime example of the quixotic character which O'Brien employs in her work. In a final parallel with Cervantes' character he dies in his own bed, receives the final sacraments and is surrounded by the people he has wronged. Reality finally catches up with both characters as their lives end in deep disillusionment. Don Quixote and Don Pablo appear to have a moment of lucidity before they die, a moment when they strive to repent for their follies and apologise to their faithful companions – Sancho and Consuelo respectively. Falling into his wife's arms for what he knows will be the last time generates a sanity inducing moment for Don Pablo. He calls for her help and as Consuelo approaches him 'her arms outstretched' he is overcome with regret

as he recalls the devotion and loyalty she has shown him throughout all their years together (*ML* 327).

The inevitability of death brings Don Quixote to his senses. With final words of regret he declares: 'I was mad, but I am sane now' (*DQ* 938). He is free, he says, from the 'misty shadows of ignorance' of the chivalric romances and is now fully aware of their 'absurdities and their deceits' (*DQ* 937). In his rational state he wishes he had time ahead of him to spend reading other books 'which might enlighten my soul' (*DQ* 937). In his lucidity it would appear that Don Quixote is shunning dangerous and nonsensical chivalric romances and wishing he had time to read edifying works, ideally with a Catholic focus. However, as Fox argues:

Should this be taken at face value? Weren't there many works of Catholic doctrine that could be described, indeed more aptly than a book full of chivalric adventures, as being responsible for dark shadows of ignorance, and as being full of nonsense and deceit? In this case, the books that Don Quixote wishes he could read to 'enlighten' the soul would not be works of Christian thought, but books of a secular nature.⁶⁷

The idea that books of a secular nature could enlighten the soul would have been a heretical thought in the Spain of Cervantes and the Ireland of O'Brien. Nonetheless, Cervantes makes it clear in this last episode of the novel that, if there is any meaning or purpose in life, it is to be found in this world, in a life of knowledge and awareness, and in the intellectual freedom of the individual. Cervantes' novel ends then with a sense of loss in the death of Don Quixote but also finishes on a positive note by demonstrating that, as long as literature exists, freedom of expression and dissent are possible even in the most oppressed society.

In a similar way, *Mary Lavelle* ends with an experience of loss and gain. Although Don Pablo dies dramatically from a broken heart and Mary is distraught that she and Juanito can never be together, we know that because of her experience in Spain, she will not return to the prescribed life awaiting her in Ireland. Instead, she will return briefly to Mellick to inform

⁶⁷ Fox, *Flaubert and Don Quixote*, pp. 170-171.

her fiancé of her decision to leave, collect the hundred pounds she was given by her aunt and set off, like Cervantes' protagonist, on a life of adventure. Following Cervantes, O'Brien compels the reader of *Mary Lavelle* to reflect on the relationship between fiction and desire. To want to be a chivalric knight or, in Mary's case a 'free lance', is not viewed as a natural desire in their specific Catholic milieus but as a desire induced and mediated by potent literary models.

By referring to Cervantes' novel as 'deadly' in both *Mary Lavelle* and *Pray for the Wanderer*, O'Brien denounces the profound untrustworthiness of imaginative fiction, yet like Cervantes she is actually championing literature's seductive power and defending the artist's freedom of expression. Spanish Golden Age writers who attempted to publish any work that was considered heretical by the Inquisition were sentenced to long periods of incarceration or in some cases faced execution – a scenario far more severe than the punishment faced by Irish authors who fell afoul of their own country's censorship legislation. As this chapter has argued, Cervantes' subversive narrative technique in *Don Quixote* provided O'Brien with a literary model that enabled her to confront her own personal battle with De Valera's Ireland. However, Cervantes was not the only Golden Age writer who shrewdly developed a means of evading censorship by the Inquisition and was revered and emulated by O'Brien. Teresa of Avila was one of the most proficient subversive writers of this era and as the next chapter demonstrates, became O'Brien's emblematic figure of female autonomy – an impossible aspiration in the Ireland of her day.

IV

Teresa of Avila: Avant-garde Feminist and Lesbian icon

In January 1961 Kate O'Brien wrote to Mary Hanley from her hotel room in Madrid and excitedly informed her friend of a trip to Avila arranged for the following day:

I go there with my old friend, the boss of the whole place, Santa Teresa – and I walk about there in peace with a few memories of my own, as well as her nibs for company. I hug the prospect of the long silent day! [...] Oh I must go to bed now, I am so much excited by the thought of Avila in the morning that I'd really rather stay up all night, just looking forward to it.¹

This letter demonstrates the profound affection O'Brien had for the Castilian medieval walled city of Avila and its most illustrious citizen, Saint Teresa (1515-82). Teresa of Avila was the sixteenth-century nun, mystic, religious reformer and one of the founders of modern Spanish literature.² The author of one of the earliest and best known modern autobiographies, she also wrote four other books, collections of poetry, letters, and other writings specifically related to her reform of the Carmelite Order. O'Brien's veneration of the saint is manifest throughout her fiction, non-fiction, personal correspondence and a series of radio talks for RTÉ in which references to Teresa and Avila abound. Furthermore, O'Brien's fascination with Teresa's character would lead her to write a full-length study of the saint, *Teresa of Avila*, published in 1951.

Teresa entered the Carmelite Convent of the Encarnación in Avila as a young woman suffering from physical illness and inner turmoil. Through her deep prayer and devotion to God, she began to experience mystical visions and out of body experiences. At a time when

¹¹ Kate O'Brien to Mary Hanley (27 January 1961), John Jordan (ed.), *The Stony Thursday Book*, 5 (Limerick: Limerick Arts Council, 1977-78), p. 6.

² Her *appellation d'origine* was chosen at the time of her canonization in 1622 in line with a traditional practice intended to promote the town, country or convent most closely associated with a saint. By evoking images of the medieval walled city, the name also acts a suitable metaphor for the strength and resilience traditionally attributed to the Spanish foundress. More recently, 'of Avila' serves the purpose of distinguishing her from the later French saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897). See Elena Carrera, *Teresa of Avila's Autobiography: Authority, Power and the Self in Mid-Sixteenth-Century Spain* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2005), p. 1.

the Spanish Inquisition was at its zenith, these strange encounters resulted in Teresa becoming the subject of much controversy and interest amongst the religious hierarchy.³ Consequently, when she was in her late forties, she was commanded by her confessors to write her life story, *La Vida*. Out of all this turmoil, and in the last twenty years of her life, Teresa would emerge to reform the Carmelite order.

O'Brien's understanding of Saint Teresa's life and personality was gained, as she acknowledges in *Farewell Spain*, from reading her autobiography and her personal correspondence. Of Teresa's life story, *La Vida*, O'Brien is unreserved in her admiration:

Her autobiography [...] is a model for ever of discipline in writing. It is short, simple, Castilian, idiomatic; its metaphors are from daily life, its tone is completely modest and cautious, and the writer's patient search for exactitude gives muscle to every line. Yet she treats of that which in her time was not only alarming to her steady logical brain, but with the Inquisition flourishing, highly dangerous to her life. (*FS* 154)

Her description of Teresa's writings as 'Castilian' is pertinent as it reflects her positive identification with this particular area of Spain. Importantly, in O'Brien's semi-autobiographical novel *Mary Lavelle*, the Castilian landscape is described by her protagonist as 'immediately appealing, pastoral, austere and tender.'⁴ As Eibhear Walshe points out, O'Brien was aware of the 'mythologising' of this landscape from writers such as Unamuno and Machado who were associated with the Generation of 1898, and like them she 'allows no other landscape or traditions within the Iberian Peninsula to find a place in her Spain.'⁵ As a native of Castile, Teresa's character had been shaped by her surroundings and as such the saint epitomised, in her writings, the reasons why O'Brien was attracted to this part of Spain.

³ The Inquisition opened cases against Teresa at least five times, each one initiated because someone was suspicious of her orthodoxy and religious behaviour. The key to Teresa's survival and success as a religious reformer and writer was to demonstrate her obedience to confessors and the hierarchal Church. For more information on Teresa and the Inquisition see Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991), pp. 26-34.

⁴ Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* (London: Virago, 1984), p. 214.

⁵ Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p. 62.

In *Farewell Spain*, O'Brien proclaims that the 'best' source of information concerning Teresa of Avila's period of reform is in 'her thousands of brilliant, witty letters'.⁶ From these she highlights the multi-faceted aspects of Saint Teresa's innovative personality which were utilised during her intrepid period of reform: 'she was everything - preacher, teacher, lawyer, cashier, politician, poet, tramp [...] She was a fighter and a schemer, a soldier and a most suitable diplomat' (*FS* 109-110). In fact she goes so far as to say that Teresa was 'the greatest woman in Christian history' (*FS* 113). Over thirty years after writing *Farewell Spain* the importance of engaging with Teresa's letters was reiterated by O'Brien in a radio broadcast on Teresa of Avila for RTÉ. Here she applauded Teresa for writing as an 'avant-garde feminist' and urges anyone who is interested in the saint to read her personal correspondence, as they will 'get to know her intimately [...] as they reveal all the moods and tenses, gaieties and angers of her protean personality.'⁷ Through her writings she did 'get to know' the saint 'intimately' and Teresa became, arguably, the greatest influence on O'Brien's aesthetic not only for her experimental style but, as this chapter will also demonstrate, as an icon for twentieth-century lesbianism. It is through O'Brien's interpretation of aspects of the saint's character that she was able, in her fiction, to give her protagonists a sense of self-government and individualism which was denied to the female citizens of de Valera's Ireland.

O'Brien was not the first avant-garde feminist writer to have connections with Teresa of Avila: George Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Vita Sackville-West, and Simone de Beauvoir all wrote in earnest about the Spanish saint. The prelude to George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871/2) suggests that Dorothea Brooke is a latter day Saint Teresa. However, although Dorothea was idealistic, passionate and had an energetic desire to live an 'epic life' as Teresa had, the social conventions of her day would prevent her from putting any kind of plan into

⁶ Kate O'Brien, *Farewell Spain* [1937] (London: Virago, 2006), p. 109. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *FS*.

⁷ Kate O'Brien, 'Thought for the Day,' RTÉ Libraries and Archives (26 November 1969).

action.⁸ Teresa, despite the seemingly insurmountable barrier of Counter-Reformation misogyny, had been able to write and initiate the reform of the Carmelite Order, whereas Eliot's Dorothea is restricted by a combination of Victorian social practices and discourses of normative femininity. As Sherry L. Mitchell argues in 'Saint Teresa and Dorothea Brooke: The Absent Road to Perfection in *Middlemarch*':

By utilising Saint Teresa as a figure who represents vistas of accomplishment that are no longer available to even the most talented of Victorian women, Eliot achieves a two-fold purpose: she foregrounds the problematic position of Dorothea's relation to contemporary discourses of normative femininity, while implicitly illuminating her own assumption of a subtly subversive speaking position analogous to that held by Teresa of Avila.⁹

Eliot's use of Teresa of Avila then is intrinsic to the discursive strategies that she employs throughout *Middlemarch* as she magnifies not only the limitations placed upon Dorothea, but also those which were placed upon her as a novelist. Given the challenges faced by O'Brien as a feminist fiction writer in the Irish Free State, it is not surprising that she was intrigued by Eliot's work.

O'Brien admired Eliot as a freethinking, subversive writer who seemed destined to remain at odds with the dominant values of English Victorian middle-class society. In a 1951 lecture, she commended Eliot's young female protagonists for qualities that echo her own female characters: 'Now, George Eliot's young ladies did emphatically go out to confront their destinies. And it is because she saw them do so, let them do so without fear or favour that she led the English novel ahead of itself in the nineteenth-century.'¹⁰ The way in which Eliot negotiates the restrictive boundaries imposed on her female characters not only inspired O'Brien's fictive representations of women, but were a major influence on several other feminist avant-garde writers of the twentieth century.

⁸ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 3.

⁹ Sherry L. Mitchell, 'Saint Teresa and Dorothea Brooke: The Absent Road to Perfection in *Middlemarch*,' *The Victorian Newsletter*, no. 82 (Fall, 1997), p. 32.

¹⁰ Kate O'Brien, 'George Eliot: a moralizing fabulist' (1955) cited in Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 117.

There is evidence in the work of Gertrude Stein, Vita Sackville-West and Simone de Beauvoir that George Eliot's *Middlemarch* was crucial to their literary development. For example, in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937) Stein recalls her early reading of George Eliot, and, as Ulla E. Dydo argues, the entry of the name Dorothea in 'A Diary' in 1927 would suggest Stein's re-reading of *Middlemarch* around the time she was writing her libretto for the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* which was inspired by the life of Teresa of Avila.¹¹ Vita Sackville-West's admiration of Eliot as a great Victorian writer is documented in her essay entitled 'George Eliot' published in 1932. Here Sackville-West praises Eliot's 'imaginative energy' and argues that her self-consciousness as a female writer makes her fiction all the more appealing.¹² De Beauvoir also refers to Eliot on several occasions in *The Second Sex* and in a section where she refers to *Middlemarch* she cites Eliot as an example of an insurgent female who has attempted to challenge what she perceived to be the unjustness of western patriarchal societies through her 'literature of protest.'¹³ Eliot's claiming of Teresa of Avila as her model for radical feminism in *Middlemarch* undoubtedly shaped the work of Stein, Sackville-West and de Beauvoir. All three would subsequently claim Saint Teresa not only as a feminist but as a lesbian icon, and this interpretation by her contemporaries also shaped O'Brien's interest in the saint. There is no direct reference to Stein, Sackville-West or de Beauvoir in O'Brien's writings, yet, as the chapter will demonstrate, all these women, as Gubar succinctly puts it, 'created texts that critique heterosexuality or express a lesbian vision' evident to those readers attuned to intertextual codes.¹⁴ The methods O'Brien uses to document certain aspects of Teresa's life would suggest that she was *au fait* with this tradition and drew from her contemporaries understanding of the Spanish saint.

¹¹ Ulla E. Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises: 1923-24* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008), p. 193.

¹² Vita Sackville-West, 'George Eliot' in Stuart Hutchinson (ed.), *George Eliot: Critical Assessments, vol. ii* (Mountfield, East Sussex: Helm Information, 1996), p. 129.

¹³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 718.

¹⁴ Susan Gubar, *Critical Condition: Feminism at the Turn of the Century* (Colombia: Colombia University Press, 2013), p. 50.

Gertrude Stein was, arguably, the first twentieth-century avant-garde writer to claim Teresa of Avila as a lesbian icon through her adaptation of the saint's character in *Four Saints in Three Acts*.¹⁵ Garrity and Latimer argue that the opera was 'a modernist tour de force' as it not only rejected conventional heterosexual narrative but also expounded 'the social and spiritual parameters of homosocial community.'¹⁶ The American composer Virgil Thomson, who was rumoured to be homosexual, had asked Stein to write an opera for him and 'as there were two saints whom she had always liked better than any others, Saint Theresa of Avila and Ignatius Loyola', Stein opted to write about them.¹⁷ In their collaboration Thomson and Stein used the religious life to make a statement about the life of the artist. If the saint was to act as a metaphor for the artist then Stein's choice of Teresa – a robust formidable female writer like herself – would have seemed logical. Yet, more significantly, by choosing Saint Teresa, Stein invoked a woman who has long been an inspiration to homosexual writers, including the seventeenth-century poet Richard Crashaw (to whom I will return to later).

In her autobiography, Teresa describes a period during her adolescence of mortal sin and blind passion relating to her relationship with a female cousin and another girl.¹⁸ Only the intervention of her father who quickly placed her in a convent prevented, she later believed, a complete moral catastrophe. There are certainly enough hints to justify the conclusion that Teresa was engaged in some kind of amorous episode with another woman. However, there is no conclusive evidence to confirm Teresa's sexuality, and thus any assertion that she had a

¹⁵ *Four Saints in Three Acts* was considered unusual for its outlandish set and costumes, and unconventional for its portrayal of European saints by an all-black cast. The formal premiere was staged on Broadway in 1934 and while critics were divided on opinion the opera was well received by audiences. At the start of the twenty-first century *Four Saints* was the longest running opera in Broadway. See Jane Garrity and Tirza True Latimer, 'Queer Cross-gender collaboration,' in Hugh Stevens (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gay & Lesbian Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 187-189.

¹⁶ Garrity and Latimer, 'Queer Cross-gender collaboration,' p. 188.

¹⁷ Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (London: Bodley Head, 1933), p. 244.

¹⁸ *The Life of Saint Teresa by Herself*, translated and with an Introduction by J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1957), p. 27.

sexual preference towards women is open to debate.¹⁹ As Nadine Hubbs points out, it is certain that Teresa experienced intense intimacy with other women and endured on account of her euphoric visitations ‘both scandalous rumour and alarming scrutiny’ from the Spanish Inquisition.²⁰ As a subversive, Teresa appealed to many lesbians, and the saint’s privately coded narratives, which I will return to in relation to O’Brien, became a paradigm for writers such as Stein who in the decades following the Oscar Wilde trials (1895) had to disguise their accounts of homosexual love.²¹ In much of Stein’s literary output she filtered lesbian content through the grid of presumed heterosexual subject matter or through experimental literary styles. In *Tender Buttons* (1914), for example, everyday objects such as pencils and boxes acquire an allusive erotic meaning. However, the sub-textual meaning could only be revealed to readers who were acquainted with the tradition. During the first part of the twentieth-century, opera became a significant force in lesbian subculture and *Four Saints* provided Stein with a vehicle with which to convey her coded meanings to an emergent audience.²²

Although there is no extra-textual evidence to confirm it, a number of hints in *Farewell Spain* suggest that O’Brien was aware of Stein’s cryptic representations of Saint Teresa’s sexuality. For example, O’Brien informs the reader that when she was in ‘Avila two years ago’ she knew little about Teresa, ‘save from Crashaw and from certain pious anecdotes heard in childhood’ (FS 103). By citing Richard Crashaw, who according to Corinne E. Blackmer ‘has been referred to as the first in a long line of queer devotees *con amore* at the

¹⁹ Bonnie Zimmerman and George E. Haggerty (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures* (New York: Garland, 2000), p. 760.

²⁰ Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America’s Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, & National Identity* (London: University of California Press, 2004), p. 23.

²¹ Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885) commonly known as the ‘Labouchere amendment’, resulted in the criminalisation of homosexual relationships in Britain and Ireland. The significance of the Labouchere amendment was that it created a concept of ‘homosexuality’ and with it a popular reaction of revulsion, fear and hatred. These found elaborate expression through the Oscar Wilde trials of 1895, where he was not only publicly vilified but charged with sodomy, indecency and corruption. For his crime Wilde spent two years in prison. For more information see Richard Ellmann, *The Trial of Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1996).

²² See Zimmerman and Haggerty, *Encyclopaedia*, p. 558.

shrine of Santa Teresa,' O'Brien is directing the reader towards this tradition.²³ Given that *Farewell Spain* was written between October 1936 and February 1937, it is likely the time of the visit was c. 1934-1935. We are not told by O'Brien whether or not this was her first trip to Avila but by stating specifically that she became interested in Saint Teresa around this time she could be directing the reader to Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, which was published the year before in 1933, and was, as Anna Linzie argues, among the most important works of literary modernism and lesbian autobiography.²⁴ Stein's narrative challenges conventional notions of genre in that it moves between autobiography, biography and memoir, thereby effectively concealing the exact nature of Stein's relationship with Toklas, evident in the fact that many initial readers assumed that Toklas was either her secretary or a personal assistant, and not her lover and life partner which she actually was.²⁵

Significantly, Alice B. Toklas' favourite Spanish city was Avila. In *Autobiography*, which won Stein international acclaim, the narrator recalls the couple's first trip to Avila in 1912:

I immediately lost my heart to Avila, I must stay in Avila forever I insisted. Gertrude Stein was very upset, Avila was alright but, she insisted, she needed Paris. I felt that I needed nothing but Avila. We were both very violent about it. We did however stay there for ten days and as Saint Theresa was a heroine of Gertrude Stein's youth we thoroughly enjoyed it.²⁶

With the opera *Four Saints* also enjoying its first successful run on Broadway in 1934, Stein had propelled Teresa of Avila to the forefront of twentieth-century avant-garde writing.

By 1934, O'Brien was living in Bloomsbury as a successful playwright and novelist. Moving in social and literary circles frequented by professional and artistic women in

²³ Corinne E. Blackmer, 'The Ecstasies of Saint Teresa: The Saint as Queer Diva from Crashaw to *Four Saints in Three Acts*', in Corinne E. Blackmer & Patricia Juliana Smith (eds), *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 10.

²⁴ Anna Linzie, *The True Story of Alice B. Toklas: A Study of Three Autobiographies* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2006), p.2.

²⁵ Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon, *Who's Who in Gay & Lesbian History: From Antiquity to WWII* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 497.

²⁶ The work was written by Gertrude Stein in the guise of an autobiography authored by Alice B. Toklas. Ibid, p. 127.

London, Eibhear Walshe argues, O'Brien found 'companionship and a sexual identity as a lesbian.'²⁷ However, the 1930s were a period when physical and emotional intimacy between women was still the subject of intense public and scientific scrutiny. In addition, as an Irish woman and writer, O'Brien was mindful of the sexual puritanism prevalent in De Valera's Ireland where, as Anne Enright succinctly puts it, 'the ideal of the lovely Irish girl did not include her falling in love with other women, in a carnal sort of way.'²⁸ Under these daunting circumstances, Walshe points out, it is not surprising that O'Brien 'never defined herself publicly as lesbian.'²⁹ Yet, as Margot Backus and Joseph Valente argue, 'O'Brien did in lieu of "coming out" publically, telegraph her lesbian identification in other ways.'³⁰ These included borrowing from Stein's appropriation of Teresa of Avila, which I argue influenced the way in which O'Brien would treat the issue of lesbianism in her future work.

One of Stein's contemporaries, the English novelist and poet Vita Sackville-West, also studied the life and work of Teresa of Avila. Published in 1943, *The Eagle and The Dove* contrasts the life of Teresa of Avila, the 'eagle,' with the later French saint Theresa of Lisieux, the 'dove.' The title of the book is taken from the text of Richard Crashaw's 1640 poem 'The Flaming Heart', his tribute to Teresa of Avila's dauntless, passionate spirit: 'By all the eagle in thee, all the dove; By all thy lives and deaths of love.'³¹ The use of the eagle as a metaphor for Teresa of Avila in Crashaw's poem and in the title of Sackville-West's study is significant as it has homosexual connotations. The eagle is commonly used as a symbol of power and authority, terms which could be applied to the Spanish saint. However, the eagle is also the definitive cultural emblem of same-sex relationships in Greek mythic

²⁷ Walshe, *A Writing Life*, p. 41.

²⁸ Anne Enright, 'Introduction to As Music and Splendour', in Eavan Boland (ed.), *Irish Writers on Writing* (Texas: Trinity University Press, 2007) p. 269.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁰ Margot Backus and Joseph Valente, 'The Land of Spices, the Enigmatic Signifier, and the Stylistic Invention of Lesbian (In)Visibility', *Irish University Review*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2013), pp. 55-73.

³¹ Vita Sackville-West, *The Eagle and The Dove: A Study in Contrasts St Teresa of Avila, St Theresa of Lisieux* (London: Michael Joseph, 1943), p. 14.

tradition and Roman culture.³² Although Sackville-West was married to the writer and politician Harold Nicolson, the couple had an open marriage and Sackville-West had numerous lesbian relationships which included a passionate love affair with Virginia Woolf.

Many writers in the Bloomsbury group sought to challenge public conventions of gender and sexuality.³³ In *The Eagle and The Dove* Sackville-West's portrayal of Teresa of Avila reflects the dominant ethos of her literary circle as she 'outspokenly' proclaims that 'the name of Teresa has been associated with that of Sappho.'³⁴ Sackville-West's investigation into Teresa's possible lesbian tendencies is, she says, 'not introduced here in any spirit of scandalous disrespect to a wise woman and a great saint. But it may well supply the clue to this mysterious and tormented chapter in her autobiography.'³⁵ This she adds is a good enough reason to investigate the matter further 'since few things are more distasteful than veiled hints.'³⁶ The 'veiled hints' that she finds 'distasteful' could be referring, paradoxically, to the banning of Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*.³⁷ In a letter to Virginia Woolf which she wrote on a visit to Germany, Sackville-West voices her anger that Hall's efforts to end public silence about lesbianism and bring about a more tolerant understanding had resulted in an obscenity trial:

I feel very violently about *The Well of Loneliness* [...] not because I think it is a good book; but really on principal [...] Personally, I should like to renounce my nationality, as a gesture; but I don't want to become a German, even though I did

³² For more information see Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 60-63.

³³ See Karyn Z. Sproles, *Desiring Women: The Partnership of Virginia Woolf & Vita Sackville-West* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

³⁴ Sackville-West, *The Eagle and The Dove*, p. 26.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ During the first part of the twentieth century the work of sexologists such as Kraft-Ebbing, Ulrichs and Havelock Ellis influenced the perception that lesbianism was a pathological sexual condition. Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* was published in 1928 with its main character acting as a model for the sexologist's studies of lesbian by providing a fictional account of its pathology. Hall's aim was to provoke social empathy of lesbianism, however, in reality, her efforts resulted in derogatory analysis and a moral panic. *The Well* and its banning profoundly changed public awareness of lesbianism as until this time love between women was still under the protective mantle of the Victorian 'ideal' of 'romantic friendship.' Hall's publicising of these new sexual discourses meant that society now had access to medical 'evidence' in order to diagnose lesbians as 'deviant.' See Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2001), pp. 1-30.

go to a revue last night in which two ravishing young women sang a frankly lesbian song.³⁸

Sackville-West clearly thought the censorship of *The Well* by the English establishment and the moral panic the novel created was ludicrous and, despite the best of efforts of Woolf to dissuade her from publicly supporting the protest against the ban, she attended the appeal hearing.³⁹ Sackville-West's dismay at the failure of the appeal is not surprising given, as Mary Ann Caws argues, that she was 'a true representative of critical excitement, of creative passion, and of female rebelliousness against masculine-set mores.'⁴⁰ This could also be said of Teresa of Avila with whom Sackville-West identified on many levels.

In *The Eagle and The Dove* the author wished to dispense with 'the prototype of the hysterical, emotional woman writhing in a frenzy of morbid devotion at the foot of the Crucifix,' for which she partially blamed Richard Crashaw, and replace her with the 'sane, vigorous, intelligent, humorous Spaniard' who had a lot in common with the independent woman of the mid-twentieth century.⁴¹ Significantly, Sackville-West's use of 'hysterical' and 'emotional' resonates with the Freudian psychoanalytic theory that lesbianism was a mental disorder.⁴² For Sackville-West, women loving women should never have been considered as abnormal, and therefore the aim of her study of Teresa of Avila was to challenge scientific discourses which categorised lesbianism as an illness that required psychiatric treatment. She admired Teresa of Avila as a woman who, despite her considerable success and capabilities as a religious reformer and writer, had been, both in life and death, erroneously labelled as deviant and was therefore an ideal role model for the modern lesbian.

³⁸ Cited in Victoria Glendinning, *Vita: The Life of V. Sackville West* (London: Orion, 2005), p. 199.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 199-200. The appeal failed and although lesbianism – unlike male homosexuality – was never outlawed in Britain, the legal controversy surrounding Hall's novel 'in many ways had for many women an equivalent social impact to the one the Oscar Wilde trials had for men.' Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, p. xii.

⁴⁰ Mary Ann Caws, *Vita Sackville-West: Selected Writings* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2002), p. 15.

⁴¹ Sackville-West, *The Eagle and The Dove*, pp. 13-14.

⁴² Throughout his career, Freud offered several accounts of lesbian patients. For example, in his 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria' (1905), Freud discerned lesbianism as the underlying cause of his patient's hysteria. See Zimmerman and Haggerty (eds), *Encyclopaedia*, p. 613.

The Eagle and The Dove clearly influenced O'Brien's monograph of Saint Teresa of Avila which was published a few years later in 1951. Indeed, Aintzane Legaretta Mentxaka suggests that perhaps O'Brien's *Teresa of Avila*, 'sought to supplement' Sackville-West's biography of the saint.⁴³ Mentxaka may be correct as both works offer a similar approach in their analysis of Teresa's autobiography and focus on the same chapter in which the saint discusses her troubled adolescence and the 'relationship' with a female cousin. O'Brien's suggestion that Teresa had amorous relationships with women, however, is more subtle than Sackville-West's. As an Irish Catholic who had already had two novels banned in Ireland by the Censorship Board, O'Brien had to be careful not to make any obvious implications that one of the Church's leading saints had lesbian tendencies. Moreover, O'Brien firmly believed that an individual's sexuality was her or his own private business, and thus, it is improbable that she would have approved of Sackville-West's candidness. It is perhaps for these reasons reason that she was inspired to write a less intrusive account of the saint's life.

The appropriation of Teresa as a model for non-normative sexuality and avant-garde feminist writers continued with the publication in 1949 of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. A rebellion against the conventional values of patriarchal societies was the motivation behind this feminist treatise. *The Second Sex* is a study of contemporary feminism and examines the situation of women in historical and contemporary Western culture. Here, de Beauvoir advances Teresa of Avila as a postmodern 'subversive' against patriarchal power structures both secular and ecclesiastical. De Beauvoir's admiration for Teresa's tenacity and strength of character is evident in her statement that the saint went her way with an 'intrepidity unsurpassed by any man.'⁴⁴ Like Sackville-West, de Beauvoir sought to dispose of the stereotypical Saint Teresa, largely created by male commentators as a hysteric, and

⁴³ Aintzane Legaretta Mentxaka, *Kate O'Brien and the Fiction of Identity* (Jefferson: MacFarland, 2011), p. 72.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 685.

reclaim her as a positive role model for the mid-twentieth century feminist movement.⁴⁵ De Beauvoir was a key player in twentieth-century French philosophy and second-wave feminism. Alongside her life partner and intellectual associate Jean-Paul Sartre she was influential in the development of existentialist philosophy after the Second World War. The couple's 'open' relationship and choice not to marry or have children defied social conventions, and throughout her life de Beauvoir had love affairs with women.⁴⁶

In a lecture that she gave in 1966, O'Brien champions Sartre, as a crucial thinker of the twentieth century and as a 'supreme example of an avant-gardist.'⁴⁷ In light of O'Brien's interest in French existentialist philosophy it is likely that she would have read *The Second Sex*, and I argue that certain parallels suggest that O'Brien's study of Teresa of Avila was influenced by this revolutionary treatise. For instance, in *Teresa of Avila*, O'Brien compares Catherine of Siena, Sappho, Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson to the saint, and importantly, all of these women, including Saint Teresa, are discussed in *The Second Sex*. As a religious reformer, mystic and writer in a patriarchal society, Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) had much in common with Teresa of Avila, and de Beauvoir champions both these eminent Catholic saints for recognising no masculine authority whatsoever and as 'women of action' who 'know very well what goals they have in mind and who lucidly devise means for attaining them.'⁴⁸ De Beauvoir refers to Emily Bronte alongside writers such as Eliot and Woolf who have attempted to challenge 'this unjust society' through their 'literature of

⁴⁵ Bernini's well known High Mannerist statue of Teresa of Avila in Rome depicts her fainting in a religious ecstasy. Hugh E.M. Stutfield dismissed Teresa's style of sanctity as 'a dreary round of billing and cooing', Hugh E.M. Stutfield, *Mysticism and Catholicism* (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd, 1925), p. 91. Josef Breuer called Teresa of Avila 'the patron saint of hysteria', Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, translated and edited by James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol II* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 257.

⁴⁶ For more information on de Beauvoir's life and love affairs see Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴⁷ Kate O'Brien, Typescript draft of an unpublished lecture 'Ireland and Avant-Gardism', May 1966, The Kate O'Brien Papers, UL, P12, 157.

⁴⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 687. Saint Catherine of Siena took a vow of virginity at the age of seven and against her parents' wishes refused to marry, cutting off her hair and wearing men's clothes in order to make herself less attractive. For a concise but informative account of the life of Catherine of Siena see F. A. Forbes, *St. Catherine of Siena* (Charlotte: Tan Books, 1999).

protest.⁴⁹ Sappho is mentioned amongst a select group of isolated early feminists including Christine de Pisan and Mary Wollstonecraft who through their work ‘protested against the harshness of their destiny.’⁵⁰ De Beauvoir also cites a letter that Emily Dickinson wrote to her friend, a young married woman, as an example of the exalted affections and ‘special friendships’ that naturally flourish amongst adolescent girls.⁵¹ O’Brien would have known that de Beauvoir was, indirectly, implying the lesbian sexuality of all these women, and in *Teresa of Avila* she adopted similar intertextual references to convey her message.

Mentxaka is the first critic to suggest that by substituting the word ‘genius’ with ‘lesbian’, the hidden meaning in the opening passage of *Teresa of Avila* becomes apparent.⁵² O’Brien’s adept use of the key word ‘genius’ is, Mentxaka argues, used in a similar way by Oscar Wilde in *De Profundis*, the published letter written in 1897 to his lover, Alfred Douglas, whilst Wilde was in prison for engaging in homosexual acts.⁵³ Wilde claims that the French understand ‘the peculiar quality of my genius’ because they know ‘that along with genius goes often a curious perversity of passion and desire.’⁵⁴ O’Brien was an admirer of Wilde and an appreciation of his work is evident in her essay ‘Imaginative Prose by the Irish, 1820-1970.’⁵⁵ It is also very probable that O’Brien would have read her former husband Gustaav Renier’s controversial 1933 biography *Oscar Wilde*.⁵⁶ The book caused controversy on its publication for its frank portrayal of Wilde’s homosexuality. Renier’s biography was remarkably advanced for its time, stating that Wilde’s homosexuality was innate and not linked, as scientific discourses of the period and previous Wilde biographers claimed, to

⁴⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 718.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 159.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 366.

⁵² Mentxaka, *The Fiction of Identity*, p. 72.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 73.

⁵⁴ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol, and other Writings* (Ware: Wordsworth, 2002), p. 2.

⁵⁵ This essay was delivered as a lecture at the University of Valladolid in 1971. See Kate O’Brien, ‘Imaginative Prose by the Irish, 1820-1970’, in Joseph Ronsley (ed.), *Myth & Reality in Irish Literature* (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1977), pp. 305-315.

⁵⁶ See Eibhear Walshe, ‘Wild(e) Ireland’, in David Alderson, Fiona Becket, Scott Brewster and Virginia Crossman (eds), *Ireland in Proximity: History, Gender & Space* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 70-72.

sudden insanity. The apparent relationship between homosexuality and genius was an idea also embraced by artists and scholars from Dante to Sigmund Freud, as well as the influential sexologist Havelock Ellis.⁵⁷ Significantly, O'Brien's familiarity with the work of these writers is apparent by a number of intertextual references in her fiction: *The Divine Comedy* is cited in *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938), and *Mary Lavelle* includes a direct reference to the work of Havelock Ellis.⁵⁸

O'Brien opens *Teresa of Avila* by stipulating that her study of the saint was undertaken by choice and borne out of a faithful admiration that is:

passionate, arbitrary, personal. No one need agree with anything I have to say – but they must not, either, be hurt thereby. I am free here to speak freely about a great woman. But I am not writing of the canonized saint. I propose to examine Teresa, not by the rules of canonization, but for what she was saint or not – a woman of genius.⁵⁹

Mentxaka may be correct, as O'Brien's mode of expression and repetitive use of the word 'genius' would suggest that a subtextual meaning is being disclosed:

I say with great regret, that within the two thousand or so years that my very poorly trained vision can take in, genius has ever flowered in a woman. We can jump back beyond those two years and boast of Sappho. But we have only fragments, rumours of her – and in any case we have to wait for a woman to match her until England and the nineteenth-century. It is strange; all the variable, definable furies, styles and freedoms could pass over Europe – we could have Virgil [...] Shakespeare, Racine, Madame de La Fayette and Miss Jane Austen – but there was still no tracking down of a *woman* who could be called genius until Emily Brontë's burning shadow flung out. Not as broken, not as indefinable as Sappho's but strangely sympathetic to her legend, and just as unsatisfactory. And they are the only female geniuses of our recorded knowledge in literature. (*T* 11) (emphasis in original)

O'Brien adds here that her claim for Teresa as a woman of genius was not that she was a writer of genius in the pure sense of Sappho and Emily Brontë, but that she left a record of a life lived by a genius. However, as Mentxaka argues, 'it is only by resorting to a set of sub

⁵⁷ See Peter Hegarty, *Gentlemen's Disagreement: Alfred Kinsey, Lewis Terman, & the Sexual Politics of Smart Men* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 18.

⁵⁸ Kate O'Brien, *Pray for the Wanderer* (London: Heinemann, 1938), p. 70; *Mary Lavelle* (London: Virago, 1984), p. 329.

⁵⁹ Kate O'Brien, *Teresa of Avila* (London: Max Parrish, 1951), p. 10. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *T*.

textual and intertextual references that a bold outing of Teresa could be printed.’⁶⁰ For example, although Sappho is recognised for her poetry, which focuses on relationships between women, there is a lesser known tradition of reading Emily Brontë as lesbian. Virginia Moore’s *The Life and Eager Death of Emily Brontë* (1936), is well known for its hypothesis that Emily Brontë’s lover was a woman.⁶¹ Indeed, Moore argues that if one reads *Wuthering Heights* as an autobiographical allegory, then Brontë ‘is without a shadow of a doubt, Heathcliff.’⁶² Importantly, Moore’s study was published the same year that O’Brien’s *Mary Lavelle* (1936), which contained a lesbian subplot, had been banned in Ireland. As previously discussed, the upshot of the scandal surrounding Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* was that there was a conscious reluctance of writers to produce material that portrayed lesbian love. Moore’s suggestion that Emily Brontë used a style of encoding which made her narratives accessible to readers attuned to homosexual codes, was a radical one in 1936. For lesbian writers such as O’Brien, it was imperative.

As *Teresa of Avila* continues further references are made to Sappho and to Emily Bronte. Here O’Brien brings the ‘genius’ of Catherine of Siena and Emily Dickinson into the frame. Importantly, O’Brien had previously referred to Catherine of Siena in the description of Nell Mahoney in her novel *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938). As discussed in chapter three in reference to *Don Quixote*, the narrator compares Nell ‘to Madame du Defand’ [...] ‘Saint Catherine of Siena. Or some might have said Sappho.’⁶³ As Mentxaka has noted, the reference to Sappho suggests that O’Brien is playfully drawing attention to the rumours surrounding the private lives of Madame du Defand and Catherine of Siena.⁶⁴ Emily Dickinson is often included in historiographies of lesbianism because of the many passionate, playful letters that she wrote to Susan Huntington Dickinson, her sister-in-law, and which

⁶⁰ Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p. 73.

⁶¹ In light of O’Brien’s interest in Emily Brontë it is probable that she read Virginia Moore’s critique.

⁶² Virginia Moore, *The Life and Eager Death of Emily Brontë* (London: Rich & Cowen, 1936), p. 327.

⁶³ O’Brien, *Pray for the Wanderer*, p. 13.

⁶⁴ Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p. 73.

allude to a love affair.⁶⁵ There is a pattern of similarities that emerge from engaging with the work of Catherine of Siena, Sappho, Emily Dickinson, and Emily Bronte that could be compared with the life and character of St Teresa. O'Brien states in *Teresa of Avila* that these women's adolescent years were filled with 'trouble and woe; terror, scandal, gossip and hysteria,' and that, also like Teresa, none of them ran 'to common form' (T 54). These free-thinking, passionate, sexually non-normative women challenged the conventions of their own times, and O'Brien adopted them as coded markers to indicate not only Saint Teresa's sexuality but her own.

Given O'Brien's implicit treatment of lesbianism in her non-fiction, it is not surprising, Emma Donoghue writes, that in her fiction she 'hid her lesbians in subplots within heterosexual romantic novels for fear of having the spotlight turned on them.'⁶⁶ For example, the only obvious Irish lesbian characters in her fiction are Agatha Conlon in *Mary Lavelle* and Clare Halvey in *As Music and Splendour* (1958). However, both of these novels are set far away from Ireland, and thus O'Brien removed her protagonists both physically as well as imaginatively from the restraints of their family and society. Although Agatha Conlon and Clare Halvey are not entirely modelled on the character of Teresa of Avila, certain aspects of O'Brien's interpretation of the saint's life are present. For instance, unlike the other Irish governesses that Mary is introduced to in the novel, Agatha is portrayed as a rather pious woman. When Mary visits Agatha's apartment we learn that she is perturbed by the sparseness of her colleague's living space and that 'there were no photographs anywhere, no odds and ends from life.'⁶⁷ The only decorations she notes are a few religious baubles, a modest wash-stand and a dozen or so books on the shelf dressed in brown paper, 'as nuns cover books' (ML 100). In *Farewell Spain*, O'Brien informs the reader that Saint Teresa,

⁶⁵ Zimmerman and Haggerty, *Encyclopaedia*, p. 237.

⁶⁶ Emma Donoghue, "'Out of Order" Kate O'Brien's Lesbian Fictions,' in Eibhear Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), p. 55.

⁶⁷ O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, p. 100.

‘was mad on ascetism,’ and her houses had to be free from material comfort (*FS* 111). Agatha’s simple, unadorned living space certainly echoes the austere way of life that Teresa insisted upon in her convents; however if the significance of the religious ornaments on display in the apartment is considered, a more direct analogy with the Spanish saint is revealed. For instance, the picture of the Holy Family above the bedstead and the *prie-dieu* are particularly emblematic. Devotion to the Holy Family was actively promoted in Spain by Teresa of Avila and the nuns of her reformed Carmelite order. As it was primarily designed for private devotional use a *prie-dieu* was one of the few pieces of furniture that the Spanish saint allowed in her convents.⁶⁸ In a further nod to Teresa, and to her appropriation as a lesbian icon by writers such as Gertrude Stein, Agatha is the first character in O’Brien’s fiction to mention Avila, and it is she who suggests to Mary that they should go on holiday to Teresa’s home place.⁶⁹

Like Agatha, Clare Halvey in *As Music and Splendour* is a committed Catholic and is referred to as ‘very austere.’⁷⁰ She is also portrayed as principled and amiable. Emma Donoghue argues that Clare is the most likeable, moralistic and least promiscuous of the characters in *As Music*, a ploy deliberately used by O’Brien to counteract her deviance.⁷¹ Even so, this is only part of the reason as these traits can also be attributed to Teresa of Avila. The saint’s outgoing, charismatic personality caught the attention of O’Brien but so did her humility and morality. In *Farewell Spain*, the saint’s appeal is reiterated as the reader is informed that Teresa who she describes as having ‘sanity, modesty’ and ‘high’ standards always ‘enjoyed society and was rapaciously interested in people’ (*FS* 105-107). By claiming Teresa of Avila as a positive lesbian role model, O’Brien ‘unfenced new realms of

⁶⁸ Marcus B. Burke, ‘Intensity & Orthodoxy in Iberian & Hispanic Art’, in Babette Bohn and James M. Saslow (eds), *Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), p. 488.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁷⁰ Kate O’Brien, *As Music & Splendour* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 58. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *AM*.

⁷¹ Donoghue, ‘Kate O’Brien’s Lesbian Fictions’, p. 51.

connotation' by providing an alternative to the figure of the masculine, socially isolated, self-loathing lesbian coalesced in the popular imagination as a consequence of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*.⁷² As Mentxaka argues, although O'Brien would have been aware of the obscenity trial that followed the publication of *The Well* and was undoubtedly influenced by certain aspects of the novel, she pursued a different strategy than Hall by rousing "empathy" rather than "pity" in her lesbian characters.⁷³

O'Brien's portrayal of Clare Halvey in *As Music* provides a challenge to Hall's stereotype. For example, even though Clare is lesbian in the novel she has satisfying male friendships, and there are occasions where she finds men physically attractive. Clare enjoys the company of Thomas Evans who is in love with her, and when on one occasion he 'took her in his arms and kissed her', she 'stayed in the embrace a minute and even he thought that half-wearily she desired to give it back' (*AM* 177). Clare takes pleasure in her attraction to Thomas and tells him that were it not for Luisa, 'easily I might have loved you' (*AM* 212). Adele Dalsimer argues that 'Clare's attraction to Thomas is not the capitulation to societal demands with which some lesbian novels end; rather, it is O'Brien's insistence that lesbians are open and responsive to other forms of love.'⁷⁴ Like Clare, Saint Teresa was by all accounts feminine, attractive to men and receptive to their interest in her. In *La Vida* the saint discusses the importance of her relationships with male friends, particularly those who advised her in difficult spiritual and political situations. In *Teresa of Avila*, O'Brien recalls an occasion where Teresa admitted that a particular priest liked her very much and that she 'had one serious struggle with those desires of the senses and thoughts of earthly love which had occupied her, normally and strongly, in girlhood' (*T* 37). The attraction was mutual O'Brien continues: 'the two fought through a dangerous situation, in which clearly each felt attraction and affection for the other, and wherein they acted with frankness and good sense' (*T* 37).

⁷² Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p. 71.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁷⁴ Dalsimer, *A Critical Study*, p. 117.

Teresa refused to lose her honour and encouraged the priest, who already had a reputation as a womaniser, to return to his vows. This episode in the saint's life, which O'Brien emphasises in her monograph and which she reproduces in *As Music* through the character of Clare, challenges the prevalent cultural stereotype that represents the lesbian as not only 'mannish' but as anti-male and non-sexual.⁷⁵ As Zimmerman and Haggerty point out, 'many people assume that a woman has become a lesbian because of unpleasant experiences with men and/or sexual abuse.'⁷⁶ Yet, by positioning Clare as a non-stereotypical lesbian, O'Brien rebuffs these common assumptions.

In *As Music* Clare and Rose discuss what paths their lives could have taken had they remained in Ireland and, in a further parallel with Saint Teresa, Clare announces that she would never have been married and may have become a nun. Donoghue argues that here, and in the case of Agatha in *Mary Lavelle*, 'O'Brien makes nunnishness hint at sexual ambiguity.'⁷⁷ Donoghue's notion is probably correct as there has been an awareness of lesbian practices in religious communities that can be traced back through the centuries.⁷⁸ Indeed, one of the earliest instances was in the fifth century, when Saint Augustine, suspecting the possibility of same-sex liaisons in convent communities, warned nuns that the love between them should not be earthy but spiritual. It is no coincidence that in *Teresa of Avila*, a text loaded with subtextual and intertextual references, that O'Brien informs the reader that the saint read *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* 'with marked understanding and appreciation' (T 44). Importantly, O'Brien quotes a line from Teresa's autobiography in which she admits that although she did not want to become a nun, she also 'feared to get

⁷⁵ Most of the common stereotypes are based on deviations from gender expectations. See Zimmerman and Haggerty, *Encyclopaedia*, p. 734

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 734.

⁷⁷ Donoghue, 'Kate O'Brien's Lesbian Fictions', p. 51.

⁷⁸ Scores of literary works represented convents in a negative light. For example, Jean Barrin's *Venus in the Cloister* (1683) represents sex as a common practice in the convent and includes several scenes of lesbian sex. Denis Diderot's *La Religieuse* (The Nun) (1796) represented the convent as a place threatening to the social structure because it fermented lesbianism. For more information see Zimmerman and Haggerty, *Encyclopaedia*, p. 645.

married' (T 29). A lifetime of slavery to her husband and the unceasing agony of childbirth which often resulted in an early death was, quite often, the lot for a married woman in sixteenth-century Avila, and it is not surprising, given that Teresa was only twelve years old when her mother died giving birth to her tenth child, that the prospect of marriage was a frightening one. Indeed as Stephen Clissold points out, 'she could not forget her mother's joyless lot – the incessant round of childbearing, the absolute submission to a husband's will.'⁷⁹ Teresa's anxiety was not unusual and, as the only alternative to becoming a wife and mother for many middle-class women in Spain (as in the Irish Free State), was to become a nun, many saw the convent as their only means of escape.

As discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, O'Brien's own trepidation regarding marriage is well documented. In addition, a concern regarding the dangers of multiple pregnancies and childbirth in an Irish society where contraception was prohibited and at a time when medical proficiency was limited, is never far from O'Brien's artistic conscience. For example, in her first novel *Without My Cloak*, Molly Considine dies giving birth to her ninth child, and although her husband 'deplored for her the discomfort of incessant childbearing' and would do anything 'to lessen it,' he could see no help 'within the social and religious code they both upheld.'⁸⁰ It could be argued however that a morbid dread of childbirth was not Teresa's or O'Brien's main 'fear' regarding marriage but that it was an ideal smokescreen with which to hide their sexuality. A line in *Teresa of Avila* is testament to this possibility, as O'Brien proclaims that 'she [Teresa] did not want to be a nun; but began to understand that she would have to be one' (T 31).

There is a third character in O'Brien's fiction, Fanny Morrow in *The Flower of May* (1953), whose possible lesbianism has been the subject of much debate by critics. Adele Dalsimer suggests a lesbian reading of the novel on the basis that although Fanny appears not

⁷⁹ Stephen Clissold, *St Teresa of Avila* (London: Sheldon Press, 1979), p. 21.

⁸⁰ Kate O'Brien, *Without My Cloak* (London: Heinemann, 1931), pp. 76-7.

to be aware of it, her feelings towards Lucille are sexual.⁸¹ Donoghue, on the other hand, disagrees by arguing that the friendship between the two young women is purely platonic because given O'Brien's openness in *Mary Lavelle* she had no reason to disguise her lesbian meaning.⁸² Yet, if we consider Donoghue's previous comment that 'O'Brien makes nunnishness hint at sexual ambiguity,' then how can she reject the possibility that Fanny is another lesbian character given Cousin Bill's remark at the beginning of *The Flower of May*: 'They tell me, Fanny, that you want to be a nun? Is that what's wrong with you?'⁸³ This comment suggests that not only is O'Brien proclaiming that Fanny is a lesbian, but that she is another character who displays hallmarks of her interpretation of Teresa of Avila.

Fanny possesses similar personality traits to Saint Teresa: she is a dreamer, she is pious, strong-minded and intelligent. There are certainly a number of similarities between the dilemma faced by the young Teresa and that faced by Fanny. For instance, Fanny wishes to join the convent in Bruges but faces emotional confusion as she knows it will break her father's heart, but she also echoes Saint Teresa when she proclaims that she has 'no intention' of marrying.⁸⁴ In an important intertextual reference, the family cat is called Teresa and although she was initially named after the saint from Normandy, Aunt Eleanor explains that if she were to 'prove troublesome, there is the great Teresa of Spain, you know. You could fit any character into her.'⁸⁵ This allusion to Teresa of Avila is raised at a key moment in Fanny's development, as she struggles to come to terms with the reality that because of her father's refusal to allow her to finish her education and join the convent, she will have to abide by his wishes and stay at home. Given the evidence it could therefore be suggested that Fanny, like Agatha Conlon and Clare Halvey, could be compared in some respects to Teresa of Avila. I would agree therefore with Mentxaka who argues that *The Flower of May* is

⁸¹ Adele M. Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1990), pp. 100-2.

⁸² Donoghue, 'Kate O'Brien's lesbian fictions', pp. 48-49.

⁸³ Kate O'Brien, *The Flower of May* (London: Heinemann, 1953), p. 22.

⁸⁴ O'Brien, *The Flower of May*, pp. 36-37.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

concerned with ‘a form of female bonding that can certainly be read as lesbian,’ and that the novel with its lesbian encoding provides ‘a modernist experiment.’⁸⁶

Although there are lesbian characters in O’Brien’s novels she does not promote lesbian identity *per se*, but instead advocates freedom for women from patriarchal constraints. Although she implicitly acknowledges the possibility that Saint Teresa had lesbian tendencies, one of the key forces in O’Brien’s work was to advance female equality, and her admiration of the saint as a proto-feminist is obvious in the chapter on Avila in *Farewell Spain*. It is here for the first time that the reader becomes directly aware of O’Brien’s admiration for Teresa of Avila. The manner in which she venerates her and relates facts about her life suggests that O’Brien’s interest in the saint was sustained and is shared with her generation of modernist female writers who challenge normative sexuality. The chapter ‘Santa Teresa’ opens with the author’s insistence that the main square of Avila should be named officially in honour of the sixteenth-century saint:

Constitutions come and go, and so do republics; markets have, as Avila knows, their ups and downs. But Saint Teresa is for ever, for history and humanity so long as they remain. And she was of Avila. A genius of the large and immeasurable kind of which there have been very few, and only one a woman. Let the feminists who, anxiously counting up their Sapphos, Jane Austen’s and Mesdames Curie, always ignore Santa Teresa – let the feminists pull themselves together and get this square named once and for all. (*FS* 101-102)

Here, O’Brien’s espousal of Saint Teresa as a proto-feminist also highlights her own commitment to feminism. The reference to ‘Constitutions’ that begins the passage is significant as, at the time of her writing *Farewell Spain*, the 1937 Irish Constitution was being prepared and the Spanish Civil War had broken out, signalling the end of the Second Republic. O’Brien was an individualist and anti-authoritarian who disliked the way in which male-determined legislative measures increased or decreased control over the freedom of women depending on whether it suited the particular state-building project. However,

⁸⁶ Mentxaka, *The Fiction of Identity*, p. 74.

O'Brien's quest was not to make demands for women as a group, but for individual rights and actions. O'Brien admired Saint Teresa for championing women's literacy and for giving her nuns the opportunity to work as chroniclers, nurses, accountants and teachers. Her claim in *Farewell Spain* that Spaniards are 'astoundingly individualistic' may well be a generalisation derived from her research on Teresa of Avila. For O'Brien the saint who was born and raised in Avila would 'for ever' be a role model of female self-government and to have the market square named in Teresa's honour was representative of her ideal.

As previously discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, female empowerment is one of the main themes in O'Brien's 1941 novel *The Land of Spices*, so it is not surprising that aspects of the life and character of Teresa of Avila are present. There are numerous direct references to Saint Teresa of Avila in the text, and O'Brien arguably presents Helen Archer – the Reverend Mother in the novel – as an analogue of the saint. O'Brien endows her protagonist with a number of characteristics that echo details from the saint's life; for example Archer is beautiful, pious, stubborn, strong-willed, rebellious, tenacious, and she flouts convention. Adele Dalsimer suggests that O'Brien idealises Helen Archer and thus omits 'many of Reverend Mother's less agreeable traits.'⁸⁷ However, I would disagree with Dalsimer as Archer possesses a number of less likeable attributes. For example, at the beginning of the novel she has uncharitable thoughts about the three new postulants who have arrived at *Saint Famille*, and she criticises the pupils rendition of a hymn whose words were written by Teresa of Avila, telling herself that the Saint would not have tolerated such 'devotional misuse.'⁸⁸ There is an intertextual reference here to O'Brien's 1969 RTÉ radio broadcast, in which she criticises Teresa of Avila for sometimes being 'arrogant' towards her young nuns and for having a low opinion of women's intellectual capabilities.⁸⁹ Saint Teresa

⁸⁷ Adele Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1990), p. 60.

⁸⁸ Kate O'Brien, *The Land of Spices* [1941] (London: Virago, 1988), p. 5. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text *LS*.

⁸⁹ O'Brien, 'Thought for the Day,' RTÉ (26 November 1969).

was the first to admit her own shortcomings, and in her autobiography she repeatedly asks God to help her to find the strength to be less critical of others. In *The Land of Spices* there are numerous examples of Archer's self-deprecation where, echoing Teresa, she asks for God's forgiveness for being 'a snob in Thy service' and prays that he might 'teach her to escape from the carplings of my small judgement' (LS 5).

In a further analogy with the life of Teresa of Avila, we learn that Reverend Mother's dislike for Eileen Doherty stems from the large dowry that the new postulant brought with her to *Saint Famille*. Before Teresa's reform of the Carmelite order, the Convent of the Encarnación was over-inhabited by daughters of the aristocratic houses of Castile. Rather than being subjected to the rigours of monastic life, the *dot* they brought with them guaranteed a lavish lifestyle: indeed some had their own furnished suites, wore jewellery, and regularly entertained visitors. Teresa's chief aspiration when she founded her convents was that nuns should be un-endowed, specifically to avoid class distinctions. In *Farewell Spain* O'Brien states that Teresa was 'a communist' and utilises a quote from the saint's correspondence to demonstrate Teresa's strong feelings on the subject of class equality: 'Let no sister have anything of her own but everything in common and to each be given according to her need' (FS 109). O'Brien's labelling of Teresa as 'a communist' in her travelogue can be interpreted as a contra to the rise of fascism in her beloved Spain.

Farewell Spain was O'Brien's lament against General Franco, yet it needs to be remembered, as Mentxaka points out, that O'Brien's 'political views were characterised by a deep dislike of political institutions, activist organisations, and dogmatic political movements.'⁹⁰ Thus, her repeated emphasis in the travelogue that 'I am not a Communist' but a pacifist opposed to all war is not surprising if it is understood in the context of 1930s Europe (FS 2, 123). Michael Cronin argues that in O'Brien's view, 'both right and left in the

⁹⁰ Mentxaka, *Fiction of Identity*, p. 217.

1930s were creating a routinised world,’ and that for her ‘the crucial issue at stake in the Spanish war appears to be this larger civilisation struggle between “individualism” and modern political systems of whatever hue.’⁹¹ O’Brien wished to hark back to a pre-modern civilisation where she says the ‘root inspiration of Communism,’ was simply the ‘old generosity and decency of a few of the world’s saints’ but which in recent times has been ‘misguidedly’ interpreted (*FS* 217). She clearly admired Teresa’s model for dealing with authority, corruption and the value attached to money and position, and for O’Brien, if current political leaders had taken heed of the simple ‘communist’ ideology of Teresa of Avila, then Spain, would not now be tearing itself apart.

When she initially entered the Convent of the Encarnación Teresa found it difficult to detach herself from outside influences and to settle into a relentless routine of prayer and servitude. In her autobiography she admits that in the year of her novitiate, she missed her father and siblings terribly and suffered long periods of disturbance, the source of which she does not reveal. Nonetheless, Teresa found freedom from what troubled her in prayer and by spending long hours in the convent’s hermitage and garden in quiet reflection. She recalls that when she took the habit:

The Lord immediately showed me how He favours those who do violence to themselves in order to serve him [...] and God converted the dryness of my soul into a very great tenderness. All the details of the religious life delighted me. In fact sometimes when I used to sweep the house at hours that I had once spent on my indulgence and adornment, the memory that I was free from these things gave me a fresh joy, which surprised me, for I could not understand where it came from. (*T* 33)

We are told that Helen Archer had suddenly entered the religious life at Sainte Fontaine and, like Teresa, had for a reason unknown to anyone but herself, ‘turned her back upon herself, upon talents, dreams, emotions – and undertaken the impersonal and active service of God’ (*LS* 18). O’Brien’s narrator recalls the austerity and hardened asceticism of the convent: ‘its

⁹¹ Michael Cronin, ‘Kate O’Brien and the Erotics of Liberal Catholic Dissent,’ *Field Day Review*, vol. 6 (2010), p. 41.

noble architecture, rigorous garden and almost empty rooms had taught the young novice more categorically even than did the Early Fathers those lessons of elimination, detachment and forgoing for which, as it happened, her hurt spirit craved somewhat hysterically at that time.’ Here and in the following passage there is a remarkable resemblance to Teresa’s account of her adjustment to religious life:

She had not accounted herself especially happy in her time of novitiate at *Saint Fontaine*. There had been difficulties and fears, peculiar to her character and situation; but she had been glad at last to take her vows, and depart, asking God’s grace, from a place of struggle, grief and self-doubt, to lose herself in work and in the encompassing of her complete dedication. (LS 11)

Helen Archer’s impulsive decision to join the convent had enhanced her wellbeing both spiritually and professionally. Similarly, Teresa makes it clear in her autobiography that her hasty decision to enter the religious life had rewarded her through an increasing faith in God and in practical terms as a senior and respected member of the Order. In a further tribute to Saint Teresa, as the novel closes Helen Archer is given the Order’s supreme honour: she has been elected to the post of Mother General. Having risen to the top of her profession, she will be the leader of nearly two thousand nuns in schools all over the world, achieving this after years of inner turmoil in which, like Teresa, she confronts her own destiny and comes to terms with her past.

As *The Land of Spices* develops we are informed that before she moved to Ireland Helen Archer had worked for a while as Mother General’s assistant at the Mother House in Bruges. Here the description of Archer bears a notable resemblance to O’Brien’s portrayal of Teresa in both *Farewell Spain* and *Teresa of Avila*. Archer had been awarded the post after the Reverend Mother at Cracow had sent favourable reports regarding her abilities as a nun: ‘she has the qualities needed for command [...] It is fortunate that with much beauty *Mère Marie-Hélène* possesses also detachment and authority [...] I do not think that *Mère Marie-Hélène* is “a born nun” but she is making herself into a very good one’ (LS 24). In *Teresa of*

Avila O'Brien states that as a blossoming adolescent Teresa considered herself to be 'very vain,' but as she matured she had gained 'endowments of detachment' (*T* 22, 25). As previously discussed, in her travelogue O'Brien is fervent in her championing of the Spanish saint's credentials as a religious leader and dwells on Teresa's strength of character, the fidelity to her mission in life and her unprecedented courage.

The description of the way in which the Mother General in Bruges exercised authority over the nuns in her charge brings to mind Teresa's method of governing her convents: 'She made free and perpetual use of the iron hand in the velvet glove. She ruled the thirty houses of the Order scattered over the globe, its eighteen hundred nuns, with cheerful, concealed astuteness, and on the principles of cold sanctity' (*LS* 25). Although Teresa was sociable, vivacious and happy - and encouraged her nuns to be the same - she could be formidable at times. In *Farewell Spain*, O'Brien tells us that 'Her letters are fluidly mischievous rather than barbed. But her mockery could be clear enough' (*FS* 111). O'Brien recalls a letter Teresa wrote to one of her prioress' who had showed some traces of self-importance in office, and arguably demonstrates the saint's method of using 'the iron hand in the velvet glove' to reprimand her nuns. Rather than attack the woman directly Teresa used a Castilian proverb to voice her disapproval.

As Reverend Mother continues to reminisce about her time working under Mother General in Bruges she recalls a conversation with her superior when the latter had been impressed with her suggestion and implementation of a policy change in the Provincial House in Paraguay:

'You would have made a useful early Jesuit,' she said amusedly to her secretary.
'A Father Lainez to St. Ignatius.'
'Truly, Mother General, I don't believe I could have managed the Council of Trent!' They laughed. 'In any case, I'd rather have worked under Saint Teresa.'
'An emotionally directed preference, I suspect, my daughter! Beware. The *Way of Perfection* is a more dangerous inspiration than the *Spiritual Exercises* - since we are not contemplatives.'

‘Mère Marie-Hélène acquiesced in silence, and went on with her work. It was the first time in her religious life that its emotional danger had had to be even so lightly indicated’. (LS 26-27)

By invoking St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, O’Brien accentuates the conservative, puritanical, authoritative Irish Catholicism that she objected to.⁹² It is significant that throughout O’Brien’s oeuvre Jesuit priests are portrayed in a negative light. The Jesuit Order’s close association with Ultramontanism and its pivotal role in the continued expansion of a dogmatic, parochial Church in Ireland was seen as destructive to the Irish nation by liberal Catholic writers like O’Brien, Seán O’Faoláin and Austin Clarke, and as such, the Order is criticised both directly and indirectly in O’Brien’s work.⁹³

In *Teresa of Avila* O’Brien is keen to point out that one of the saint’s confessors, a Jesuit, had in her opinion ‘made a real fool of himself’ by insinuating that Teresa’s mystical experiences were ‘from the devil’ (T 59). O’Brien’s cynicism continues in her fiction; for example Denis Considine in *Without My Cloak* painfully recalls the ‘weals’ on his hands that were regularly inflicted by the violent master who taught him at the local Jesuit school.⁹⁴ Moreover, Liam, one of the Costello children in *Pray for the Wanderer*, is anxious at the thought of the punishment he will incur for bringing the wrong type of notebook to the Jesuit run School of the Holy Name, and in a later passage, he asks his mother to attend to his ‘bruised and swollen hands.’⁹⁵ Crucially, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916),

⁹² The Council of Trent (1545-1563) was one of the Catholic Church’s most important ecumenical councils. Its mantra was theological and socially conservative and the Church’s established ecclesiastical and social hierarchy were strenuously defended. The Jesuits – were in many ways Trent’s biggest supporters – as they not only warded off attack but went out to the field of battle to pre-empt any challenge to the Church’s theology and social power. Trent enforced the pomp of Catholic rituals that revelled in the power of popes and priests who presided over the faithful celebrating the sacraments from altars that were physically separated from the congregants. See Curt Cadorette, *Catholicism in Social and Historical Contexts* (New York: Orbis, 2009), p. 145.

⁹³ When Cardinal Paul Cullen (1803-1878) spearheaded the mid-nineteenth century Romanisation of the Irish Catholic Church, one of his biggest collaborators were the Jesuits. An extreme Ultramontanist and exponent of the Council of Trent, Cullen is credited with the revival of regular Catholic devotion in Ireland and the instigation of a sexual repression that would permeate the nation for decades. For more information on the ‘devotional revolution’ in Ireland see Emmet Larkin, *The Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism* (New York: Arno Press, 1976).

⁹⁴ O’Brien, *Without My Cloak*, p. 80.

⁹⁵ Kate O’Brien, *Pray for the Wanderer* (London Heinemann, 1938), p. 38.

the religious life experienced at Clongowes – the Jesuit school of Joyce’s youth – appears harmful to the artistic spirit and must be rejected if creativity is to survive. Echoing Joyce, Clongowes features in *The Land of Spices* as the school which Anna Murphy’s brother Charlie attends, and where he drowns in an accident. Charlie’s drowning is, arguably, symbolic of how O’Brien and Joyce felt as fiction writers in Ireland, and the only way for them and their art to stay afloat was to move abroad.

O’Brien’s comparison of Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises* with Teresa’s *The Way of Perfection* is symbolic of the clash between the liberal version of Catholicism that she upholds in her fiction and the reality of the dogmatic Irish Church. Although both these works provided spiritual instruction for Catholics, they differ in a number of ways. For instance, *Spiritual Exercises* was designed to work in tandem with the devotionism of the Catholic Church that emphasised by the Council of Trent. The booklet was approved by Pope Paul III, and the exercises were designed to be undertaken under the direction of a spiritual director. Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuit Order that he founded fully supported papal authority and articulated the doctrinal emphasis in the Catholic Church; individualism had no place in Jesuit philosophy. *The Way of Perfection* was written by Teresa on the request of her nuns at the convent of San José in Avila. However, Teresa took her confessors’ vague dispensation to write a brief devotional guide and stretched it to the limits of contemporary orthodoxy by writing on the censored topic of mental prayer and proceeding to ridicule the ignorance of those who condemned it.

Alison Weber suggests in *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* that when Teresa was writing *The Way* she clearly had a wider audience in mind than the handful of nuns in her first reformed convent. Indeed, as she continues: ‘Buried within a notebook of advice on convent life, with a gloss on the Lord’s Prayer, the perceptive reader can find a preliminary guidebook to mental prayer and a defence of women’s rights to choose the path

of spiritual perfection.’⁹⁶ In her monograph of the saint O’Brien refers to *The Way of Perfection* as ‘special’ reading (T 75). Of Teresa’s spiritual writings O’Brien states: ‘Authority, poetry and sublimity inform these works – therefore they are not for all markets, and no sensible person will urge them on the man in the street’ (T 75). Here, O’Brien is again mocking the puritanical pietism and self-righteousness which consumed Irish society, and that, as religious values were concerned, there was a remarkable consensus amongst the populace that traditional Catholic values should be maintained. As discussed in chapter three, O’Brien was attracted to the notion of ‘interiority’ which she found in the works of Erasmus, and she found a similar spiritual philosophy in the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila. O’Brien informs the reader that when Teresa was in the Convent of the Encarnación she was ‘forbidden to read certain theological works. Her books were taken from her, and their loss caused her great distress’ (T 58, 59). She does not cite these books by name but it is likely they included the works of Erasmus which, after the rise of Protestantism and the associated fear of heresy, had been banned in Spain by the Inquisition. Like Teresa, O’Brien was a proponent of individualism and what impressed her was the way in which, despite the constraints of the Inquisition, the saint maintained a personal dialogue with God. As was the case in Inquisitorial Spain, the Church in Ireland approved only vocal forms of prayer that came from the vast liturgy of the Catholic Church. O’Brien knew that any philosophy which promoted contemplative or mental prayer, and which encouraged women to choose their own spiritual path, would be seen as a ‘dangerous inspiration’ in de Valera’s Ireland.

It is apparent from studying O’Brien’s writings on Teresa of Avila that the saint was an important model for her as a writer. However, some of O’Brien’s comments regarding the saint’s ability as a writer are ambiguous. For instance, in the introduction to her monograph of Teresa she diplomatically insists that Teresa ‘was *not* a great poet’ and she was ‘a careless

⁹⁶ Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 83.

writer of prose (*T* 12, 13 emphasis in original). Yet, at the same juncture in the book, she says Teresa was ‘a formidable writer of prose’ whose work was ‘brilliant and sometimes transcendently marvellous’ (*T* 12, 13). The significance of these contradictions should be examined, because it is through Saint Teresa’s writings, especially her letters and autobiography that O’Brien understands her.

When O’Brien considers Teresa’s writing style she describes it as ‘expressive’ but that:

One cannot say that her easy, living Castilian equals in grace the beautiful, easy French of Madame de Sévigné, though admittedly she used it with triumphant naturalness to interpret experiences entirely beyond the imaginative scope of the seventeenth-century marquise; and it is as true that her quill could not match in precision the one that Jane Austen sharpened as that the lady of the English parsonage would have turned with a shudder of distaste from many of the searching, strange records set down by the Carmelite nun. (*T* 13, 14)

By raising Madame de Sévigné and Jane Austen, O’Brien is again signposting the reader to the hidden meaning in *Teresa of Avila*, as there is, due to the intimate nature of their personal correspondence and rumour surrounding the possible lesbian sexuality of both these women (I will return to the significance of letter writing in relation to O’Brien later in this chapter.)⁹⁷ However, O’Brien states that ‘the Carmelite nun was a personality much larger than normal life, which neither of these two delightful writers was’ (*T* 14). It is difficult to say for certain what exactly O’Brien is implying by Teresa’s ‘personality’ here, but I would argue that she found Teresa’s expression of her sexuality to be far more sincere than in the writings of de Sévigné or Austen. It is precisely because O’Brien recognised that Teresa was ‘able to establish that personality forever in many enchantingly readable prose works, and in her letters,’ that her veneration for the saint endured (*T* 14).

⁹⁷ Madame de Sévigne letters to her daughter, Madame de Grignan, and Jane Austen’s letters to her sister, Cassandra, have been located on a “lesbian continuum” of feminine tenderness. However, by using this graduated spectrum of women loving women it is impossible to demarcate where passionate friendship, intimacy, and bonding end, and where homosexuality began. See Susan Gubar, *Critical Condition: Feminism at the Turn of the Century* (Colombia: Colombia University Press, 2013), pp. 49-50. In her essay ‘Writers of Letters,’ O’Brien refers to ‘the hundreds of extraordinary love-letters’ that de Sévigne wrote to her daughter. See Kate O’Brien, ‘Writers of Letters,’ in *Essays & Studies, 1956* (London: John Murray, 1956), p. 11. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text *WL*.

As John Hildebidle argues, ‘it is Teresa’s ability to express her own character through the written word that Kate O’Brien repeatedly emphasises’ and that in the following passage from *Teresa of Avila*, ‘O’Brien goes so far as to claim that Teresa’s mysticism has a parallel in the work of the writer.’⁹⁸

She [Teresa] believed, from the first thought of her life to the last, in the Christian God and in the whole cosmology of Christian doctrine. But her accurate development and expression through herself of what that belief was is analogous to an artist’s self-conscious exploitation of his gift. (*T* 46)

For O’Brien, Teresa was a unique writer whose ‘gift’ transcends the talents of innovative and prominent artists such as Rembrandt, Beethoven, Shakespeare and Dostoevsky (*T* 46). Teresa’s mysticism, she understands, does not appeal to everyone, and the saint’s spiritual work can only be fully appreciated by those of adequate intellectual capacity. O’Brien repeats again that Teresa was not a poet but that ‘she speaks to poets’, and she uses one of the saint’s more simple teachings – the metaphor of the garden and the four ways of watering it - to try to convey her point. She writes that ‘A child can reflect on the four progressive movements of this parallel, but a poet, advanced and impetuous in imagination, will also see how far into the movements of the soul its clear ascent might carry him’ (*T* 49). O’Brien is that ‘poet’ who had seen Teresa’s special powers of creativity and expression and knew that they had been used in an extremely ingenious way. But where did Saint Teresa’s ability as a creative artist originate? As a middle-class Spanish girl she received little in the way of formal schooling, but unusually for a daughter of nobility Teresa could read. Thus, she gained her education from an unconventional source - by reading novels of chivalry.

When Teresa was a girl her mother introduced her to her own love of reading and in particular, books of chivalry, a habit Teresa’s father despised. These novels were generally seen as dangerous since although they were heroic and gallant in tone they were regarded as

⁹⁸ See John Hildebidle, *Five Irish Writers: The Errand of Keeping Alive* (London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 53.

crude and unsubtle, particularly unsuitable as reading material for a thirteen year old girl. In *La Vida* Teresa admits that she ‘began to become addicted to this reading, and this little fault, which I had observed in my mother, began to chill my desires and to lead me astray in other respects as well.’⁹⁹ Her addiction to these novels, O’Brien writes in her monograph, ‘turned the full natural force of her curiosity upon the world and worldly pleasures’ (T 21). She says that the books in question, which ‘she read and re-read with passion’ – ‘Amadis de Gaul, Orlando Furioso and their fellows’ are the ones ‘which Cervantes’ curate and barber were later on to burn’ (T 21-22).¹⁰⁰ The reading of chivalric novels was seen by Don Quixote’s peers and family as the cause of his descent into madness, and in *La Vida* Teresa blames her passion for reading similar books for what she perceived to be her immoral behaviour as an adolescent.

Saint Teresa’s autobiography is littered with self-critical remarks and confessions of wickedness and incompetence. However, according to Vita Sackville-West it is unlikely that Teresa had been as sinful as she would have the reader believe, mainly because she would have had little opportunity to indulge in anything resembling immoral behaviour.¹⁰¹ O’Brien agrees and suggests that it is also unlikely Teresa thought so critically of herself. *La Vida* was written only to appease her confessors and therefore, as O’Brien is keen to stress, ‘it is necessary to exercise caution’ when reflecting on her compunction (T 23). In *Teresa of Avila*, O’Brien makes a number of excuses – including weariness, anxiety and being out of touch – for the middle-aged saint’s ‘overstated case against Teresa the very young sinner’ (T 25). Yet, I would argue that she was altogether aware that Teresa’s humility and remorse was a rhetorical strategy for defending herself against the increasing misogyny of the Inquisition.

⁹⁹ *The Life of Saint Teresa*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁰ By raising *Don Quixote* at this juncture O’Brien is referring to the transformative power of reading fiction which she examines in her early novels *Without My Cloak* (1931), *Mary Lavelle* (1936), *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938), and which is discussed in chapter three.

¹⁰¹ Sackville-West, *The Eagle and The Dove*, p. 25

Teresa lived during a time when Pauline doctrine prohibited women from engaging in theological discourse and when female mystics were mercilessly persecuted by the inquisition. Despite this, Teresa was able to engage in rhetorical strategies in *La Vida* including repeated apologies for her own inferiority and her ignorance of theological doctrine, which allowed her to present her practices, particularly that of mental prayer, in a manner which satisfied the demands of her confessors while still allowing her to continue the same activities. Furthermore, writing the autobiography established a precedent which allowed her to write other texts. Her success would have been impossible, however, had she not taken into account the patriarchal ideology of her confessors. Teresa had already been labelled by the famous theologian Bartolomé de Medina as a *mujercilla* (silly woman), which constrained the conditions of her discourse.¹⁰² Teresa's defensive strategy was to embrace stereotypes of female ignorance, timidity, or physical weakness but disassociate herself from the double-edged myth of woman as seducer/seducible. Alison Weber refers to this method of defence as a 'rhetoric of feminine subordination' and refers to examples from *La Vida* where Teresa's use of 'the diminutive *mujercitas* is subtly ironic.'¹⁰³ For instance, Weber explains that 'Teresa argues "little" women may receive more spiritual favours from God precisely because they are weak, whereas learned men have less need of these divine consolations.'¹⁰⁴ It is unlikely that Saint Teresa thought that this was factually true so rather than 'writing like a woman,' perhaps Teresa wrote as she believed women were '*perceived*' to speak. As previously discussed, O'Brien recognised that Teresa often denigrated women, and in her monograph she is somewhat critical of this trait: 'I have never excused in her those low bows of the "poor little woman". When she slaps down her more or less intelligent nuns I am also out of sympathy with her' (*T* 66). O'Brien's disapproval, however, is not sincere and her statement that Teresa was 'cunning and subtle' is evidence that she knew the saint was

¹⁰² See Weber, *Rhetoric of Femininity*, pp. 32-34.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 159 & 36.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

writing in an environment of anti-feminist and anti-reformist zeal, and therefore that her behaviours were acts of resistance to an increasingly patriarchal, and authoritarian Counter-Reformation Church (*T* 19).

When she was writing *Teresa of Avila*, O'Brien clearly adopted her own rhetorical strategy which owed much to the saint's methods of subversion. Under the guise of being naïve she was able to comment on and criticise the saint whilst at the same time directing her more attuned readers to uncover the real nature of Teresa's work. This is evident in the section of the monograph where O'Brien discusses the saint's 'loathing' of Martin Luther but then apologetically proceeds to compare her with him (*T* 67). She tells us that Saint Teresa 'amuses us, in her writings, with her careless use of the word "Lutherans". She simply flings it out, without a thought of accuracy, at any supposed enemy of the Church' (*T* 65). During Teresa's time Martin Luther and his followers threatened the very existence of the institutional Church. Therefore, in the context of sixteenth-century Catholic Spain, the term 'Lutherans' would have been a popular derisory expression used in general terms by much of the populace. Of Martin Luther, O'Brien supposed Teresa 'knew no more than could any ordinary person in Avila in the 1530s and 1540s' (*T* 67). This may be true, but given that his basic theology challenged the authority of the Pope and that he believed that every man should answer for himself directly to God, his work was of interest to Teresa. It is impossible to know whether Teresa really thought Luther was, as O'Brien puts it, 'the arch-enemy of civilisation,' but as a *converso*, as a woman and as a mystic whose writings were under constant scrutiny for any sign of heresy, she had to publicly denounce him (*T* 65). Privately, given her Jewish heritage (her grandfather had converted to Catholicism after the

Reconquest), Teresa may well have disapproved of Luther's rhetoric against Jews which he wrote in a number of treatises during the 1540s.¹⁰⁵

Instead of taking these overt factors into consideration, O'Brien purportedly cannot understand why Teresa insists on repeatedly describing 'whoever was against her as a "Lutheran,"' and refers to the saint's assertions as an 'innacuracy' which she cannot excuse 'any more than I excuse her lapses into the "I am only a woman and therefore" line of argument' (*T* 65). O'Brien finally directs the reader to her own train of thought by suggesting that Saint Teresa 'had gifts and attributes in common with her enemy, Martin Luther' (*T* 67). At first glance the linking of Saint Teresa's mystical path with the non-mystical and Pauline beliefs of Martin Luther would seem nonsensical. However, as Antonio Pérez-Romero argues, the similarities are significant as 'what Teresa was doing in her works was expounding the Christian message of salvation as it was understood by the new or Renaissance religion.'¹⁰⁶ In other words her way of obtaining religious knowledge and her encounters with the Divine were outside the sphere of the Church hierarchy, and thus her work, like Luther's, could be seen as heretical. In the following passage O'Brien compares their writing styles:

She [Teresa] was, like Luther, passionate, fearless and self-assured; like him she was a naturally brilliant and fluent writer, who did not have to struggle with the *art of writing*, and who wrote only to forward immediate business; like Luther too she was the master of her fellows, and perhaps more consciously than he, certainly with more guile, she was, when it suited her, a dictator. (*T* 67-68) [emphasis mine]

Here she lauds Teresa and Luther for the innovative way that as writers they went about the business of trying to resolve the problems of belonging to a Church that they wanted to challenge and change. Importantly, Anna Vind argues that Luther ignored the model of other contemporary polemical books and adopted his own literary style: 'he always deliberately

¹⁰⁵ See Timothy F. Lull, 'Luther's Writings,' in Donald K. Makim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 57.

¹⁰⁶ Antonio Pérez-Romero, *Subversion and Liberation in the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila* (New York: Rodophi, 1996), p. 200.

considered the recipient when choosing how to shape his thoughts: the choice of language, style, and level of augmentation were strongly dependent on the person addressed.’¹⁰⁷ This description could equally be applied to the writings of Teresa of Avila and, in particular, the contents of her letters. In *Farewell Spain*, O’Brien identifies that given the difficulties posed by the Inquisition, Teresa ‘was very shrewd and had need to be,’ but that this astuteness was concealed in her letters as she often ‘put fun into intriguing’ (*FS* 112). For instance, she reveals that when the saint suspected that her letters were being opened, the Inquisitors became ‘the Holy Angels,’ and Christ became ‘José’ (*FS* 112). It was therefore not only in her prose writings that Teresa used coded narratives; indeed as Antonio Pérez Romero points out, in her letters she always ‘covered her tracks’ so that anything that could be perceived as heretical was spread throughout in meticulous ways.¹⁰⁸

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, O’Brien acknowledges in *Farewell Spain* and in an RTÉ radio broadcast that reading the letters of Teresa of Avila was crucial to her understanding of the saint. This mantra is repeated in *Teresa of Avila* where she states that ‘more delicious letters have never been written’ and repeatedly encourages the reader to engage with them to fully appreciate the trials and tribulations the saint endured during her campaign of reform, and in order to discover her true personality (*T* 73). For example, she proclaims that: ‘It is impossible to read her letters without being made aware of her social gifts, her sense of comedy, her fluent irony, and her warmth of heart’ (*T* 42). Again she affirms that Teresa’s ‘sincerity, her modesty and her humour became as crystal-clear in any one conversation as did her uncanny intelligence’ (*T* 58). Saint Teresa’s letters, which were translated into English and published in London between 1919 and 1924 in four volumes,

¹⁰⁷ Anna Vind, ‘Luther’s Thought Assumed Form in Polemics,’ in Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel and L’ubomír Batka (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 474.

¹⁰⁸ Antonio Pérez Romero, *Subversion and Liberation in the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila* (New York: Rodophi, 1996), p. 200.

would have been easily accessible to O'Brien and given the numerous references to the letters in her work, she clearly studied them at length.¹⁰⁹

In her essay 'Writers of Letters,' O'Brien gives some insight into the reasons why this particular form of communication intrigues her:

One of the accidental delights of my life has been in reading letters [...] A letter, however dull its content, lives only because someone wrote it to someone who read it. From that accident of purpose, of direction, it gains a vibrant, flying life that irritates our curiosity as no private jottings can. The word flung out from man to living man, from friend to enemy, from lover or hater, from parent to child, is a clue, a cry, a song, an answer, or an insult [...] It is communication. (WL 7, 8)

Here she argues that letter writing is far more than simply a case of oral communication being put into writing. Rather, a letter proclaims the writer, provides an insight into his personal relationships and mirrors his or her personality. For O'Brien, however, the success and effectiveness of a letter is dependent on the skill and art of the writer's pen.

In 'Writers of Letters,' O'Brien opens her discussion by stating that the greatest letters have been written mostly by 'very good creative writers' and she puts forward a case that the best letters could be considered as works of art (WL 7). The 'very good' writers whose letters she has read are numerous but include W.B. Yeats, Gustave Flaubert, Charlotte Bronte and Madame de Sévigné but she begins her discussion with, as she says, 'the deliciously intimate letters of Teresa of Avila' (WL 9). The sixteenth century, O'Brien states, heralded the beginning of 'modern letter-writing' and Saint Teresa, 'prolific, impatient, gay, affectionate and very dependent upon exchange of news and views with her friends and relations, was a leader of the European fashion' (WL 9). She wrote so many letters, O'Brien continues, that she became concerned about the excessive cost of the portorage. The letters to her friends, we are told, are warm and witty and in them she discusses trivial topics such as pots of jam and the uses of bed linen.

¹⁰⁹ *The Letters of Saint Teresa: A complete edition translated from the Spanish and annotated by the Benedictines of Stanbrook; with an introduction by Cardinal Gasquet Vol. 1-4* (London: Thomas Baker, 1919-24).

O'Brien quotes from a particular letter to Teresa's brother Lorenzo regarding his young sons as it 'makes her as real as if she spoke in our hearing' (WL 9). Here she says the saint gives her brother advice with a 'loving fussiness and firmness' regarding the arrogant behaviour of her nephews: 'pray God my brother's boys may not grow up to think too much of themselves' (WL 10). O'Brien proceeds to inform the reader that the saint wrote constantly in this simple manner to personal friends and relatives but that she also had to write:

day in day out, the letters of a political campaign and of a governor and a general, these having to be shrewd, angry, forthright or guileful as occasion showed. To Phillip II, to the Papal Nuncio, to Archbishops, cardinals, priors and prioresses she wrote in a flying and economical style, always saying exactly what she intended to say, with great deftness, but also with all attention to the elaborations of etiquette and of courtesy which were second nature to a Castilian lady. (WL 10)

However, O'Brien adds as these letters are concerned only with the business side of Saint Teresa's life they are not of 'universal interest now,' yet she contends that these letters are significant as they demonstrate that she was 'most expressively and vividly human' (T 10). The lines she uses to corroborate her argument are taken from a letter Teresa wrote to her Prioress at Seville, and it could be argued that by raising this particular rhetoric O'Brien is suggesting a love affair between the two women:

provided you love me as much as I love you, I forgive you everything, whether in the past or in the future...for believe me, I have a great affection for you...although at Sevilla where there was first one kind of trial and then another and I was treating you as one of my dearest daughters it hurt me horribly not to find the same frankness and love in you. But this letter of yours had made me forget all that ... it is worse when one has not the defence of another's love against one's trials, because one's own love is not enough. (WL 11)

This letter written in 1576 could certainly be interpreted as an innocent exchange between close companions, but a closer examination of Teresa's corpus of personal correspondence reveals that an unusually large number of letters containing similar affirmations were exchanged between herself and Mother Mary of Saint Joseph, the Prioress at Seville. Teresa founded sixteen convents throughout the vast country of Spain, and she understandably had

to correspond with her prioresses on matters of business. However, if for example the letters to Mother Mary Baptist, Prioress of Valladolid are compared with those sent to the Prioress of Seville, a difference in tone is immediately apparent.¹¹⁰ The correspondence with the former is similar in tone to most of Teresa's letters - sincere, affectionate, enthusiastic, amiable and business like - whereas her letters to the Prioress of Seville contain all of these qualities but are far more emotional and pertain to love.¹¹¹

O'Brien knew that the contents of the letters would neither shock nor offend, but she was able to direct readers attuned to homosexual codes to her train of thought, which was that the saints 'deliciously intimate' letters demonstrate that Teresa's lesbian tendencies had not been just a lapse in adolescence. The section on Teresa's letters ends with her lauding the saint as a 'great communicator,' which could be construed as O'Brien's acknowledgement that Teresa's lesbianism was not a fallacy but was 'vividly human' as the reality of it came alive through her personal correspondence (WL 11). If we return to the closing pages of *Teresa Of Avila*, published five years before, 'Writers of Letters' which Mentxaka describes as 'an unrecognised yet important example of lesbian historiography,' O'Brien yet again encourages the reader to engage with the saint's personal correspondence: 'To find the full charm of her one must read her letters – to her *prioresses*, to Gracian, to her spiritual directors' (T 95, emphasis mine). This appeal which O'Brien found in Teresa is explained in the following passage from the monograph:

I suggest, uncertainly, that why she is so interesting is that she was not obviously endowed (except, by a freak to the nor'west) for sainthood. She could have been any of about five perfectly good things – and made a mark in any of such directions [...] She would have been a writer, anyway – which is something that few saints have been. And her writings, the simpler works no less than the profound, are a great gift she made to life. (T 76)

¹¹⁰ Volume II of *The Letters of Saint Teresa* contains several letters written to Mary of Saint Joseph and Mary Baptist between 1576 and 1577. See *The Letters of Saint Teresa: A complete edition translated from the Spanish and annotated by the Benedictines of Stanbrook; with an introduction by Cardinal Gasquet Vol. II* (London: Thomas Baker, 1921).

¹¹¹ For example see *ibid*, pp. 2, 29, & 105.

It was Teresa's human frailty and not a life of exceptional holiness that O'Brien was concerned with. This is made clear when she states that the purpose of her monograph is to 'examine Teresa, 'not by the rules of canonization' but to present her 'in her human aspect' (*T* 10, 92). For O'Brien it is in her letters as nowhere else that Saint Teresa appears extremely human, and it is through these exchanges that, she says, proof of 'her sincerity, her modesty and her humour became crystal clear [...] as did her uncanny intelligence' (*T* 58). It is certainly for her skills as 'a communicator,' that O'Brien's lifelong veneration for Saint Teresa endured.

Letters are also an important component within O'Brien's fictional narratives. For example, in *Mary Lavelle*, *The Land of Spices*, *The Last of Summer* (1943), *That Lady* (1946), *The Flower of May*, and *As Music and Splendour* there are a number of letters either written by or sent to her female protagonists. Although O'Brien's engagement with the epistolary form is demonstrated in this chapter, a more thorough analysis is out of the remit of this thesis and is a topic for further research. Nonetheless, O'Brien's use of letters in *Mary Lavelle* and *The Land of Spices* is constructive in providing a definitive example of how the influence of Saint Teresa's personal correspondence on O'Brien's aesthetic is manifest in the development of the fictional plot. Given that Helen Archer, the Reverend Mother in *The Land of Spices*, bears characteristics analogous to Teresa of Avila, it is not surprising that letters play an integral part in the disclosure of her character. From early in the novel it is apparent that Reverend Mother had reached the limits of her patience with the self-satisfied parochialism of her Irish nuns and clergy, who think she is too foreign. Thus, she drafts a letter to the Mother General of the Order in Bruges asking to be recalled from her Irish post. Here we are made aware of the fervour with which the nun documents her grievances: 'Tears swam into her eyes. She began to write, ignoring them. She wrote very fast [...] Reverend Mother's hand shook as she blotted and folded this letter' (*LS* 62, 64). Although Helen

Archer is viewed by her fellow nuns and Father Conroy as cold and merciless, her letters reveal that she is a human and vulnerable individual. There are clearly parallels to be drawn here with O'Brien's interpretation of the letters of Saint Teresa. In the RTÉ broadcast on Teresa she recognised that the saint could be formidable at times, but that she was 'more often humble, amusing and gentle.'¹¹² What is apparent throughout all O'Brien's writing on Teresa is her insistence on promoting Saint Teresa's vulnerability and pragmatism, and in her fiction she endows her protagonists with similar traits.

In *Mary Lavelle* the opening chapter is entitled 'Three Letters,' and begins with the three letters that Mary has written on her arrival in Cabantes to her father, Mother Liguori and her fiancé, John. The letters are written in sequence and no narratorial comment is made until the final one has been signed and sealed. O'Brien's use of the epistolary form allows the reader to directly engage with Mary's character and offers an immediate insight into the inner workings of her mind, without recourse to the device of the omniscient narrator. The three letters in *Mary Lavelle* are directly connected to O'Brien's attitude to aesthetic inspired by Teresa's letters. As O'Brien points out in 'Writers of Letters,' 'everything she [Teresa] wrote, even however she relaxed and sought to please here and there in the writing, was directed purely to a purpose' (WT 11). Similarly, the three letters at the beginning of *Mary Lavelle* are written with a particular recipient in mind, and this is reflected in the tone, content and level of emotion. For example, in Mary's letter to her father she appears very uncertain about her decision to work in Spain; yet, at the same time it is clear that she is eager to reassure him: 'I am perfectly well and happy and am certain to be quite content here.'¹¹³ The letter to Mother Liguori is polite and appreciative, but as the aim of the letter is to thank her former school mistress for 'finding the job for me and arranging everything', the discourse is business like and to the point. The final letter written to her fiancé is the longest in length and as reflected

¹¹² O'Brien, 'Thought for the Day,' (26 November 1969).

¹¹³ Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* (London: Virago, 1984), p. 3.

in the letter to her father she reveals an air of uncertainty whilst consciously reassuring him that although he was against the idea her decision to go to Spain was the right one. However, it becomes more evident in this letter, which she addresses to ‘My Dearest John,’ that despite her declaration that she yearns for him and is homesick, Mary is in a state of flux:¹¹⁴

I wish I knew how to describe this place so as to make it seem real to you – but I never could. You see, its entirely unlike everything you and I know [...] And if I say that already after twenty-four hours I feel familiar with it, you’ll say I’m mad. But I mean it [...] It was the best thing to do wasn’t it – to come out here for a year or so, until we can get married? But there’s no need to go over all that again [...] I’ll be quite happy here, and I’ll learn Spanish and get to know something about the world – or a bit of it. Which will be no harm, will it?¹¹⁵

This letter is significant in that it chronicles Mary’s private interiorised moments which serve to not only highlight her feelings of loneliness and vulnerability, but also expose her hidden desire to escape from the constraints of her family and society. Teresa of Avila’s letters had provided O’Brien with a crucial insight into the inner psyche of the saint, and by adopting this method in her fiction she employed a literary device which illustrated the true character of her protagonist and, therefore, allowed her reader to engage with Mary as she embarked on her journey of self discovery.

As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, the letters of Saint Teresa provided O’Brien with the subject matter for her historical novel, *That Lady*. Ana de Mendoza’s wildly contradictory behaviour had made her a thorn in Teresa’s side, yet as Dalsimer points out ‘to serve the political needs of her order, the saint described the princess with a restraint that belied her experience as well as records of the event.’¹¹⁶ Ana had thrown the convent of Pastrana into turmoil by rushing there after her husband’s death. The princess had insisted that she and her two maids be admitted as novices, but as she was not prepared to follow the strict mandate of the reformed Carmelites, Teresa refused to agree to her demands. When she left the convent she withheld the money she and her husband had promised the Carmelites,

¹¹⁴ O’Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, p. 5.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹¹⁶ Dalsimer, *A Critical Study*, p. 91.

and a lack of funds forced the closure of the foundation in Pastrana. Although O'Brien's fictional Ana bears little resemblance to the violent, spoilt and unreliable historical character, the existent tension between the Princess and Saint Teresa is raised in the novel. However, in an exchange between Antonio Perez and Ana's maid, the latter is certain that the Princess is embarrassed and ashamed about her behaviour towards Teresa and her Order: 'She doesn't like to remember it- any more than she likes being one eyed [...] After all, 'we've all made fools of ourselves at one time or another.'¹¹⁷ The episode with the saint is portrayed more sympathetically than the actual event; here Ana's actions, we are told, are uncharacteristic and the result of a temporary bout of insanity brought on by grief. In the disclaimer at the beginning of *That Lady*, O'Brien states that 'in order to retain unity of invention I have refrained from grafting into my fiction any part of their recorded letters or observations.' The Ana in *That Lady* is O'Brien's ideal of an intelligent, principled woman who wishes to be autonomous and independent, and thus her protagonist could bear little resemblance to the insufferable woman portrayed in the letters of Saint Teresa.

Despite O'Brien's fascination with the personal correspondence of a diverse assortment of eminent literary and historical personages, she was, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, not as eager for her own letters to become the subject of public scrutiny. Despite this O'Brien was a frequent recipient and writer of letters. This is confirmed, albeit covertly, in 'Writers of Letters,' where she states that, despite *The Times* newspaper protesting that people in the modern era preferred to communicate by taxi, telephone and telegram: 'I know that letters are still written, as certainly as I know that people polish their shoes and brew coffee' (WT 8). This suggests that O'Brien viewed hand written letter writing as a routine activity but, more specifically, it is an indirect reference to the middle-class European culture that she affiliated herself with.

¹¹⁷ Kate O'Brien, *That Lady* (London, Virago: 1985), p. 37

Through her engagement with the writings of Teresa of Avila, O'Brien found the most significant literary model of her career. She particularly admired the way in which the saint's subversive technique enabled her to circumvent the Inquisition, whilst still advancing her quest for women's spiritual, sexual, and intellectual liberation. Teresa was an ideal role model for O'Brien as she attempted, through her fiction, to challenge the status quo in post-independent Ireland. In the opening pages of *Teresa of Avila*, O'Brien writes that the opinions and assumptions about the saint are her own and are a result of her 'long reflection on a markedly individual and dangerous fellow creature' (T 9). Teresa was a proponent of individualism who operated within her own moral code and she was a literary artist whose writings challenged the boundaries set by a Church propagated censorship system. O'Brien invented Teresa of Avila in the likeness of herself and, thus, the Spanish saint became the ideal role model for an avant-garde feminist writer who questioned the conventions of normative sexuality, and was seen as 'individual' and therefore 'dangerous' to the guardians of the Irish Free State.

Conclusion

‘It would be fitting to recognise her [...], not alone for her personal achievement, but for her intransigent commitment to European culture.’¹

A year before Kate O’Brien died in England, aged seventy-six, in the Kent and Canterbury hospital, John Jordan, her friend and critic, appealed for O’Brien’s unique contribution to Irish letters to be officially acclaimed. However, her work would not be celebrated as Jordan had requested, neither before her death nor in the period thereafter. The reluctance to recognise her work is reflected in a passage from an obituary in *The Irish Times*:

Perhaps she [Kate O’Brien] was unfortunate in the period in which she lived. Born fifty years earlier she would have been a best seller to the end of her days. Fifty years younger she might have welcomed the freedom of which another Irish writer of the same name and sex has been able profitably to take advantage.²

The writer of ‘the same name and sex’ referred to here is Edna O’Brien whose capacity to address issues common among Irish women of the twentieth century owes much to her predecessor’s courage in introducing to the literature of a misogynistic and censorial Ireland the questions of female autonomy, self-definition, and sexual freedom.

Unlike Joyce or Beckett, O’Brien’s legacy in terms of the generation of Irish writers who followed her is rarely acknowledged, yet it should not be underestimated. In 2004, John McGahern recalled that because O’Brien was absent from the literary magazines that he had fervently read during the 1940s, ‘I didn’t realise how good Kate O’Brien was until much later. She was written out of that time as a serious writer while she was still alive.’³ O’Brien was omitted from Irish periodicals after *The Land of Spices* was banned in 1941 until *That Lady* was published in 1946, and there is no doubt that the censorship of two of her novels

¹ John Jordan, ‘Kate O’Brien: First Lady of Irish Letters’ (1973), in Hugh McFadden (ed.), *Crystal Clear: The Selected Prose of John Jordan* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2006), p. 227.

² ‘Kate O’Brien dies in Canterbury’, *The Irish Times* (14 August 1974), p. 9.

³ John McGahern to Frank Shovlin (2 May, 2004). In private possession of Frank Shovlin.

resulted in her being somewhat marginalised in her own country. The reissue of a selection of her novels in the 1980s was the catalyst for a renewed critical interest in O'Brien; however it is only in recent years, through a steady reassessment of her work by writers such as Mentxaka, that her 'intransigent commitment to European culture' has begun to be acknowledged.⁴

In the closing passages of *Farewell Spain* O'Brien reveals the rationale behind her love of Spain:

Fatal attraction between persons is an old poets' notion that some of us still like to believe is possible and occasional, though not probable – and Spain seems to me to be the *femme fatale* among countries. Though many would claim that for lovely France. For me, however, it has been Spain. So true is this that I have hardly seen any other countries. Always I go back over the Pyrenees. My love has been long and slow – lazy and selfish too, but I know that wherever I go henceforward and whatever I see I shall never again be able to love an earthly scene as I have loved the Spanish. Except some bits of Ireland, bits of home. But that is different. Though Ireland is as beautiful as any country on earth, I am native to her, and therefore cannot feel the novel thrill of her attraction. One does not mix up the love one feels for a parent with the infatuations of adult life. And with Spain I am once and for all infatuated.⁵

Here, O'Brien makes it clear to the reader that it is Spain that drove her aesthetic, and not France, as in the case of other writers who were associated with the artistic avant-garde that flourished in Paris during the inter-war period.⁶ O'Brien's allusion to Paris could also indicate her identification with lesbian writers such as Gertrude Stein, H.D., Marianne Moore, Djuna Barnes, and others who Maroula Joannou's argues:

were modernists, in the sense that like Joyce and Pound they were avant-garde writers and bohemian expatriates. But they were also significantly different from their male counterparts in that they did not live conventional heterosexual lives, some being lesbian or bisexual, and were sustained by female friendship networks that gave them the freedom to express non-normative textual and sexual identities. Situated in Paris

⁴ Jordan, 'Kate O'Brien: First Lady of Irish Letters', p. 227.

⁵ Kate O'Brien, *Farewell Spain* (London: Virago, 2000), p. 227.

⁶ James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and Ezra Pound were associated with the artistic avant-garde which flourished in the inter-war period. See Jean-Michel Rabaté, 'Joyce the Parisian', in Derek Attridge (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce 2nd edn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 52.

these women invested in new ways of writing to liberate themselves from gendered restrictions upon their freedoms (emphasis in original).⁷

If Spain is substituted for Paris then O'Brien fits this paradigm. Like the above group of writers, the creative stimulus of her foreign milieu allowed her to discover herself as a woman and as a writer. This thesis has demonstrated that her engagement with Spanish literary culture gave her the framework to deal with issues pertinent to her Catholic middle-class female protagonists, and the difficulties she faced as a female writer in the Irish Free State. It also argues that certain traits associated with the literary avant-garde, which are present in the work of Espina, Benavente, Cervantes, and Teresa of Avila, were borrowed and adapted by O'Brien.

Defining the terms avant-garde and modernism is fraught with difficulty as both are open to interpretation and revision. However, O'Brien can certainly be included alongside writers such as Stein, H.D., Moore and Barnes who have been reconceptualised by revisionist critics as 'Sapphic modernists.' Indeed, as Laura Doan and Jane Garrity point out:

Over the past two decades, feminist scholars of literary modernism have extended Baudelaire's effort to link the Sapphic and the modern by deploying the phrases 'sapphic modernism' and 'lesbian modernism' as part of a wider strategy to expand the high modernist canon, including a more diverse group of writers, and perhaps even constituting a literary subgenre.⁸

For most of its history, modernism has, as Peter Childs puts it, 'predominantly been represented in white, male, heterosexist, Euro-American middle class terms.'⁹ Nonetheless, as Doan and Garrity have noted, the reconceptualisation of certain aspects of modernism has enabled critics to redraw the parameters of what has been a traditionally male centred canon. Yet, despite the attempt to include the achievement of women writers within modernist studies, O'Brien has been, as Mentxaka argues:

⁷ Maroula Joannou, 'Modernism, Modernity, and the Middlebrow in Context', in Maroula Joannou (ed.), *The History of British Women's Writing, 1920-1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 2.

⁸ Laura Doan & Jane Garrity (eds), *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 6. In the late nineteenth century the French poet Charles Baudelaire described the lesbian as 'an evocative symbol of a feminised modernity.' See *ibid*.

⁹ Cited in Joannou, 'Modernism, Modernity, and the Middlebrow in Context', p. 3.

constantly described as a “popular novelist,” on account of her themes and style. Aligned to the “family saga” and the “romance” genres, part of the construction of O’Brien as popular by critics has to do with preconceptions of women’s writing, and what critics see as her dependence on (rather than subversion of) popular genres.¹⁰

Mentxaka may be correct as although the themes of O’Brien’s novels surround issues typically seen as the female domain – romance and family – she does not promote the traditional view that a woman’s place is in the home. Instead her narratives demonstrate a radical feminism that espouses self-determination. The ‘women’s writing’ that Mentxaka refers to above was first given the label of ‘middlebrow’ during the 1920s, and is the concept under which O’Brien’s fiction has been erroneously categorised.

The middlebrow novel was derided by proponents of high modernism for its emphasis on sentiment and for a forced and ineffective attempt at cultural and intellectual achievement. Virginia Woolf, for instance, mockingly suggested that the middlebrow was written by a person of ‘middlebred intelligence who saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself or life itself.’¹¹ Nicola Humble argues that this contempt ‘is compounded partly, I would suggest, of class snobbery, with the middlebrow seen predominantly as the readership of the lower-middle class, and partly of a sense – probably correct – that highbrow culture was under threat from the middlebrow.’¹² The middlebrow was dependent on a particular sort of reading culture in the inter-war years. The combination of commercial libraries, book clubs, best-seller lists and newspaper and magazine reviews formed the basis of what came to be labelled ‘middlebrow culture’ and created a new sort of readership for fiction: mass middle-class, suburban and predominantly female.¹³ Demand and expectation led to the creation of a body of writing written for women,

¹⁰ Aintzane Legaretta Mentxaka, *Kate O’Brien and the Fiction of Identity* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2011), p. 102.

¹¹ Cited in Nicola Humble, ‘The Feminine Middlebrow Novel’, in Joannou (ed.), *The History of British Women’s Writing*, p. 98.

¹² Humble, ‘The Feminine Middlebrow Novel’, p. 98.

¹³ John Baxendale, *Priestley’s England: J.B. Priestley & English Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 20.

and largely by women, that demonstrated a considerable number of shared preoccupations and concerns, for example: romance, marriage, family, motherhood, and the home.¹⁴ Certainly, the contemporary consensus saw the popular middlebrow as a particularly feminine sphere with George Orwell stating that ‘roughly speaking, what one might call the average novel – the ordinary good-bad, Galsworthy-and-water stuff which is the norm of the English novel – seems to exist only for women. Men read the stuff it is possible to respect, or detective stories.’¹⁵

As discussed in Chapter Two, O’Brien’s first novel *Without My Cloak* (1931) was described in contemporary reviews as a family narrative in the style of Galsworthy’s *The Forsyte Saga* (1906-21). Moreover, in 1937, her reputation as a writer of middlebrow fiction was augmented by the Irish feminist Hannah Sheehy Skeffington’s claim in a lecture she gave in London that O’Brien was the ‘The Irish Galsworthy.’¹⁶ This labelling of O’Brien’s early work meant that her subsequent literary output was viewed in similar terms; yet, to dismiss her as a middlebrow novelist, which, in Orwell’s words, was a writer of the ‘the ordinary good-bad, Galsworthy-and-water stuff’ would be remiss. Instead, this thesis has demonstrated that O’Brien was a feminist avant-garde writer whose willingness to embrace a cosmopolitan culture and experiment with writing style, genre, voice, and themes had much in common with the modernist novelists of her generation. In addition, O’Brien’s admiration for James Joyce, one of the most significant high modernist writers of the early twentieth century, should not be underestimated, as the numerous references to his work which appear throughout her literary corpus is testament to her desire to emulate him.

When Joyce wrote *Ulysses* (1922) he set himself the task ‘of writing a book from eighteen different points of view and in as many styles, all apparently unknown or

¹⁴ Authors who are generally considered to be writers of middlebrow fiction include Margery Allingham, E.M. Delafield, Stella Gibbons and Rosamond Lehmann. See Humble, ‘The Feminine Middlebrow Novel’, p. 101.

¹⁵ Cited in Humble, ‘The Feminine Middlebrow Novel’, p. 101.

¹⁶ Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O’Brien: A Writing Life*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p. 69.

undiscovered by my fellow tradesmen.’¹⁷ Although O’Brien did not reach the heights of artistic innovation displayed in *Ulysses* she did, however, adopt some of his methods. For example, in *The Land of Spices* (1941) her subtle use of the ‘Uncle Charles Principle,’ a term that Hugh Kenner applied to Joyce’s version of free indirect discourse, has generally gone under the radar of critics.¹⁸ However, Mentxaka notes in her analysis of *Mary Lavelle* (1936) that ‘O’Brien’s favoured point of view here is that of the modernists: third person free-indirect style.’¹⁹ Thus, O’Brien’s achievement as a modernist novelist is starting to gain acknowledgement. Free indirect discourse was used in *Don Quixote*, and as discussed in Chapter Three, Cervantes’ experimental novel was a major influence on O’Brien’s aesthetic. Significantly, Joyce alludes to Don Quixote and Sancho in *Ulysses*, as he laments the innate lack of artistic creation amongst Irish writers.²⁰

O’Brien was as deeply committed to Ireland as any of her literary colleagues, but like Joyce she warned Irish writers against sealing themselves off from other traditions. For both these Irish writers, the influence of other European cultures was crucial to their artistic vision. Following on from Joyce O’Brien recognised ‘that Irish cultural provincialism could be redeemed only if a proper concern with nationality was combined with an acceptance of the riches of European culture.’²¹ In an article of 1965 entitled ‘Irish Writers and Europe,’ O’Brien described ‘writing to a high standard’ as ‘non-parochial and free.’²² For her, Ireland could be itself not through a ‘self-absorbed antiquarianism, but through acceptance of her position as a European nation with links to the intellectual and artistic concerns of the

¹⁷ James Joyce to Harriet Weaver (24 June 1921) in Stuart Gilbert (ed.), *Letters of James Joyce*, vol. 1 (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), p. 167.

¹⁸ See Hugh Kenner, *Joyce’s Voices* (London: Dalkey, 2007), pp. 15-38, and for an example of O’Brien’s adaptation of the Uncle Charles Principle see Kate O’Brien, *The Land of Spices* [1941] (London: Penguin 2006), p. 186.

¹⁹ Mentxaka, *Kate O’Brien and the Fiction of Identity*, p. 112.

²⁰ See James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Bodley Head, 1986), p. 158.

²¹ Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social & Cultural History, 1922-2002* (London: Harper Perennial), p. 156.

²² Kate O’Brien, ‘Irish Writers and Europe’, *Hibernia*, (March 1965), cited in *Stony Thursday Book 7* (Limerick, Limerick Arts Council, 1981), pp. 36-37.

Continent.’²³ O’Brien’s fear for the future of the literature of her own country is re-iterated in ‘The Art of Writing,’ which she wrote as her own career was drawing to a close. In the final paragraph she is hopeful that the current crop of novelists ‘will keep Ireland in the European stream.’²⁴ Perhaps the closing sentence of that essay sums up for her what constitutes ‘the art of writing’ as she refers to a the Spanish writer and critic George Santayana: “Imagination generates as well as abstracts; it observes, combines and cancels; but it also dreams.” Always, thank Heaven, it dreams.’²⁵

²³ Brown, *Ireland: A Social & Cultural History*, p, 156.

²⁴ Kate O’Brien, ‘The Art of Writing’, *University Review*, vol. 3, no.4 (Spring, 1964), p. 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

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