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DESTABILIZING TRADITION: GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND POSTNATIONAL  
IDENTITY IN FOUR NOVELS BY IRISH WOMEN, 1960-2000

by

Sarah M. Nestor, B.A., M.A.

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,  
Marquette University,  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

May 2012

ABSTRACT  
DESTABILIZING TRADITION: GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND POSTNATIONAL  
IDENTITY IN FOUR NOVELS BY IRISH WOMEN, 1960-2000

Sarah M. Nestor, B.A., M.A.

Marquette University, 2012

This dissertation examines four novels that represent Irish women and girls confronting the typical narrative of Irish national identity in the twentieth century. The post-independence construction of Irish national identity depended upon prescriptive roles that aligned with its founders' beliefs about the nation's ethnic homogeneity and moral superiority. Irish women's identity and roles as wives and mothers were imperative to upholding this idea of the nation, particularly its morality. Irish women were therefore charged with maintaining well-defined gender roles and the nuclear family in an effort to define a distinctive Irish identity. Thus, when women's roles are challenged or changed the idea of the nation and national identity are also challenged or changed.

This study finds that novels by Edna O'Brien, Maeve Kelly, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Anne Enright depict typical Irish national identity as masculinist, essentialist, inaccurately monolithic and, ultimately, damaging. The novels assert the need for alternatives by portraying the multiplicity of Irish experiences and identities, particularly for women and girls. In considering the ways in which these novels reimagine Irish women's identity and social roles, I employ the term "postnational identity" to show that these novels are reaching beyond typical mid-twentieth century ideas about Irish national identity to develop a more complex picture of the relationship between women's roles and Irishness.

In the first chapter I analyze how Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue* (1987) represents the harmful effects of prescriptive gender roles as the characters struggle to supersede the Irish nation's feminine ideal. The second chapter traces the ways in which Maeve Kelly's *Necessary Treasons* (1985) resists cultural consensus and asserts the need for women's political participation in order to create social change. In the third chapter I consider the ways in which Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing* (1999) challenges the social norms of national identity by advancing the need to recognize more inclusive and diverse identities. Finally, the fourth chapter argues that Anne Enright's *What Are You Like?* (2000) asserts that the ideal of Irish national identity is broken because it created unfair gender divisions that victimized women.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sarah M. Nestor, B.A., M.A.

### *In Memory of Nana*

The realization of this dissertation stems from the many educators who have inspired and encouraged me as I have pursued my academic endeavors. With gratitude I would like to take this opportunity to thank the teachers from Indianapolis Public Schools, Scecina Memorial High School, Saint Mary's College, the University of Indianapolis and Marquette University. I am especially grateful to the faculty at Marquette for their guidance and support during my doctoral studies.

I would like to express my gratitude to my dissertation committee for their patience, support and suggestions. As the chair of my dissertation committee, Amelia Zurcher has been an invaluable resource who has generously given her time and feedback. I found her willingness to read and discuss my numerous drafts incredibly helpful as she gave me the self-confidence to pursue my argument. Michael Patrick Gillespie supported this project from its inception and has kindly shared his knowledge of Irish literature, history and culture. I appreciate the insights he has provided throughout the writing process and as my argument has evolved. John Boly's perceptive comments encouraged me to consider different aspects of my analysis and ways in which I can develop these chapters in the future. I enjoyed sharing my project with my entire committee and appreciate all of their feedback and advice. While I acknowledge the help and insights I have received, any faults are of my own making.

I would like to thank my fellow graduate students for enriching my experience at Marquette. In particular, I would like to thank my dissertation writing group, including Colleen Fenno, Karen Galbraith, Vida Muse and Kelsey Squire, for their camaraderie and encouragement. I appreciate the many conversations I have shared with my peers at Marquette and the ways in which they have shaped my intellectual growth.

While there are numerous people who have helped me in both small and large ways throughout my doctoral studies, I owe special thanks to my family because their love and support has encouraged and sustained me through the years. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement I have always received from my sister, Susan Nestor Laratta, as well as her willingness to chat for hours. With gratitude I acknowledge the sacrifices it has taken for me to succeed and I am eternally grateful to my husband, Brock Babcock, for both his selfless generosity and constant support. Without my husband's love and encouragement this dissertation would not have been completed and it is with deep appreciation that I acknowledge his help in realizing my dream.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my Nana—Mary Ann Scribner—a woman who always found a way to persevere.

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## Introduction

### Gender, Sexuality and Postnational Identity in Irish Literature

Ireland is a nation that has experienced profound social, cultural and political changes throughout the course of the twentieth century. Many of these changes are related to the concept of nation and national identity as Ireland established its independence and defined anew its character in the first-half of the twentieth century. As Ireland socially and politically sought to redefine the Irish nation and national identity, Irish writers from Sean O'Casey, W. B. Yeats and James Joyce, to John McGahern, Brian Friel and Roddy Doyle, have engaged with the ideal of the Irish nation and national identity. While these male authors, and many others, have been studied in relation to the Irish nation and national identity, few women writers have been considered in a similar fashion. Thus, as Heidi Hansson notes, the dominance of male authors discussed in relation to the Irish nation and national identity prompts the question of “how far national or postnational writing is perceived as an exclusively male domain” (218). Despite the exclusion of many Irish women writers from discussions of the nation and national identity, Irish women have been addressing these topics in their writing—both explicitly and implicitly—throughout the twentieth century. While some literary critics contend that Irish women have been “trying to find a place for themselves within the narrative of the Irish nation” (Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women* 1), I argue that many Irish women writers, particularly the ones considered in this study, criticize the typical narrative of the Irish nation as masculinist and inaccurately monolithic. Such a narrative, they argue, damages Irish women by enforcing restrictive models of behavior that are primarily based upon gender and sexuality. My study consequently focuses upon four novels by women writers that depict Irish women and girls

in order to understand some of the ways in which Irish national identity and, more specifically, gender and sexuality, are contested and complicated.

After achieving national independence, Ireland's political leaders redefined Irish national identity and established restrictive social roles that were meant to differentiate Ireland from England and assert its moral superiority. As the Irish nation and national identity were redefined, gender and sexuality were important aspects to defining social roles and establishing models of behavior. Ultimately, a singular, essentialist national identity developed that prescribed specific roles for both men and women. In particular, Irish women were primarily defined as wives and mothers and were expected to maintain the nuclear family and home. These expectations were most concretely imposed by the Irish Constitution of 1937 because it "aimed at cultivating and developing the nation through the bodies of its population" (Harrington 424). The nationalist hegemony expressed in the constitution sought to construct a singular Irish national identity. This construction of a singular national identity depends upon the assumption that national identities are both natural and monolithic. In Ireland, singular national identity presumed a masculine, Gaelic, Catholic and heterosexual archetype. The novels of this study, I argue, respond to this masculinist and monolithic national narrative by challenging Irish women's roles and, thus, the idea of the Irish nation. As the 1937 Constitution indicates, Irish women's social roles were imperative to Irish national identity and, in particular, the nation's morality. Thus, by challenging Irish women's roles these novels destabilize singular national identity and construct new identities better suited to the complexities of Irish society.

My decision to focus upon the ways in which particular Irish women's novels challenge the typical narrative of Irish identity developed from my reading of the texts and the characters and themes portrayed. My study considers the idea of the nation and national identity because

few studies, as Heather Ingman notes, have considered what the nation and national identity look like from the point of view of Irish women's novels (*Twentieth-Century Fiction* 27). As my study moves from novels published in the 1960s to novels published at the end of the twentieth century, a narrative emerges of these novels criticizing Irish national identity as homogenous, singular, fixed and, ultimately, damaging. The novels challenge this damaging ideal by depicting women—and through them, Irish national identity—as actually being heterogeneous, constructed and fluid. The novels consequently assert that the ideal of national identity is not ideal but flawed. Hence, the novels destabilize singular national identity and imagine complex Irish identities that do not depend upon fixed gender roles or ideal behaviors. While the novels do not move beyond the idea of the nation and national identity, their character depictions and revisions of Irish national identity invoke a postnational perspective because they acknowledge regional connections without assuming natural or monolithic experiences. Although I do not consider the novels in this study to be postnational, I contend that their portrayals of Irish women and girls align with postnational theories of identity. All of the novels considered in this study ultimately argue that identity is complex and multiple and that a uniformity of Irish identity and thought does not exist. Central to my analysis, then, is the suggestion of postnational identity models that I find in these texts and that, I propose, derive from the novels' concerns with female gender identity, female empowerment, and the role of nationalism, particularly in its complicity with the patriarchy.

The terms national and postnational are, of course, dependent upon the definition of nation. A nation is most often understood as a constructed community that is defined through its shared customs and experiences. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an “imagined community” that



depends upon cultural or ethnic similarities (6). Today, a nation is most often understood as a constructed entity rather than a natural grouping of people. Consequently, nationalism and the construction of national identity depends upon a clear definition of what the nation is and what it should be (Kornprobst 410). Nationalism, according to Nancy Curtin, “requires a single, unifying, myth of the nation ... [that can] comfort and affirm, but still exclude” (211-212). Essential to nationalism and national identity is the notion of exclusion because nationality depends upon defining who belongs to the nation and who does not. These demarcations, Markus Kornprobst argues, are decided by elites who “invent and re-invent nations ... in order to maximise their material interests” (403-404). According to Kornprobst, four primary beliefs directed the construction of the Irish nation, including: “nations are ancient, nations are ethnically homogenous, nations have clearly defined boundaries demarcating Us from Them, and the uniqueness of each nation necessitates a unique polity tailored to the nation’s needs” (410). The construction of Irish national identity in the twentieth century upheld these beliefs as its post-independence founders advocated that Ireland was an ancient nation of ethnic homogeneity that was able to maintain uniqueness despite colonial rule (Kornprobst 410-411). Ireland’s nation-builders consequently created restrictive norms of behavior as they defined Irish identity in terms of being natural, or singular, and collective, constructing both an imagined community and identity.

National identity may not in itself be damaging, but those nations that construct and maintain a singular or essential collective national identity often create restrictive and harmful expectations of behavior. This was the case in post-independence Ireland as political leaders defined a singular national identity that was primarily based upon differentiation from others,

gender divisions and exclusion (Guibernau 72; Mayer 2-3). This is exemplified by Douglas Hyde, one of Ireland's nation-builders, who advocated Irish homogeneity and uniqueness:

In one word, we must strive to cultivate everything that is most racial, most smacking of the soil, most Gaelic, most Irish, because in spite of the little admixture of Saxon blood in the north-east corner, this island is and will ever remain Celtic to the core, far more Celtic than most people imagine ... On racial lines, then, we shall best develop, following the bent of our own natures; and, in order to do this, we must create a strong feeling against West-Britonism, for it – if we give it the least chance, or show it the smallest quarter – will overwhelm us like a flood. (169)

Hyde's perspective highlights the exclusionary variant of Irishness that depended upon a perception of Gaelic authenticity. Ultimately, this Gaelic authenticity was often tied to Catholicism as nationalists sought to define both Irish identity and behavior. This resulted in the establishment of rigid gender roles that aligned with Catholic beliefs and assumptions of Irish morality and that primarily limited women to the home. Monolithic images of Irish women, then, persisted throughout the twentieth century because of the persistence of exclusive identity discourse in Irish politics. Consequently, "viewing women's constructed images paradigmatically as parallel trajectories in Benedict Anderson's concept of the imagined nation, we notice the myths, literal and metaphorical, of women's roles, encoded with women's identitarian values, in the same ways that Anderson illuminates how national identities and 'imagined communities' have political meanings, values, and histories" (Ahmad 3). These myths entail the construction of monolithic images of Irish women that include, for instance, the image of Mother Ireland, an image that was far removed from the experiences, expectations and ideals of contemporary Irish women (Meaney 3). As Ireland's social reality has changed, it has become

imperative to consider the limited ways in which Irish women have been defined and the ways in which new identities are being imagined.

The myth of Ireland's ancient, homogenous and exclusionary identity has been challenged throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as the past has been contested and global culture has become even more influential. While Ireland is still identified as a geographical entity whose inhabitants more or less-define themselves as Irish, the ways in which national identity is expressed are varied and individual (Curtin 212). This shift away from nationalist exclusivism towards an embrace of multiple and shifting identities—the “varieties of Irishness”—rejects the singular or essential forms of Irish nationalism. The concept of postnational identity emerged in an effort to acknowledge the complexities of identity in today's nation-states as nationality no longer encompasses the varied relationships of belonging and identity. In using the term postnational identity, I do not contend that there has been a linear shift from nationalism towards postnationalism but rather that these theories have evolved simultaneously in order to recognize the different ways in which identity is expressed and imagined in Ireland. Postnational identity acknowledges the significant cultural and political changes in Ireland while also accepting the various ways in which identity has been constructed and expressed. Postnationalism does not seek to supplant the nation-state, but asserts that homogenous and exclusionary forms of nationalism no longer sufficiently account for individual identity. As nationalism and postnational arguments have evolved the “imagined oneness” of national identity has been challenged and the contexts and meanings of belonging in society have been reframed (Hedetoft and Hjort xv). Thus, postnationalism changes the formation of national homogeneity by recognizing the various types of identity and belonging that co-exist—although often uneasily—in the nation-state. I therefore find postnational theory useful as an analytic tool

for understanding the varieties of identities depicted in these novels and the ways in which they intersect with the perception of an essential, or singular, national identity. Postnational identity has been defined as multiple, fluid, inclusive and accepting of cultural differences (Delanty 20-21), which not only allows for the different expressions and forms of Irish identity, but also accepts and acknowledges diverse identity formations and the complex ways in which people negotiate their identities.

Postnationalism it is not easily defined by scholars, but its simplest definition is as a political condition in which a culture has progressed beyond the nation or nationalism. However, to what extent postnationalism moves beyond the nation and nationalism is dependent upon interpretation. Today, few scholars would argue that “the nation has been overcome by a post-national order or that national identities have been rendered obsolete” (Delanty and Rumford 92). Instead, postnationalism offers ways to understand the transformations of nations and national identities as they can no longer be constituted by or reduced to unitary or homogenous states (Delanty and Rumford 93). Postnationalism consequently offers an alternative to exclusionary forms of nationalism and belonging. Whereas the “age of nationalism and the nation-state demanded that the political and prepolitical community, citizenship and ethnicity/identity, be imagined as one, the postnational era threatens to disaggregate the two...” (Hedetoft and Hjort xvi). Postnationalism, then, takes issue with ethnic or exclusionary nationalism as it defines identity within restrictive norms and seeks to homogenize the nation. In contrast, according to Jürgen Habermas, a postnational society would only realize a “limited patriotism of an identification with the constitution (a ‘constitutional patriotism’) – rather than on territory, cultural heritage or the state” (Delanty and Rumford 55-56). As postnational theories have developed, notions of identity and belonging have been essential as theorists focus on the various

ways in which individuals define or redefine themselves with and against a region or community.

In order to recognize both the multiplicity and commonality of a region, postnationalism considers citizenship to be its shared commitment because it resists “ethnic essentialism, gendered or ascriptive social categories and political authoritarianism” (Frost 279).

Postnationalism consequently considers a more global orientation and emphasizes civic choice and membership over assumed ethnic or cultural absolutes.

Given the particular ways in which Irish identity can be defined, my goal is to consider how a sense of self is conceptualized and depicted in works by individual Irish women writers as they represent what it means to be both Irish and a woman in the twentieth century. These novels represent the varieties of Irish narratives and identity that signal the ways in which Irish identity has been contested and reconceptualized in the twentieth century. I chose to focus upon four novels by women from the twentieth century in order to provide comprehensive discussions of these particular texts and their relation to the theories of national and postnational identity. In juxtaposing works by Edna O’Brien, Maeve Kelly, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Anne Enright, I provide close readings that examine the themes of these texts and the specific, individual ways in which they challenge a monolithic, essentialist Irish national identity and produce accounts of the self. In seeking to illustrate the intersections between these texts and their depictions of identity, I consider novels produced throughout the second half of the twentieth century that acknowledge and explore the ongoing practice of reimagining Irish women’s roles and their relation to the Irish nation. The historical sweep of these four novels reflects a continued literary interest in the identity of Irish women and their roles in the nation, as the novels raise similar questions and consider the role of Irish women as signifiers of national identity. The common themes and questions in these novels consequently connect them and assert similar conclusions about Irish

national identity. These texts do not adhere to a predetermined women's literary or feminist agenda, but they share similar thematic focuses as they depict Irish women and their relationship to the nation. This differentiates my study from recent surveys of Irish women's literature that assume a united purpose in women's writing. My treatment of these novels can also be distinguished from a number of recent studies that provide useful introductions to Irish women's writing as they survey numerous works, rather than offering detailed analysis of specific texts. Thus, while Christine St. Peter's *Changing Ireland: Strategies in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (2000), Rebecca Pelan's *Two Irelands: Literary Feminisms North and South* (2005) and Heather Ingman's *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (2007) provide important insights into Irish women's writing that were first established in Ann Owens Weekes's *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition* (1990), my study builds upon their surveys in order to offer a thematic analysis of four particular novels and the ways in which they represent identity and selfhood. Consequently, I consider the diverse representations of identity in these novels and the ways in which they complicate identity in postnational ways.

Ultimately, this study argues that postnational theory often aligns with the concerns of the novels as they challenge the ideology of Irish nationalism, the construction of a singular Irish national identity, and depict the formation of individual sense of self. In "Habermas and Post-National Identity," Gerard Delanty argues that postnational identity assumes that there are multiple identities within a nation and that these identities are based on cultural differences rather than consensus (20), to which I would add that postnationalism assumes that identity is constantly evolving because it is ultimately heterogeneous, constructed and fluid. This concept of postnational identity challenges the monolithic, essentialist Irish national identity that was often propagated throughout the twentieth century. As previously explained, this monolithic ideal

depends upon women's roles because the nation as an idea hinges on prescribed social roles. Thus, the concept of postnational identity has particular relevance for Irish women who, for most of the twentieth century, were upheld to a restrictive and damaging identity ideal. The complex ways in which these novels contend with identity therefore provide new insights into twentieth century Irish society and the construction of individual identity.

The aim of *Destabilizing Tradition: Gender, Sexuality and Postnational Identity in Four Novels by Irish Women, 1960-2000* is to demonstrate the thematic intersections between these novels and the ways in which they depict Ireland and Irish women's identity. Hence, I examine Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue* (1987), Maeve Kelly's *Necessary Treasons* (1985), Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing* (1999) and Anne Enright's *What Are You Like?* (2000) because these novels represent a diversity of Irish women's experiences and depict Ireland at different points in the twentieth century. I have chosen these specific texts, not with the aim of representing any 'best' books, or evolution of Irish women's fiction, but with the purpose of considering novels that portray what life is like for women in twentieth century Ireland. I did not attempt to consider a wider range of novels published by women in the second half of the twentieth century, instead choosing to focus on a few novels in order to address the specific ways in which they depict different ethnic, cultural, gender and class conflicts in the Irish nation. Even though my aim is to demonstrate how these novels intersect with twentieth century concerns about identity, the individuality of each novel is emphasized. Even so, these four novels perform similar work as they invite readers to consider the diversity of Irish women's experiences and the complexity of identity in twentieth century Ireland. In particular, these novels depict gender identity as open and fluid, rather than a fixed state or destiny, and in

the process challenge the ideal of Irish womanhood and offer alternatives to narrow national identity.

While these four writers address the problem of identity and selfhood, the novels differ in their narrative form and ways in which they represent the historical, familial and socio-political ideologies that restrict social roles. As a result, the ways in which these novels depict identity are compelling because they each address specific aspects of the sexual, national, political, or familial realm. Consequently, these novels do not form a monolithic whole but similarly highlight the ways in which Irish national identity is restrictive and damaging to Irish women. The novels depict Irish women's experiences as much more diverse than the ideal of singular Irish national identity suggests, and they assert that Irish national identity is actually heterogeneous, constructed and fluid, rather than fixed, essential or singular. One of the ways in which the novels convey the multiplicity of Irish women's experiences is through their utilization of gender and sexuality, which, I contend, most effectively challenges singular national identity. Their depictions of gender and sexuality effectively challenge singular national identity because Irish nationality was dependent upon limited gender roles, restrictive sexuality and a fixed state of identity. Consequently, I connect the characters' negotiations of their gender and sexuality with their national identity because these are the primary ways in which social roles are defined by the nation. Irish women, according to social, political and ecclesiastical norms, are supposed to be wives and mothers whose sexuality is limited to procreation and the nuclear family. By depicting women who do not conform to these expectations the novels complicate the social roles of Irish women and, thereby, national identity because Irish women's gender roles and sexuality are important to defining the nation. The novels challenge masculinist and monolithic, essentialist Irish national identity by depicting women's changing social roles



and asserting the need for new paradigms that account for the diversity of Irish women and their sexuality. By complicating Irish female gender and sexuality, the novels advance an understanding of communal identity that is heterogonous, diverse and fluid, aligning with a postnational model of identity.

### **Redefining Irish National Identity in the Twentieth Century**

Rigid perceptions of Irish national identity developed in light of colonial stereotypes disseminated by the English and in accordance with militant Irish nationalists who were seeking to separate themselves from England. English characterizations of Ireland often centered on depicting the nation and its people as women, or sometimes children, who needed to be cared for. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, English writers and commentators tended to attribute “feminine” characteristics—innocence, frailty, irrationality—to the Irish and “masculine” characteristics—courage, strength, rationality—to the English (Lengel 5). This focus on emotions, particularly irrational emotions, aligned the Irish with contemporary perceptions of women in England. Historian Susan Kingsley Kent notes that British politicians, journalists, satirists, novelists and clergy equated the Irish with women throughout the nineteenth century because “like women, they were impulsive, inconsistent, contradictory, passionate, and prone to exaggeration, and until they demonstrated a manly kind of behavior, they would be ruled as if they were women, dependent and in need of a controlling hand” (213). The English differentiated the Irish from themselves via gender binaries and made clear distinctions between the colonizers and colonized. These distinctions constructed hierarchical relationships based on the assumption that the Irish were inferior and the English superior (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 10). Consequently, this gendered dichotomy enforced power relationships and

distinctions of nationality and race because the Irish could never be English (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 228).

While English imperialist rhetoric was based upon the assumption that the Irish could never be English, Irish nationalists also sought to differentiate themselves from the English by using gendered language to unite and inspire supporters of Irish independence. Depictions of Irish masculinity were crafted against gendered British descriptions of Irish nationality and emphasized “masculine” attributes that portrayed Irish men as the guardians of the female nation. These gendered perceptions of nationality established distinctive roles for Irish men and women in the twentieth century. Alan Finlayson illustrates the common depiction of Irish men and women:

The man is the brave hero boldly defending Her, his motherland, the source of his being. But She is only this in as much as it is he that protects Her, worships Her, and defends Her honour. She is sometimes warrior, most times mother, passive yet an activating image, often weeping and always suffering. Her position is entirely dependent on the actions of the male heroes at the same time as they appear to be acting only in response to Her. (93)

These nationalist perceptions offered fixed ideas of how men and women should behave and enforced gender divisions that defined men as strong, intelligent, and rational, and women as weak, foolish, and irrational (Lengel 7). The hierarchy established by colonialism was consequently imposed upon the relationships between Irish women and men, as women were charged with possessing and reproducing Irish purity and tradition within the home, while men focused on establishing and protecting the modern Irish nation.

The Irish nationalist movements of the twentieth century focused on developing depictions and beliefs about the physical assertiveness, strength and rationality of young men in order to counter colonial feminization and in order to express Irish ownership of the nation. Finlayson contends that in colonial Ireland “the woman-nation is both goddess (source of power, object of veneration) and victim (assaulted by colonialism, in need of guidance from the state). Men can never ‘be’ the nation — they can only ‘have’ it — while women can never ‘have’ the nation, because they ‘are’ it” (98). This nationalist depiction of Irish women is reflected in literature from the first-half of the twentieth century as women were commonly portrayed as the suffering emblems of colonialism. In *Irish Women Writers*, Weekes explains that Irish women have not fared well in textual representations:

Nationalist iconography of the Irish Literary Revival drew upon a long tradition of portraying women as emblematic figures, whether as maidens or mothers: Dark Rosaleen, Cathleen ni Houlihan, Mother Ireland. While such portrayals might appear to suggest that Irish women were regarded with affection, even importance, in the social realm, they were in fact indicative of an appropriation of women’s bodies in the interests of nationalism, with a corresponding discursive elision of the lived experience of actual Irish women. (104)

As Weekes notes, images of Irish womanhood were entwined with that of the Irish nation as literary representations often considered “the nation as woman; the woman as national muse” (Boland 136). The conflation of the Irish nation and women is demonstrated by Ireland’s various names, most of which are allusions to women, and include: Mother Ireland, the virginal

Hibernia, Sean Bhean Bhocht<sup>1</sup>, Caithleen Ni Houlihan<sup>2</sup> and the Dark Rosaleen. These references are found throughout twentieth century literature and depend upon nationalist definitions of women's identity. Irish poet Eavan Boland argues that such representations render women "passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status" and leave Irish women outside their own national literature (136).

Irish nationalists were successful in gaining independence from England in 1922 when the Irish Free State was established. However, Ireland's female motif persisted as the image of Mother Ireland continued to be invoked throughout the twentieth century and women were primarily defined as wives and mothers. According to Angela Martin, women were relegated to the domestic sphere because of Irish male nationalists and their attempts at nation-building, which depended "upon the cooperation of Irish women as mothers and hearth-keepers in the prototypical turn-of-the-century Irish home" (67). Thus, despite imperialism's end in Ireland, gendered discourse and divisions continued to influence the Irish nation, national identity and, subsequently, Irish literature. In *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (2002), Antoinette Quinn argues that the literary representation of Ireland as a female victim has had adverse consequences for Irish women, such as masking the reality of women's lives. Quinn writes that the image of woman as nation

is accused of diverting readers' attention from the harsh lives of those actual rural and urban women whom James Connolly characterized as the slaves of slaves. It is also censured for depriving women of literary agency, consigning them to the status of passive

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<sup>1</sup> The Sean Bhean Bhocht, or as it is phonetically spelled the Shan Van Vocht, is a folk song written when the Irish were expecting help from revolutionary France in 1798. Translated it means "The Poor Old Woman" and was used as a symbolic reference for Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> A symbol of Irish nationalism personified as a woman that has often been used in literature. W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, Sean O'Casey and many other writers have incorporated the "old woman" into their writing.

emblems and ornaments, instead of authors. That the feminization of the national occluded realist representations of Irish women is undeniable. The emblematic image of Ireland as a vulnerable and dependent woman was promoted as a totalizing symbol which would transcend actual attention from diverse differences of class, creed, ethnicity and location. (Vol. V 895)

The image of the Irish nation as a woman was used to unite men politically, but ultimately it marginalized women in both the Irish nation and literature. Thus, throughout the twentieth century many women were marginalized as they were defined solely by Ireland's singular national identity.

Twentieth century Irish national identity was cemented under the leadership of Eamon De Valera and the 1937 Constitution. De Valera was particularly concerned about the ways in which the Irish nation and national identity were defined. De Valera favored an Irish nation that would govern in accordance with the Catholic Church and his nationalist campaign focused on establishing a government based upon a constitution that would be "Irish from top to bottom" (De Valera qtd. in Boyce 350). De Valera's sense of Irishness appealed to many nationalists and was rooted in an idealized vision of rural Ireland. De Valera's ideal of an "agrarian, homely, Catholic society" was based on images of "an Ireland of small farms, of a God fearing, manly peasantry; a frugal Ireland, turning its back on materialism" (Boyce 351). These images aligned with an elitist vision of Ireland that defined the nation as ancient, homogenous and unique (Kornprobst 410). De Valera's idea of the nation represents one of the first times an Irish man in an Ireland politically independent of England defined what it meant to be Irish. According to De Valera, the Irish nation would be based upon a "people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit" (Boyce 351). De Valera's ideal of a Catholic,

Gaelic nation appealed to many people because “it was comforting to know that a great national leader could articulate such sentiments, and tell the world what Irishmen were really like, even if most of them were not really like that at all” (Boyce 351). Sentiments like De Valera’s were popular because the 1920s and 1930s were times when the Irish were concerned with proving they could govern themselves and disprove the stereotypes and slurs which had been attached to them during colonialism (Valiulis 100). Irish culture was consequently romanticized as Irish nationalists crafted virtuous depictions of themselves in contrast to the immorality of the English.

As De Valera and his colleagues focused on defining the Irish nation as morally superior to that of England, women increasingly became the means by which Irish morality was represented and upheld. According to historian Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, women were relegated to the home after the establishment of the Irish Free State because politicians and ecclesiastical leaders wanted to define Ireland as a “pure and virtuous nation” (101). The women who helped Ireland gain independence were no longer expected to take active roles in government but were expected to return to the home and focus on their lives as wives and mothers. Valiulis explains that “legislative restrictions and ecclesiastical prohibitions reinforced the idea that women’s citizenship was rooted in their role in the family as wives and mothers. It was through motherhood especially that women performed their service to the State ... [and therefore] Motherhood was given a political status” (101-102). Irish women, as wives and mothers, were expected to reproduce and instruct children about Catholicism, the Gaelic language and traditions, and Irish culture. As women were charged with upholding the family unit and Irish culture, their status in society became the primary way in which Ireland proved its moral superiority. Consequently, perceptions of gender and sexuality became intertwined with the ideal of Irish morality.

The 1937 Constitution reinforced the homogenous construction of Irishness by defining gender roles and proclaiming that the family unit was the essential unit of the Irish nation. The Constitution states that “by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall therefore endeavor to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home” (Article 41.2). The Constitution defined women as wives and mothers and mandated that they support the Irish nation by remaining in the home, fulfilling their reproductive duties, and supporting the family unit. Thus, the 1937 Constitution declares:

The State recognizes the family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law. (Article 41.1)

The Constitution reflected nationalist morality and provided a constant reminder of the social morals deemed appropriate in Catholic Ireland. For women, this meant adhering to the roles of wife and mother within the sanctity of marriage and the family unit. The 1937 Constitution illustrates the influence of Catholicism upon the State as “the significance of the Catholic Church in politics, society and culture led to its being accorded a ‘special position,’ tantamount to *de facto* recognition of its status as a State Church” in Article 44.1.2 of the Constitution (Welch 91). This clause remained in place until 1972 when it was removed with the passing of the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution Act. While the recognition of the “special position” of the Catholic Church was removed, political policies throughout the twentieth century continued to uphold conservative social policies that aligned with Catholic ideology, including the illegalization of divorce, contraception, abortion and pornography. Thus, the Irish nation’s sense of moral superiority was rooted in the beliefs of Catholicism.

There were few legislative and social changes from the 1930s through the 1960s and with few exceptions women remained within the home in Ireland. However, as women's rights movements continued in the United States and Britain, some Irish women also began to publicly challenge "the patriarchal assumption that a woman's main role should be that of homemaker and childbearer" (Weekes, *Contemporary Irish Fiction* 103). Many women began to rally against Irish social and political policies that isolated women and enforced restrictive legislation, including the "marriage bar" that did not allow married women to hold jobs, the housing industry that did not allow women to have a mortgage without a man's endorsement, and the banning of women from juries (Kenny 247). Ireland's restrictive policies were challenged beginning in the 1960s and throughout the 1970s as Irish women writers, journalists and activists joined together to organize the Irish Women's Liberation Movement.<sup>3</sup> Irish citizens active in the Irish Women's Liberation Movement sought to address the disparities in Irish society that had created a history of repression and silence most of Irish society preferred to ignore. Irish women writers played an essential role in challenging the social and political norms of mid-twentieth century Ireland by depicting alternative images and narratives of the Irish, particularly of women and children. As Irish society changed throughout the second half of the twentieth century, an increasing number of female writers emerged. In *Two Irelands*, Pelan explains:

The changes that occurred in Irish society since the 1960s, such as the easing of censorship laws, the shifts away from isolationist policies, an increase in publishing opportunities (including feminist presses), as well as the constitutional separation of church and state, have meant that, unlike their predecessors, contemporary women

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<sup>3</sup> The first organized Irish women's equality movement began in 1970 with a group of women that included Mairin de Burca, Mary Maher, Nell McCafferty, Moira Woods, Mairin Johnston, Rosita Sweetman and Mary Kenny. See Anne Stopper's *Mondays at Gaj's: The Story of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2006).



writers from the Republic of Ireland have been free to challenge traditional orthodoxies—and challenge them they have. But unlike women from revolutionary societies who have used this freedom to express nationalist struggle . . . or to endorse an existing national identity, much women's fiction from the Republic of Ireland in the contemporary period reveals a rejection and undermining of nationally privileged images, such as the mother figure and women as figures of purity and passivity, as well as challenging the hegemonic role of the Catholic Church in women's lives. (*Two Irelands* 3)

Unlike women from other postcolonial societies, Irish women writers have rarely advanced the nationalist agenda in their fiction but have instead challenged the ideals upon which the Irish nation was formed. The idea of the Irish nation originated from beliefs about the nation's ethnic homogeneity and moral superiority, which resulted in the dissemination of a monolithic and essentialist Irish identity that limited women's opportunities. I argue that the proliferation of a monolithic or singular national identity depended upon well-defined gender roles that restricted Irish women to the nuclear family and home. Thus, fiction by Irish women often challenges women's roles in the nation because the idea of mid-twentieth century Ireland depended upon women's compliance with social and political norms that sought to restrict women to the home and nuclear family. This study argues that from the 1960s through the 1990s, many Irish women's novels took as a big part of their purpose a challenge to what they saw as singular national identity, and the proposition of a new kind of identity that is inclusive, multiple and fluid, suggesting a postnational understanding of identity.

## **Towards a Postnational Irish Identity**

In response to Ireland's social, political and cultural changes in the 1990s, scholars began to use the term "postnational" (or "post-national") to explain the nation's transformations and global influences from a different vantage point. In particular, Richard Kearney's 1997 study entitled *Postnationalist Ireland*, established an Irish postnational paradigm and launched discussions about the possibility of Ireland realizing a postnational condition. These discussions highlight the indeterminate definitions of postnationalism, showing that postnational identity is less a fixed concept than a complicated process, one that is manifested through multiple, overlapping relationships (Cliff 118). According to Kearney, a shift from nationalism towards postnationalism would preserve cultural memories of nationalism while also superseding them (59). Kearney argues that postnationalism "does not solicit a liquidation of the past but is a reinterpretation or *Aufhebung*" (59). Kearney envisions a postnational identity that does not rely upon the concept of nation but finds more appropriate forms of expression that foster a fuller way of being by recognizing "that we are all happily mongrelized, interdependent, impure, mixed up" (186-188). Kearney's model proposes that "national identity [would] appeal to an historical past and transnational, European identity to a projected future, [while] regional identity represents a commitment to participatory democracy in the present" (246). Ireland would therefore shift from nationalist independence to European interdependence and in the process achieve a multiplicity of new identities (Harrington 426). According to Kearney, postnational identity moves "away from nationalist exclusivism" in order to "embrace multiple and shifting identities" (Harrington 426). Kearney asserts that postnationalism advances new modes of identity and self-definition that are not dependent upon the nation-state because they are not limited to specific categories or Irish nationalism (15).

In Ireland, according to Matthew Brown, postnationalism developed “as a response to the continued hegemony of nationalism in Irish Studies” (94). Brown notes that Kearney’s *Post-nationalist Ireland* was an attempt “to move beyond or sidestep inherited nation-state models of national identity” (94). Building upon Kearney’s ideas, Brown claims that postnationalism “signals another way of seeing things,” just as Irish literature offers new ways to imagine the Irish nation and identity (Brown 92-93). In particular, Brown’s analysis of novels by John Banville and John McGahern supports my use of postnational theory as he asserts that postnationalism should “question the foundational categories upon which the nation has and will continue to constitute itself” (104). Brown considers the different ways in which Banville’s and McGahern’s novels respectively depict cosmopolitan and regional worldviews and whether or not these diverging views can be reconciled. Accounting for today’s fluid national boundaries and global culture, Brown contends that postnationalism can account for “the complex interplay between Ireland and Europe (and, indeed, Ireland and the rest of the world) ... [because] postnationalism will better illuminate the conditions by which the individual must approach the overlaps between regional and cosmopolitan world views” (104). Ultimately, Brown acknowledges that postnationalism encourages different ways to interpret the influences of both regional and global categories upon individual identity. Intrinsic to his study, is locating the ways in which Banville’s and McGahern’s novels intersect with and diverge from monolithic, essentialist national identity in order to contest the ways in which national identity has been conceptualized in Ireland. Similarly, my study considers the ways in which O’Brien’s, Kelly’s, Ní Dhuibhne’s and Enright’s novels contest and struggle with a monolithic, essentialist construction of Irish national identity that they assert is inaccurate and harmful, advocating the need to recognize alternative or postnational identities.

Considering the transformation of Irish nationalism and identity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Catherine Frost establishes a postnational political model and the ways in which she believes Ireland aligns with this model. Frost asserts that the postnational model requires “that populations move away from nationally-based attachments and towards a new ideal” (278-279). This ideal would entail “the de-politicisation of nationalism, the de-nationalisation of the state and a broadening of social responsibility” (Frost 279). According to Frost, the postnational model emphasizes civic participation and rights, increased engagement in public life and self-government, increased public debate and critique, as well as addressing systematic inequalities (279). And Frost finds that elements of this postnational framework have been taking place in Ireland, including the “introduction of innovative hybrid citizenship options, a heightened focus on legal rights and equalities and a concern with public participation” (290). While these changes suggest a shift towards postnationalism, Frost ultimately finds that although “the dominant form of Irish nationalism has undergone change, it is not automatically clear that it has been replaced...[and] discussions about ‘what it means’ to be Irish suggest that attachment to particular modes of belonging remains strong” (289). Frost concludes that Irish nationalism and national identity have transformed but that these changes do not fully adhere to a theoretical model of postnationalism. However, she also asserts that Irish national identity has changed and become more diverse, establishing a shift towards postnational identity.

Acknowledging that there is little cohesion in defining postnational identity, sociologist Gerard Delanty developed Habermas’s postnational theories in order to more clearly define the term. While Delanty exclusively applies his definition to the case of Northern Ireland, it is equally relevant to discussions of the Irish nation and literature. Incorporating various critical accounts of postnational identity, Delanty claims:

Post-national identity is best defined as an identity that is based on multiple identities, and can therefore be contrasted to national identity which is based on an exclusive reference to a single identity. A second characteristic is that it is not focused on the territorial nation-state but on more reflexive reference points. A third characteristic is that post-national identity is post-historical: unlike national identity it is not defined by reference to the past or a myth of origins but by the present. A fourth characteristic is that it is not focused on cultural traditions: rather than presupposing cultural consensus, post-national identity is based on the acceptance of dissent and cultural difference. A fifth characteristic is that if we conceive identity in terms of a continuum ranging from positive to negative, post-national identity involves an emphasis more on positive identification than on negative: the 'we' is defined less by negative reference than by what 'we' have in common and in broadening the 'universe of obligation.' (21)

Delanty's definition provides a useful framework for understanding postnational identity because it establishes specific criteria. In particular, Delanty's model of postnational identity can be used to analyze social, political and literary narratives because it displaces narrow nationalist narratives and broadens national identity. Delanty views postnational identity as a challenge to the nation-state and singular national identity and does not assert that the nation-state has been superseded. Thus, for the purposes of this study postnational identity explains the ways in which the narratives distance themselves from an exclusionary nationalism and contemplate alternatives to singular national identity; however, these novels do not move beyond the nation or assert an anti-nationalist perspective. I do not claim that these novels separate or destroy all affiliations with the Irish nation, but that they offer alternatives to the narrative of a monolithic, essentialist national identity that align with a postnational understanding of identity.

While the term “postnational” can be contentious in an Irish context, it has proved useful to studies of Irish literature because it allows the reader to understand how novels can both engage with the ideas of the Irish nation and advance alternative ideals and national identities. Accordingly, in her article on postnationalism in the Irish novel, Heidi Hansson asserts that postnationalism can be interpreted as either a temporal or political concept. Hansson explains, “In its temporal meaning, ‘postnationalism’ would simply mean that which succeeds either nation or nationalism and does not necessarily imply any interrogation of these as previous stages of development. As a political idea, however, postnationalism would primarily be a challenge to nationalism as an ideology” (219). Hansson further adds that she views postnationalism “as the label for a political attitude that rejects both ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ in all their varieties as insufficient tools for the analysis of contemporary and global experience” (221). Although Hansson’s concept of postnationalism is broad—incorporating any literary text that challenges the Irish nation or nationalism—it does not provide specific requirements or a recognizable framework. Hansson does not build upon previous definitions of postnationalism or postnational identity but reduces these terms to vague concepts of dissonance and rejection. While I agree with Hansson’s assertion that the search for identity and the deconstruction of common Irish myths in Irish fiction can be connected to postnational theory, I do not believe that these challenges to Irish national identity make novels—particularly Anne Enright’s *What Are You Like?*—postnational. Instead, I believe that the realization of postnationalism is much more radical than defined by Hansson because it is a theory that not only seeks to challenge the norms of society but ultimately rejects the concepts of nation and national identity. Thus, a postnational novel would more than challenge the concepts of nation and national identity but would in fact seek to disengage or eliminate nation and national identity from its framework.

To utilize the term postnational assumes that the concepts of nation and national identity will be contested and therefore the novels of this study frequently challenge these concepts. My study consequently incorporates the previous definitions of postnationalism and postnational identity, particularly Delanty's, in order to analyze the ways in which the novels depict the historical, familial and socio-political influences on the characters and the ways in which they define themselves with and against these paradigms. By employing the concept of postnational identity, I seek to illustrate another way of understanding the Irish nation and identity in these novels. While I demonstrate the ways in which these novels align with national notions of identity, my aim is to show the alternative ways in which the narratives depict community and identity. The novels ultimately complicate the notion of Irish identity by defining it as heterogeneous, fluid and constructed—advancing a postnational perspective—rather than homogenous, fixed and essential. What is offered here, then, is a strategy: *Destabilizing Tradition* reads these novels in context with a postnational theory of identity and the choice of these four novels indicates the range—not the limits—of that theory. These specific readings do not, of course, exhaust the ways in which postnationalism functions in twentieth century Irish literature, nor do I suggest that these are the only texts that move readers towards an alternative or postnational identity. Challenges to Irish national identity and the suggestion of a postnational identity is, in other words, a prevalent narrative in twentieth century Irish fiction that has yet to be fully examined.

### **Destabilizing Tradition: Gender, Sexuality and Postnational Identity in Four Novels By Irish Women, 1960-2000**

The first chapter of this study discusses *The Country Girls Trilogy*, O'Brien's tale of growing up in mid-twentieth century Ireland and its consequences for Irish women. The three

novels that make up this collection were originally published separately as *The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girl* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1963) but were published together with an added epilogue in 1987. These are O'Brien's first published novels and depict Caithleen "Kate" Brady's adolescence and adulthood, as well as her relationship with her longtime friend Baba Brennan. *The Country Girls* portrays an underrepresented segment of Irish society—rural, Catholic and impoverished women—and the ways in which they negotiate Irish national identity and social norms. This chapter traces the ways in which Caithleen and Baba establish their identities with and against an essential, singular national identity that the novel asserts is harmful to Irish women. Thus, this chapter argues that the trilogy demonstrates how gender and sexuality subvert singular national identity and challenges restrictive social and political institutions, particularly the institution of marriage. Through its depiction of Caithleen and Baba, the novel explores national paradigms that limited women to the domestic sphere and the ways in which social, political and religious norms reinforced women's roles in society. After considering the ways in which the women of the trilogy align with and against national identity, this chapter argues that the novels destabilize mid-twentieth century perceptions of a singular national identity and assert the need for new and diverse models of Irish femininity and national identity.

Chapter two of this study examines Maeve Kelly's *Necessary Treasons*. Set in 1970s Limerick, Kelly's novel depicts Eve Gleeson's growing involvement with the Irish women's movement and the conflicts this causes within her life, particularly with her fiancé. Kelly's young protagonist is naïve and optimistic when she begins her involvement with the local women's movement and it is her recognition and interpretation of the gender biases and divisions in Irish society that challenge the reader, as well as contemporary social and political norms.



Kelly most effectively depicts societal gender divisions by juxtaposing Eve's perspectives with those of Hugh Creagh, her middle-aged fiancé. Initially both Eve and Hugh accept the conventional gender roles of Irish society, but as Eve witnesses the abuse and imbalances of many of the novel's marriages she begins to question the validity of social and political norms that are based upon gender divisions. Eve's interpretation of the power imbalances in Irish society leads her to challenge conventional gender roles and the absence of women's and children's rights within society, particularly the family unit. The institutions of marriage and family are central throughout the novel as Eve initially contemplates marriage to Hugh and then becomes an advocate for women physically and sexually abused by their husbands. Eve helps these women negotiate their marriages and the law and in doing so challenges the status of married women in Irish society. Hence, this chapter analyzes the effects of gender and sexuality on Irish identity, particularly as defined within the institutions of marriage and family, and argues that the novel's representation of women subverts commonly held beliefs that sought to uphold a singular national identity. The novel demonstrates the extent to which the purity of the nation obscured real women's lives and experiences by depicting the realities of domestic abuse and sexual assault. Through the attention it pays to physical and sexual abuse, Kelly's novel acknowledges the history of violence against women and children in Irish society and participates in a more inclusive Irish history that recognizes that there is a multiplicity of Irish narratives, rather than one narrative of the Irish nation. In addition, the novel argues for women's political participation as a means for creating social change in Ireland.

The social and political climate of the 1970s is also the setting of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing*. This novel begins in Dublin when a group of teenagers set out on their summer journey to Donegal's Gaeltacht region with the purpose of improving their Irish.

Primarily told from Orla Crilly's perspective, this is a narrative of adolescent development as Orla and the other girls depicted in the novel encounter social challenges and adult concerns. Coming from various geographical, social, political and religious backgrounds, the young women of the novel challenge the perception of a singular national identity and demonstrate its harmful effects as they seek acceptance and a place within the Irish nation. In particular, as Orla negotiates her Dublin and Donegal identities she seeks to maintain her perception of singular national identity because she fears social rejection. However, Orla's separation from her mother, as well as her interactions with the girls of the novel, allows her to intellectually develop and interpret the social norms that impact and order her life. In the Gaeltacht, Orla is finally able to recognize the fluid and heterogonous nature of Irish identity because she is able to develop her own opinions and thoughts. The novel consequently prompts an understanding of multiple Irish experiences and identities that disrupt the national ideal. Hence, the novel's awareness of a multiple and diverse Irish identity moves readers towards a postnational identity, although the novel is not postnational. *The Dancers Dancing* does not denounce Irish nationalism but seeks to understand some of the prevailing ideas and images of gender, sexuality and ethnicity, as well as class. The novel subsequently destabilizes Irish national identity and reveals that a singular national identity has been destructive, particularly to Irish women, because it has often privileged one person—especially one gender—over another.

The final chapter of this study examines *What Are You Like?* by Anne Enright. *What Are You Like?* depicts twins—Maria Delahunty and Rose Cotter—unknowingly separated at birth and their journey of reconciliation with each other. In 1985, Maria realizes that she may have a sister after a brief love affair with a man who carries a picture of a young girl that looks exactly like her but is not her. Maria's realization that she not only has a sister but a twin drives the

remainder of the narrative as Maria and her twin seek the truth about their existence.

Encompassing not only different time periods but different cities as well, the novel presents the societal influences that lead to the girls being separated and the ways in which they cope with their perceptions of their missing self and subsequent awareness of their familial connections.

While Maria's and Rose's anticipated meeting drives the narrative, it is their family histories that illustrate the societal factors that lead to their separation and ignorance of each other's existence.

The narrative also exposes the marked differences between their lives and their mother's by depicting the choices available to women in the 1960s in comparison to those available in the 1980s. The choices Maria, Rose and their family make are integral to their identities as Maria and Rose negotiate their roles within their families and nations. Thus, Enright's novel demonstrates the ways in which identity is fluid and changeable and ultimately destabilizes conventional forms of Irish national identity. As a result, postnational theory supports the novel's depiction of Irish national identity as multiple and diverse, even though the narrative does not move beyond the nation.

## 1 Diagnosing the Nation

### The Ill Effects of Marriage, Motherhood and Family in Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue*

Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue* (1987) chronicles Caitheleen Brady's and Baba Brennan's exploration of identity from childhood through adulthood. The three novels of the trilogy, *The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girl* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964) are remarkable because of the ways in which they foreground issues of sexuality, female desire and gender divisions in order to confront national standards of Irish identity. The trilogy depicts Caitheleen's and Baba's physical and psychological journeys as they negotiate their identities and travel from the rural west of Ireland to Dublin and then London. Throughout the trilogy the narrative examines the women's relationships with men, including Caitheleen's failed relationships with older men and Baba's financially successful but loveless marriage, as well as the women's affairs. This chapter consequently traces the ways in which Caitheleen and Baba establish their identities with and against national constructions of essential, singular femininity that the novel asserts are harmful to Irish women. In particular, this chapter argues that the trilogy uses gender and sexuality in order to criticize Irish national identity and restrictive social and political ideals, particularly the institution of marriage, because sex was often seen as a transgressive act in mid-twentieth century Ireland. Through its depiction of Caitheleen and Baba, the novel explores national paradigms that limited women's roles to the domestic sphere and the ways in which social, political and religious norms reinforced women's limitations in society. In particular, the novel's depiction of Caitheleen and Baba from childhood to adulthood emphasizes their struggles and asserts that the Irish nation's maintenance of a natural or essential national identity is harmful and damaging to women. After considering the ways in which the women of the trilogy align with and against national identity, this chapter

argues that the novels subvert national identity in order to assert the need for new and diverse standards of Irish femininity and national identity.

Irish nationalism in the twentieth century developed in response to colonialism and from a desire to establish a national culture. The tenets of Irish national identity arose from independence and the establishment of the nation-state as Irish nationals sought to distinguish Ireland from England. As a result, twentieth century Irish national identity emphasized homogeneity and Catholic morality as defining features of the Irish, while also emphasizing the importance of the family unit and women's roles as wives and mothers. National identity is frequently defined as essentialistic and based on a single or natural identity that depends upon exclusion and cultural consensus (Delanty 20). In addition, gender norms are often an intrinsic part of establishing national identity ideals and behaviors. Gender roles have played a central role in Ireland's nation building as the repetition of gendered behavior helped construct national identity in accordance with gender divisions. Men primarily defined Irish identity at the onset of the twentieth century and "frequently [sought] to sustain control over reproduction and representation of both sexuality and nation and over the boundaries of the nation, through defining who [was] included in, or excluded from it" (Mayer 7). Thus, according to Tamar Mayer, nationalism often privileges one gender, one nation or one sexuality over another (1). In Ireland, this has been manifested as the empowerment of men over women and heterosexuality—especially the institution of marriage—over homosexuality. Accordingly, Irish national identity is most often defined as male and heterosexual, while Irish women are charged with reproducing the Irish nation, supporting the family and upholding morality in order to support Irish nationalism. The novels consequently assert that Ireland's social and political systems emphasize the importance of marriage, motherhood and family to Irish women and in the process reinforce

restrictive gender roles. Through its depiction of nationalism, the novel demonstrates the belief that Irish women belong to the nation and fulfill national identity when they adhere to social and political norms that emphasize their domesticity. However, the novel argues that these domestic ideals fail to account for the reality of many women's lives as they struggled to maintain their homes, finances, families and selves.

O'Brien's depiction of Irish womanhood counters national identity and the domestic ideal by undermining marriage, motherhood and the family unit. The juxtaposition of Caithleen and Baba throughout the trilogy further emphasizes the harmful effects of national identity and restrictive gender norms. O'Brien claims that she crafted two female heroines in order to highlight the gaps between what an Irish woman should be and what she actually was. In an article published in the *New York Times*, O'Brien explains why she chose to have two female protagonists: "Realizing that the earlier heroines [in the tradition of Irish writing] were bawdy and the later ones lyrical I decided to have two, one who would conform to both my own and my country's view of what an Irish woman should be and one who would understand every piece of protocol and hypocrisy that there was" (O'Brien, "Irish Heroines"). Accordingly, Caithleen represents the conventional Irish woman and national ideals, while Baba is a cynic who recognizes the social scripts that structure Irish masculinist culture and the reality of her circumstances. While their perspectives on life and their fulfillment of Irish social expectations differ, they both distance themselves from the rural Irish village they were raised in and seek to live lives different from their mothers'. Juxtaposing images and characters representative of Ireland's traditional values against the realities of alcoholism, sexism, materialism and sexuality, the novel depicts the conflicting influences on young women and, through Caithleen, the naïveté with which young Irish women negotiated the world. Although Baba is not naïve, her

circumstances echo those of her mother and are not that different from Caithleen's. The trilogy consequently depicts the nation's restrictive gender divisions and indicts the institution of heterosexuality and, thus, marriage, in limiting women to the home as wives and mothers. While Caithleen and Baba's sexuality is one of the ways in which they negotiate their identities and relationships with men, their sexuality is ultimately not a liberatory mechanism within the novel but reflects the destructive forces of restrictive social practices and singular national identity.

Caithleen and Baba's relationships with men are integral to the novels as the women use their sexuality to both disrupt Irish social and political norms and navigate their identities. O'Brien's trilogy is often discussed and written about because of its depiction of sexuality and the fact that it was one of the first Irish novels to explicitly portray Irish women's sexual desires and behaviors. O'Brien's novels brought Irish women's sexuality to the forefront of not only literary discussions but social discussions as well. Lisa Colletta and Maureen O'Connor note that O'Brien was both "hailed for her lyrical prose and vivid female characters and attacked for her frank treatment of sexuality and alleged sensationalism" (3). O'Brien's depiction of sexuality was considered vulgar and shocking by some readers and the novels of the trilogy were banned by the Irish Censorship Board in the 1960s. While the Censorship Board was known to ban books for even the slightest allusion to sex, O'Brien's novels were considered especially lewd because they depicted women expressing and enacting their sexual desires in a manner that the censors found "pornographic and obscene" (Colletta and O'Connor 4). The banning of O'Brien's novels demonstrates that sexuality is politically relevant and that sexual identities, according to Veronique Mottier, "are not merely the expression of natural instincts, but are social as well as political constructs" that constitute a primary component of modern identity (113). The trilogy depicts mid-twentieth century Ireland—particularly the 1950s and 1960s—and represents Irish

culture and women's experiences of living in mid-twentieth century Irish society. These experiences repeatedly reveal the harmful effects of Ireland's social and political practices towards women. Through their depiction of sexuality, the novels assert that Ireland's restrictive norms have created devastating social problems—particularly for women—that the institution of marriage reinforces.

Marriage, motherhood and the family unit have been intrinsic to the fixed constructs of gender and national identity in Ireland. The novel demonstrates that these tenets of Irish womanhood are not natural or essential attributes but constructions of national identity that the women of the novel often fail to fulfill. As Caithleen and Baba struggle with and against national identity and norms, the novel illustrates that Irish identity must be challenged and reformed in order to create social change. In particular, the novel contends that Irish womanhood cannot continue to be confined to the domestic sphere and the institution of marriage because these limitations reinforce gender imbalances and create expectations impossible to fulfill. The trilogy emphasizes that marriage, motherhood and family are the primary ideals for Irish women and that these three tenets of Irish society influence Caithleen and Baba into reliving many of their mothers' dysfunctional experiences. Consequently, this chapter argues that nationalism's socialization of young women in the mid-twentieth century created restrictive and harmful models of behavior that were based upon exclusion, cultural consensus and a singular national identity that Caithleen and Baba are ultimately unable to supersede but that the novel contends need to change.

### **In the Home: Identifying the Effects of Marriage and Domesticity**

The novel's examination of gender and the institution of marriage illustrates that Irish nationalism utilizes heterosexuality in order to normalize gender divisions and regulate gender



roles. In twentieth century Ireland, marriage was the hegemonic form of heterosexuality, which was not only culturally dominant but also an overwhelmingly common experience for Irish women. As feminist scholars have long argued, heterosexuality incorporates more than just sexual desires or sexual acts because it is an institution that encodes and structures everyday life. As an institution, heterosexuality has been socially constructed as a natural or fixed identity that is primarily based upon gender divisions. For most women, heterosexuality “is an identity defined primarily in relation to desire for men and/or the social and economic privileges associated with being the partner of a man, in particular the traditional roles of wife and mother” (Richardson 2). Sexuality is therefore understood not only as encompassing sexual preference but also as forming identities, family structures, sexual practices and relationships. This is because sexuality “is not simply the ahistorical expression of natural instincts. [But] It is a historical experience ... that is constructed through various discourses” (Mottier 116). Heterosexuality is informed by the various discourses of gender, class, race and culture, and often reinforces social and political ideologies that form everyday life (Richardson 1). As heterosexuality represents ideals about normality and facilitates social structures and relationships it has considerably impacted the ways in which women and men identify themselves with relation to one another. The gendered hierarchy most often depends upon the dominance of men over women and the appropriation of women’s bodies and labor by men. Heterosexuality, then, is experienced as being more than a sexual preference; it structures the way men and women live and perceive themselves and each other.

The trilogy demonstrates that heterosexuality has played a significant role in shaping Irish social and political ideals. For instance, throughout the twentieth century the importance of marriage and children was emphasized by religious and political leaders who believed the

success of the Irish nation depended upon procreation and the stability of the Irish home.

Throughout the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s and 1960s Irish women were regarded as symbols of Irish nationalism and were primarily relegated to the home by political and ecclesiastical policies that placed restrictions on women's opportunities in order to preserve the family unit and uphold Catholic values (Ingman, *Edna O'Brien* 254). Heather Ingman explains that women in mid-twentieth century Ireland were "confined to the home, restricted in their professional lives, and forbidden access to contraception, abortion and divorce" (*Edna O'Brien* 254). Irish social and political discourses frequently constructed and emphasized gender divisions and hierarchy in order to define male and female identities. The hyper masculinity of Irish male identity and the passivity of Irish female identity naturally accentuated the subordination of women in Irish society and created a masculinist culture in twentieth century Ireland. In this social and cultural context, O'Brien published fiction that illustrates concerns about women's roles and choices within Irish culture. Many of the trilogy's concerns are connected to heterosexuality and the identities available to women because of their position within social institutions that primarily limited to being wives, girlfriends, mothers or daughters. The trilogy quickly establishes marriage as the primary social and gender norm that the women of the novel—both Caithleen and Baba and their mothers—must contend with.

### **Romancing the Mother: Identifying the Ideals of Motherhood and Family**

The most influential models of Irish femininity for Caithleen and Baba are their mothers. Even though they are separated from their mothers as young girls—Mrs. Brady through death and Mrs. Brennan through distance—the trilogy emphasizes the ways in which Caithleen's and Baba's mothers influence their perceptions of marriage, motherhood and family. Through Caithleen and Baba's conformity to cultural expectation—marriage, motherhood and family—

the novel asserts that Irish women often repeat their mother's lives and perpetuate a cycle of frustration and discontentment. The opportunities available to Caithleen and Baba are central to the trilogy because the women's opportunities and choices illustrate the social and political norms that dominate their lives. Kristine Byron explains:

More than merely showing women's struggle for self-affirmation in the face of constricting social and legal norms, O'Brien's *Trilogy and Epilogue* deconstructs the prescribed roles of women in patriarchal Irish society. Dealing with issues such as motherhood, sexuality, religion, and marriage, the *Trilogy* exposes the ways feminine gender roles are constructed, offering a radical critique of a capitalist patriarchy that is particularly Irish and Catholic. (15)

In particular, the novels connect national identity to prescribed gender roles and in doing so demonstrate that singular notions of Irish femininity and national identity are destructive and harmful to Irish women. Chronicling the effects of compulsory heterosexuality and the institution of marriage, O'Brien illustrates Caithleen's and Baba's struggles with and against dominant cultural values that defend and cherish the family unit as being essential to Irish nationality. The novels assert the importance of family and marriage in Irish society and that this emphasis leads women like Caithleen to believe that their happiness can only be found through their husband and children. Drawing upon the national image of Irish femininity, O'Brien's representations of Irish women foil presumptions about who or what Irish women should be by exposing the negative effects of singular national identity—and the limitations created by national expectations—on Irish women's lives.

Caithleen and Mrs. Brady's limitations are established in the opening pages of the trilogy as Mr. Brady wields his masculine authority and the narrative illustrates the abuses of power that

are allowed to occur in sustainment of the family unit. The trilogy situates Caithleen and her mother as dependent upon Mr. Brady as they cope with his domestic abuse, alcoholism and financial irresponsibility. Although Mr. Brady does a poor job of supporting his family, his masculinity guarantees him privilege and dominance as the protector of the nation's primary social unit. Accordingly, the Bradys regulate their family by keeping their problems to themselves. Self-regulation in Ireland stemmed from the desire to preserve the nation and therefore

when social laws were transgressed in the family, self-preservation meant attempting to hide transgressions from the eyes of those who might punish them, whether it be the local community, the church, or colonial authority. The family cell thus remained the ideal unit group of society, while individual family cells regulated their public images and kept any instability under wraps. (Conrad, *Locked in the Family Cell* 9)

Mrs. Brady and Caithleen consequently conceal their family's instability in order to maintain the appearance of the ideal family unit. In doing so, the women sustain their subordination and Irish national identity. The Brady women therefore reinforce the novel's diagnosis that the nation's idealized images of Irish femininity create harmful effects and social ills.

The novels argue that women like Mrs. Brady often felt compelled to sustain the family unit and home because there were few options available to them outside the domestic sphere, particularly since divorce was illegal and Irish society viewed marriage and motherhood as the natural option for women. Consequently, Mrs. Brady tirelessly works to maintain the Brady family and home in order to fulfill social expectations despite the abuse and unhappiness she experiences while married to Mr. Brady. Social and juridical policies emphasized the importance of the family unit in Ireland and lead to Irish citizens regulating themselves, instead of contacting

authorities, when transgressions were committed. This is demonstrated by the fact that reports of domestic abuse decreased after the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 because domestic abuse was viewed as a family concern and not a State issue (Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women* 18). Elizabeth Steiner-Scott notes that the Irish Free State was reluctant to interfere with the private domain of the family under the premise that family interference would weaken the state and destabilize social order (qtd. in Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women* 18). While the Bradys increasingly find it difficult to keep their family's instability "under wraps" the town still overwhelmingly believes that Mr. Brady is a "gentleman, a decent man who wouldn't hurt a fly" (O'Brien, *Trilogy* 27). Although many of the town's citizens know that the family's financial ruin is imminent, most of the villagers do not connect this with Mr. Brady's drinking because they do not believe his behavior is problematic or a public concern. Even though Mrs. Brady's friends, such as Hickey, Jack Holland and the Brennans, know about Mr. Brady's reckless drinking binges they do not try to interfere or help Mrs. Brady and Caithleen. Instead, not only Mr. Brady, but the entire Irish family and social structure constrain Mrs. Brady and Caithleen to a life of poverty and violence within their family unit.

Although the narrative depicts the family as a conventional experience in Irish society, the stability of the family is exposed as tenuous and dependent upon the subordination and sacrifice of Irish women and children. The Bradys' interactions with one another—particularly Mr. Brady's abuse—demonstrate that the family's, and thereby the nation's, public stability is often coupled with private misery. The Bradys' miseries are depicted through Mrs. Brady's and Caithleen's fear as the trilogy emphasizes their hardships. The trilogy begins with Caithleen rising from the bed she often shares with her mother because the two offer each other comfort

from Mr. Brady. Mrs. Brady has already gone downstairs for the day and Caithleen's heart races as she remembers that her father's disappearance the previous night means that he has been out drinking. Caithleen and her mother live in fear of Mr. Brady and Caithleen wonders if her father will "shout, struggle, kill her [mother] or apologize" (6). Caithleen's desire for Hickey, the family's farmhand, to stay near the house in order to offer the women protection illustrates her fear of violence and abuse at the hands of her father. Mrs. Brady's and Caithleen's suffering reveals the detrimental cost of maintaining the nuclear family for Irish women. Furthermore, the novel's depiction of abuse and misery within the Bradys' home asserts the need to address the power imbalances that idealize women's passivity and sacrifice and privilege men over women.

Caithleen's mother is her closest confidant and friend as the two suffer through Mr. Brady's violent rants and drunken escapades in order to preserve their family and fulfill national ideals. Lily Brady's unhappy marriage is fraught with abuse and financial struggles that she is forced to endure because of social and political norms that maintain the importance of marriage and family above individual wellbeing. Mrs. Brady's disastrous marriage illustrates the prevailing gender norms that limit women to the home as wives and mothers and the restrictions these norms create for women, particularly in rural Ireland. For instance, Mrs. Brady is unable to report Mr. Brady's abuse because there were few resources available to abused women and the state often refused to involve itself in what were considered family affairs. Consequently, with few options and resources available Mrs. Brady endeavors to maintain her family and home despite Mr. Brady's destructive and abusive behavior. In depicting Mr. and Mrs. Brady's failed relationship, the novel counters national ideals of marriage and gender that limit women to the domestic sphere.

Mrs. Brady actually seeks to break the cycle of abuse and entrapment that she finds herself in by advising her daughter against marriage. Although Irish legislation maintained that women should live their lives within the home in order to achieve common good for the nation (*The Irish Constitution*, Article 41.2), Mrs. Brady attempts to dissuade her daughter from marriage because “anything” was better than marrying (O’Brien, *Trilogy* 67). Mrs. Brady’s admonishment that “anything” is better than marriage suggests that more than any other institution marriage limits women’s opportunities in early and mid-twentieth century Ireland. Marriage is further criticized by the fallacies of a singular national identity that naturalized and limited women’s roles to the domestic sphere, primarily as wife and mother. The only other socially acceptable option was to enter a convent and become a nun. Mrs. Brady’s preference for Caithleen to enter a convent is clear as she hopes to save her daughter from the brutal circumstances of her own life (Weekes, *Contemporary Irish Fiction* 109). The brutality of Mrs. Brady’s life stems from her marriage and the ideals of national identity that emphasize women’s limited roles. With limited choices available, Mrs. Brady would prefer her daughter to reject marriage and become a nun in order to be in a better social position in which to negotiate and resist men. While the convent affords women some authority and privilege within Irish society, the nuns are subjected to the same gendered behavior and ideals—particularly chastity, modesty and morality—that define married women. Consequently, whether an Irish woman chooses to be a nun or a wife both social positions are defined through heterosexual relationships that are dependent upon restrictive gender roles.

In the novel, Mrs. Brady’s dependency upon gender divisions and heterosexuality is illustrated when she tries to utilize her sexuality to save the Bradys’ home and land from foreclosure. Mrs. Brady is forced to rely on her sexuality because of the social and political

limitations that keep her from negotiating a new mortgage or selling their pieces of their land. Instead, Mrs. Brady turns to other men from the village for financial help which leads to her tragic death. Mrs. Brady drowns in a boating accident with Tom O'Brien, a married man with five children, whom she apparently approached for financial assistance. While the details about Mrs. Brady's excursion to Shannon Lake are never revealed, it seems her efforts to preserve her family's home propelled her to use her sexuality in order to garner favors from local men. Jack Holland reveals that Mrs. Brady asked him for money but that he could not help Caithleen's mother because he has limited financial assets. Mrs. Brady's financial dependency upon Mr. Brady and the other men in her life expose the economic gender imbalances that privilege men over women in mid-twentieth century Ireland. As Mrs. Brady seeks to trade her sexuality for monetary compensation, the trilogy asserts the need for new paradigms of Irish femininity and behavior that are not limited by singular national identity and restrictive gender norms.

Mrs. Brady epitomizes the sacrificial mother—a national ideal—as she is aged from the work and worry of her life, a tragic figure who has been broken by her marriage to a violent and abusive man. The family's suffering at the hands of Mr. Brady is consistently conveyed as Caithleen notes the bills her father hides, the broken lavatory and general disrepair of their home. Mrs. Brady is repeatedly left with the responsibility of caring for the farm, home and Caithleen as Mr. Brady spends their small income on alcohol. "Ah, that's life," Mrs. Brady reflects, "some work and others spend" (8). Mrs. Brady's resignation and sacrifice reinforces Caithleen's idolization of her mother because she believes her mother encompasses the feminine ideal. Caithleen even struggles to leave for school because she fears her father will kill her mother while she is absent. Mrs. Brady tries to soothe Caithleen's fears:



‘Don’t cry, love. Come on now, you better go. You have a nice little piece of cake for your lunch and I’ll meet you.’ She straightened the cap on my head and kissed me three or four times. She stood on the flag to look after me. She was waving. In her brown dress she looked sad; the farther I went, the sadder she looked. Like a sparrow in the snow, brown and anxious and lonesome. It was hard to think that she got married one sunny morning in a lace dress and a floppy buttercup hat, and that her eyes were moist with pleasure when now they were watery with tears. (9)

The worries that plague Caithleen and her mother stem from their struggles to maintain the nuclear family in light of the emotional and financial instabilities Mr. Brady creates. Even as Mrs. Brady comforts Caithleen it is apparent that their fears persist because they feel alone and incapable of changing their circumstances. Ultimately, the cost of maintaining the nuclear family proves to be fatal for Mrs. Brady as her death symbolizes the disparities between the public ideal and private reality. Unfortunately, Caithleen does not learn from Mrs. Brady’s tragic death because it only reinforces her idolization of her mother as the feminine ideal. Through the Brady family dynamic and Mrs. Brady’s death the trilogy identifies the Irish nation’s construction of the nuclear family as harmful because it privileges men over women and reinforces limited gender roles. The trilogy consequently asserts that the charade of public stability creates ideals that women cannot maintain or even live up to.

In contrast to the Bradys’ misfortunes, the Brennans enjoy a middle-class lifestyle in their rural village. Mr. Brennan is the local veterinarian and Martha Brennan married him for his middle-class status and money. Mrs. Brennan seems to have everything she could possibly need, especially when compared to Mrs. Brady, but is unsatisfied with her life and seeks attention and excitement from other men. O’Brien writes:

Martha was what the villagers called fast. Most nights she went down to the Greyhound Hotel, dressed in a tight black suit with nothing under the jacket, only a brassiere, and with a chiffon scarf knotted at her throat. Strangers and commercial travelers admired her. Pale face, painted nails, blue-black pile of hair, Madonna face, perched on a high stool in the lounge bar of the Greyhound hotel; they thought she looked sad. But Martha was not ever sad, unless being bored is a form of sadness. She wanted two things from life and she got them — drink and admiration. (30-31)

Mrs. Brennan's behavior creates a counter-narrative to Ireland's gender constructions of motherhood and family that sought to limit women to the domestic sphere. Mrs. Brennan actually uses gender divisions—particularly her sexuality—in order to manipulate men and satisfy her selfish desires for alcohol and admiration. Mrs. Brennan does not completely conform to the national construction of female behavior but seeks to construct an alternative lifestyle that allows her to live within the confines of conventional society while fulfilling her personal desires. Mrs. Brennan's actions further expose the disparities between the reality and ideal of Irish women because she does not conform to the moral or behavioral standards established by Irish nationalists. While Mrs. Brennan uses her gender and sexuality to her advantage, she does not depend upon men for her happiness or expect that her affairs will change her social status or create social change. Mrs. Brennan's depiction consequently criticizes the limited social scripts available to women and the ways in which national constructions of gender sought to normalize women's behavior.

The novel's depiction of Mrs. Brennan and Baba as alternatives to the nation's feminine ideal actually emphasizes the ways in which women are sexualized and limited to domestic roles. The novel shows sympathy for Martha and Baba that does not sentimentalize or ideologically

reinforce the nation's feminine ideal but identifies the impact of the nation's ideal upon women's behavior and options. In particular, the narrative identifies the idealized mother image that aligns motherhood with the Virgin Mary and depends upon women's subordination, passivity and sacrifice. Through Mrs. Brady, Mrs. Brennan, Caithleen and Baba, the novel not only depicts behavior—particularly sexual behavior—that undermines the nation's feminine ideal and criticizes the gender roles available to women. The juxtaposition of Mrs. Brady and Mrs. Brennan, as well as Caithleen and Baba, demonstrates the inadequacy of the gender roles available to Irish women. Consequently, the novel does not condemn the women's behaviors but the social and political norms that create such restrictive, and ultimately destructive, feminine ideals.

### **Leaving Home: Seeking New Standards of Heterosexuality and Marriage**

Although both Mrs. Brady and Mrs. Brennan fail to uphold conventional gender ideals, Caithleen and Baba understand the social expectations of Irish womanhood and its equation with marriage and motherhood that their mothers, society and school emphasize. At the age of fourteen, the girls begin attending a convent school in order to increase their educational knowledge and reinforce the importance of their morality. At the convent school, women's purity and chastity are upheld as ideal and the girls are forced to dress and undress under the cover of their dressing gowns. The girls are taught to ignore their bodies and sexuality in order to maintain the image of the Virgin Mary and their chastity. The equation of Irish girlhood and chastity is consistently reinforced by the nuns as the girls spend three years at the convent school. During this three year period the girls are severely restricted both physically and intellectually as the nuns monitor all of their activities. The restrictive and even abusive behavior leads Baba to formulate a plan for their expulsion from the school. Relying on the equation of

girlhood and chastity, Baba writes an offensive note and leaves it for a nun to find. Baba describes the moment the note is discovered to Caithleen:

“Imagine,” said Baba, “she read it out, ‘Father Tom stuck his long thing,’ and when she realized what it was, she went purple at the mouth and began to fume around the recreation hall. She beat several girls with her strap, and she was yelling, ‘Where are they, where are they, those children of Satan!’” Baba was enjoying every moment of this.  
(105)

Baba utilizes the chaste and pure ideal of Irish girlhood in order to circumvent the feminine ideal of the Virgin Mary and escape the confines the convent school. However, while her actions lead to the girls’ expulsion from the convent, Baba is unable to evade the fixed concepts of femininity that depend upon purity and chastity. Baba’s note and the nuns’ reactions emphasize the trilogy’s assertion that the Irish ideal of womanhood is unrealistic, harmful and also very powerful. Consequently, while Caithleen and Baba no longer fulfill the nuns’ expectations of purity and chastity they are not immune to the fixed concepts of purity and chastity that the nation’s feminine ideal depends upon.

At the same time that the girls begin attending the convent school, Caithleen also begins to enact her concepts of gender and dependency upon men when she establishes a relationship with Mr. Gentleman, a foreign, upper-class and middle-aged man from their village. Their relationship begins when Mr. Gentleman offers her a ride to Limerick so she can buy her school uniforms. Just as Mrs. Brady exchanged small sexual favors for gifts and food, Caithleen allows Mr. Gentleman to hold her hands, rub her legs, and even kiss her in exchange for his attention and gifts. In Limerick, Caithleen and Mr. Gentleman separate but agree to meet for lunch at a hotel. In preparation for their lunch, Caithleen purchases a tube of lipstick and applies the pink

color to her lips but Mr. Gentleman does not approve of her makeup and tells her that “men prefer to kiss young girls without lipstick” (54). While Caithleen has had a crush on Mr. Gentleman and she readily develops a relationship with him, their substantial age difference and Mr. Gentleman’s manipulative behavior creates a power imbalance in their relationship and establishes Mr. Gentleman’s pedophilic desires. Mr. Gentleman defines expectations for Caithleen that mirror the nation’s chaste and pure expectations of Irish girlhood but in the process also sexualizes her in fulfillment of his desires. Although it seems that Mr. Gentleman’s preferences for purity and chastity align with the expectations of her father and convent school as he engaged the language and expectations of Irish morality, his sexual desires contradict the nation’s idea of purity and chastity. Mr. Gentleman’s desires demonstrate how sexuality and gender are essential to constructing identity as he seeks to make fourteen-year-old Caithleen his ideal sexual partner. Caithleen’s willingness to engage in this abnormal and destructive relationship advances the novel’s indictment of the institution of heterosexuality and singular national identity by demonstrating their damaging effects upon Caithleen’s sense of self.

Although Caithleen is aware of national paradigms—particularly her father’s brand of masculinity—she is unable to perceive the ways in which she, or the men she dates, fulfill Irish national ideals. For instance, Caithleen naively believes that Mr. Gentleman’s foreign citizenship differentiates him from her father and national expectations. By repeatedly choosing to develop a relationship with Mr. Gentleman, Caithleen rejects her father and attempts to circumvent Irish masculinist culture by being with a foreigner. Caithleen admires Mr. Gentleman’s foreign heritage and status in the community because he seems to be the antithesis of her father. While Mr. Gentleman is different from her father because he is French, affluent, handsome, polite and a “big shot” (96), he also upholds many of the same gender norms that her father

reinforces, such as privileging men over women. O'Brien writes, "Mr. Gentleman was a big shot because he never drank in the local pubs, and because he had visitors from Dublin and foreign places" (96). Caithleen is consequently attracted to Mr. Gentleman because she perceives him to be different from the Irish men who repeatedly hurt her mother. Caithleen's love for Mr. Gentleman and the unrealistic expectations she forms highlight her dependency upon men—albeit men who are different from her father—and her compulsion to participate in heterosexuality. Caithleen participates in this relationship because she wants to conform to heterosexual norms while receiving male attention that she believes is different from her father's abusive and threatening behavior. However, Caithleen's relationship with Mr. Gentleman does not conform to normative heterosexuality because it begins as sexual abuse. In addition, Mr. Gentleman is married and Caithleen is unable to participate in the traditional heterosexual relationship of marriage with him. Although Caithleen perceives Mr. Gentleman to be a sober, non-abusive and gentle man who genuinely cares for her, the narrative undermines this perspective and asserts that Mr. Gentleman is a manipulative pedophile. While Caithleen's relationship with Mr. Gentleman constitutes her teenage dating experience, she is never able to critically examine his behavior or their relationship. Caithleen's failure to acknowledge Mr. Gentleman's faults stem from her belief that he will save her from her mother's fate and the limitations of Irish femininity.

Although Caithleen avoids men like her father in hopes of circumventing her mother's experiences, her relationship with Mr. Gentleman makes her vulnerable to Ireland's heterosexual values and gender divisions. Caithleen's vulnerability is illustrated when she continues to maintain a relationship with Mr. Gentleman after moving to Dublin. Caithleen and Baba move after their expulsion from school in order to live and have " [...] young men. Romance. Love

and things” (145). While Caithleen claims she wants romance and young men she chooses to date Mr. Gentleman, who subsequently decides they should travel to Vienna for a weekend away. Mr. Gentleman explains they need to have sex in order to get it out of their systems and that Vienna will be the perfect location. Caithleen agrees and ignores the possibility of coming back to Dublin without him and instead implores, “... I want you for always” (163). O’Brien writes:

He smiled and kissed me lightly on the cheeks. Kisses like the first drops of rain.

‘You’ll love me always?’ I asked.

‘You know I don’t like you to talk like that,’ he said, playing with the top button of my cardigan.

‘I know’ I said.

‘Then why do you?’ he asked tenderly.

‘Because I can’t help it. Because I’d go mad if I hadn’t you.’ (163)

Caithleen’s impression of what it means for the two of them to be together and Mr. Gentleman’s version are completely different as she envisions their life together and he considers their relationship a fling. As Caithleen prepares for their trip her naiveté persists as it becomes clear that she does not even know what sex is or its possible outcomes. In preparation for the trip she borrows a nightgown from her landlady who warns her not to “fill up with baby” but Caithleen just laughs because she thinks that’s impossible. Caithleen notes, “I had an idea that couples had to be married for a long time before a woman got a baby” (169). Caithleen’s ignorance about sex and pregnancy demonstrates that Irish women and girls often were not taught about these topics beyond the admonishment to stay chaste until marriage. Caithleen’s lack of knowledge demonstrates the harmful effects of social practices that left women uneducated about their

bodies and reproduction. Consequently, Caithleen's ignorance and idealistic sensibilities leave her vulnerable to not only Mr. Gentleman's advances but the national environment that emphasizes women's subordinate roles in Irish society.

For Caithleen, heterosexuality and the ideal of marriage are essential or natural identity norms that she intrinsically attaches to romance. With Mr. Gentleman her pattern of romanticism is established as she plans to spend her life with him and he fails to even collect her for their trip to Vienna. The abrupt end to their relationship leave Caithleen heartbroken but hopeful that she'll be able to find love again. Thus, Caithleen's romantic idealizations are further developed in the second novel of the trilogy as she desperately hopes to meet a nice man. Because Caithleen believes that "all the nicest men were in books—the strange, complex, romantic men; the ones I admired most" she clings to her desire to meet a man different from her father (179). Caithleen embraces her romantic notions about relationships and men despite her mother's experiences and warnings against marriage and her failed relationship with Mr. Gentleman. While Caithleen is focused on finding love and fulfilling her romantic desires she does not consider the other elements intrinsic to most heterosexual relationships in 1960s Ireland: marriage, motherhood, homemaking and other domestic labors. The novel asserts that Caithleen is trapped within an idealistic ideology that depends upon limited gender roles.

Caithleen's romanticism fixates her within the traditional gender divisions and heterosexual norms because she is unable to recognize the ways in which romance reinforces the nation's feminine ideal. In the novel, romance operates in order to identify the harmful and destructive effects of the feminine ideal, particularly through marriage, motherhood and family. Caithleen's "constant wish" to "meet a new, wonderful man" (181) epitomizes the fallacies of her nation's romantic ideals that are used to reinforce women's dependency upon men for their



happiness. However, as Amanda Greenwood notes, even Caithleen begins to recognize the limitations of romance in the first novel of the trilogy. Greenwood explains:

In *The Country Girls*, ‘romance’ is finally undermined when Caithleen and Mr. Gentleman undress for each other in Dublin. His penis is analogized with ‘a little black man on top of a collecting box that shook his head every time you put a coin in the box’ — an image that simultaneously suggests otherness and transaction (*CG* 175). Though Caithleen remains susceptible to the idea of romantic love, she has begun to be miserably conscious of its effects, admitting: ‘Mr. Gentleman was but a shadow and yet it was this shadow I craved’ (*CG* 183). (26)

Caithleen’s recognition that she craves the “shadow” of Mr. Gentleman demonstrates that she is conscious of her own dependency upon men, but that she is unable to critically examine why she desires male attention and relationships. Thus, while Caithleen’s desire to marry conforms to Ireland’s construction of national identity, the novel’s depiction of her romantic expectations and reliance upon men identifies the Irish ideal of womanhood as unrealistic and limiting. In particular, Caithleen’s relationship with Mr. Gentleman develops from child sex abuse, which she ignores by failing to critically examine their relationship, in order to perceive their relationship exclusively in romantic terms. Caithleen’s romanticism creates the “shadow” or idealized version of Mr. Gentleman, as well as her idealized expectations of marriage, motherhood and family, because it creates a delusion that conceals her reality. The novel therefore connects romance and the nation’s feminine ideal in order to condemn idealized images of marriage and motherhood that typify the traditional romance plot. Thus, the trilogy “articulates the welcome death of romanticism, subverting the traditional outcome of the romance plot; for [Caithleen] was waiting for a male Florence Nightingale, a Prince Charming, a

Good Shepherd, who never arrived and, as Baba suggests, may have never existed” (Byron 23).

In the novel, Caithleen represents singular national identity and the ways in which this form of Irishness is unrealistic and damaging. In particular, the novel argues that singular national identity depends upon restrictive gender roles that limit and harm women, demonstrated through Caithleen’s tragic pursuit of romance.

The second novel of the trilogy finds Caithleen actively pursuing a relationship with Eugene Gaillard, another successful, older and half-Irish man who represents Caithleen’s desire to separate herself from her father and his version of heterosexuality. Eugene shares many similarities with Mr. Gentleman and Caithleen’s pattern of dating older men with foreign backgrounds reveals her attempts to circumvent her mother’s admonishments about the difficulties of marriage. This is illustrated when Caithleen first meets Eugene and reflects, “I felt suddenly at home with him, I don’t know why. He wasn’t like anyone I knew [...]” (185). Caithleen’s perception of Eugene’s differences allows her to form a relationship with him because she believes, like Mr. Gentleman, that he’s different than her father and Irish masculinity culture. Although Caithleen fears loneliness, she fears becoming like her mother even more and therefore avoids men who remind her of her father. Caithleen falsely assumes that she will evade similar forms of oppression by forming romantic relationships with men who are middle-class, foreign and shun traditional Irish culture, particularly drinking and pubs.

While Eugene initially seems different from Mr. Brady, the narrative quickly establishes that he often seeks to control and demean Caithleen in order to assert his masculine authority. Caithleen notes that life with Eugene carries many rules, that she claims she only slightly resents (323). One of Eugene’s first mandates includes changing Caithleen’s name to Kate because Caithleen sounds too “kiltartan” for his liking (202). His insults—or improvements—often center

on her rural background and appearance, even though he claims that he is attracted to her innocence and country ways. His jibes include, “You’re a mechanical idiot you can’t even turn off a tap,” “I’m teaching Caithleen how to speak English before I take her into society,” and “Run upstairs on your peasant legs” (335). These comments demonstrate Eugene’s disdain for Caithleen’s rural background—the Irish national ideal—and low class status, which aligns with her contempt of her father and his national standards. This is why Caithleen rarely takes exception to these remarks because she believes Eugene is helping her improve herself. However, Eugene is trying to mold Caithleen into the woman he thinks she should be and his tactics are ultimately as abusive as her father’s because they both seek to control the women in their lives. Caithleen fails to see any correlation between her father’s oppressive behavior and Eugene’s because of her conscious decision to pursue someone different from her father. She cannot see that the systematic social values that denigrated her and her mother in her father’s home are the same values that mandate her behavior in her lover’s home.

Eugene initially views the relationship in a mercenary manner and trades his financial support for access to Caithleen’s body. This is illustrated by his interpretation of the ring he gives her to maintain the appearance of social propriety, “With this expensive ring, I thee bed” (314). Although he allows Caithleen to live in his home, he views this arrangement as an exchanging of commodities: his home for her body. When Caithleen and Eugene finally consummate their relationship, Caithleen doesn’t feel pleasure, “just some strange satisfaction that I had done what I was born to do” (316). Caithleen’s reflection that she had done what she was born to do illustrates her conscious awareness of society’s construction of gender roles and her participation in those same gender roles. Even as Caithleen idealizes the institution of marriage, she is aware that her relationship with Eugene is contentious and chooses to ignore

their problems. Eugene also maintains the appearance of conventional heterosexuality and promises to marry Caithleen and give her nice babies one day. However, Eugene's attitude towards Caithleen is one of ownership as he tries to mold her into his version of a perfect woman and treats her not as a partner but as a child in his care. Caithleen continues to think of their relationship in romanticized terms, despite his tyrannical behavior, because her expectations and behavior are influenced more by her perception of Irish femininity and her mother's experiences than by her reality. Caithleen illustrates the difficulty of resisting traditional Irish social scripts and gender norms because her affair with Eugene ultimately aligns with Irish heterosexuality. While their relationship is a departure from the norm of marriage, Eugene receives all the benefits of being married while Caithleen receives none. Consequently, their relationship reinforces the heterosexual norm as Caithleen pursues the national ideal of family through her relationship with Eugene.

Central to the trilogy is Caithleen and Baba's engagement with traditional gender roles, particularly marriage and motherhood, and the ways in which they depart from and conform to Irish society's expectations. The novels demonstrate that both Caithleen and Baba are conscious of the gender roles that prescribe women's behavior, but that Caithleen persistently romanticizes these roles in contrast to Baba's realistic and critical perspective. Their conflicting perspectives finally coincide in the final novel of the trilogy when the institution of marriage as it is defined by the Irish nation is definitively undermined through the depiction of their married lives. *Girls in Their Married Bliss* opens with Baba's reflection that "Not long ago, Caithleen Brady and I were having a few gloomy gin fizzies up London, bemoaning the fact that nothing would ever improve, that we'd die the way we were—enough to eat, married, dissatisfied" (381). The shift in narrator and tone emphasizes the trilogy's critical perspective of marriage as Baba details their

dissatisfaction with their lives. It is clear within the first few pages of this section of the trilogy that although these women left Ireland, they did not escape the fate of their mothers because they all—Mrs. Brady, Mrs. Brennan, Caithleen and Baba—ended up in unhappy marriages. The repeated pattern of unstable and abusive marriages that all of the women are unable to escape emphasizes the harmful effects of singular national identity and restrictive gender norms.

Caithleen and Baba's experiences illustrate that unconventional behavior alone does not collapse social and political constructions that sustain and enforce singular national identity and gender norms. Although the women form sexual relationships outside of marriage, seek men different from their fathers and immigrate to London, they continue to exhibit the harmful effects of singular national identity and Ireland's restrictive gender norms. Neither Caithleen nor Baba took conventional paths to marriage but their culture clearly influenced their marital decisions as they were both absorbed into traditional gender roles and economic dependency upon men. Consequently, O'Brien's challenge to Irish national identity and hegemony comes in "private, individual moments of freedom for her heroines, but, as Judith Butler points out in *Gender Trouble*, such Kristevan moments of *jouissance* are never enough to alter paternal law" (Ingram, *Stretching the Nation's Boundaries* 259). Although the novel emphasizes Caithleen's and Baba's rebellious actions, these individual rebellions, according to the novel, are not enough to defy Irish femininity and gender norms. While Caithleen and Baba are unable to successfully alter paternal law, the novel argues for the need to alter the Irish cultural and political environment in order to construct more inclusive gender norms and identities. The trilogy's critique of Irish society consequently diagnoses romanticism and prescribed gender roles as unrealistic and destructive forces in Irish women's lives.

Throughout the trilogy the social scripts available to Irish women—particularly the conflation of romance with women’s roles as wives and mothers—are criticized. Caithleen epitomizes women who internalize perceptions of heterosexuality and gender because she repeatedly fails to recognize her dependence upon men, particularly on male rescue figures (Morgan 450) and romantic ideals. Caithleen is consequently the “quintessential maiden-victim of the nationalist allegory whose role was to suffer stoically until rescued by an Irish hero” (Morgan 457). Caithleen does not have a happy ending with her hero(es) but self-destructs as she clings to romanticism and the hope of male rescue. This is illustrated through the end of her marriage with Eugene, whom she initially married because she believed marriage to him was what was best for her. However, after numerous years of marriage Caithleen can no longer tolerate Eugene’s controlling demands and looks to other men for comfort. Caithleen’s desire to be rescued from her marriage leads to an affair with another man. “She’d met someone else,” Baba notes, “she was in love, the old, old story” (387). The “old story” is the stories of their mothers—women’s dependencies upon men and gender norms—that Caithleen and Baba continue to repeat even as they are conscious of these gender norms and their restrictions. In contrast to Mrs. Brady, Caithleen is able to leave her abusive husband by divorcing him, which would have been illegal in Ireland at the time. Although Caithleen breaks with heterosexual Irish social and political norms by divorcing Eugene, the divorce further highlights Caithleen’s naiveté and Eugene’s cruelty as the two conflict over the custody of their son and their roles in his life.

The divorce process initially provides Caithleen with momentary empowerment because she finally recognizes Eugene’s abuse and subordination through traditional gender norms. Caithleen’s recognition of Eugene’s behavior is illustrated through her conversation with her

lawyer when he questions why she would have ever married “a man like that” (505). O’Brien writes:

‘It seemed to be what I wanted.’

‘Marry a . . .’

‘I knew less then . . .’

Although her face was to the window and light was pouring in on her, there was no trace of tears or breaking down.

“Silly girl,” he muttered, but in a way that was affectionate and not reprimanding. (505)

The lawyer does not chastise Caithleen for choosing to marry Eugene because he believes her to be a “silly girl” who entered a bad marriage because she did not know enough about men and the world. However, Caithleen pursued her relationship with Eugene because he seemed different from her father and his brand of nationality. While Caithleen’s actions initially rebel against her father and community, her relationship with Eugene does not create the cultural or political changes necessary to reform Irish gender norms or identities. Instead, the novel condemns Caithleen’s actions in order to emphasize the damaging effects of heterosexual norms that, according to the novel, depend upon Irish women’s subordination, passivity and sacrifice. Caithleen’s relationships with men are therefore utilized by the novel to demonstrate how Irish culture keeps girls and women longing for romance even as they know it’s a delusion, which puts them in a tenable and easily exploitable position. While Caithleen is able to recognize that her marriage to Eugene stemmed from her desire to realize romance and adhere to typical gender norms, she is unable to recognize that these same norms are what propel her to begin an emotional affair with another man and to consistently seek male rescuers throughout her life.

Although Caithleen repeatedly turns to men for emotional and financial support, her self-imposed sterilization indicates her awareness of the norms that shape her life because this action defies both Irish and masculine culture. Caithleen chooses sterilization to not only punish herself for her marriage to Eugene, but for her constant desire to “trade anything for scraps of love” (*Trilogy* 496). Caithleen is spurred to action by her realization that she depends upon men to

fall in love, heal her, provide new thoughts, new happiness, banish the old ugly images of fresh-spattered blood, and forceps, and blunder; do away with Eugene, the guardian ghost, who shadowed her no matter what streets she crossed or what iniquitous sheets she slipped between. She honestly believed that this man, or some man, was going to do all this for her. (499)

In this moment Caithleen recognizes the ways in which she adheres to Ireland’s social and gender norms that reinforce her dependency upon men and harm her. In choosing to sterilize herself, Caithleen seeks to separate herself from her mother’s life and end the cycle of self-sacrifice that motherhood can create. Caithleen consequently redefines the way in which she engages in sex, and in the process resists national constructions of sexuality, because she removes the possibility of procreation and motherhood.

Emphasizing Caithleen’s developing consciousness of her mother’s harmful legacy and Ireland’s destructive gender norms is Baba’s narration of the trilogy’s epilogue. Baba’s critical point of view in the trilogy’s epilogue condemns Ireland’s standards of femininity by depicting her and Caithleen’s inevitable failure to uphold these images. The epilogue’s change in narrator emphasizes the ways in which Caithleen and Baba mimic their mothers as they seek to create new relationships and models of behavior. Unfortunately, both Caithleen and Baba fail to create alternative models for women to follow but do undermine the ideals of Irish femininity and



national identity. Thus, the epilogue's depiction "of motherhood again recalls one of the most common outcomes of the female romance plot: the heroine can only realize her potential as woman through marriage and childbearing. This idealized vision of motherhood is dismantled in the *Trilogy*, particularly in Baba's assessment of Kate's life" (Byron 23). Through Baba's critical perspective of herself and Caithleen, the epilogue dismantles not only the ideal of motherhood but the Irish ideals of marriage and family as well. Baba recognizes the power of social norms, particularly the institution of marriage, and is able to create a sense of self separate from her roles as wife and mother. In contrast, Caithleen's sense of self is entirely invested in her relationships with men, her domestic roles and her desire to create the ideal home. However, Baba is not presented as an ideal alternative to Caithleen because she also unhappily upholds traditional gender roles that limit her opportunities.

In juxtaposing Caithleen's and Baba's tragic conclusions, the epilogue diagnoses the Irish nation's ideals of marriage, motherhood and family as damaging and problematic for Irish women. The novel consequently asserts that Irish women need to abandon the nation's idealized models of Irish motherhood and femininity because they create unrealistic expectations that are impossible to achieve. This is repeatedly demonstrated through Caithleen's romanticism and Baba's realistic, yet destructive, perspective. While Baba is aware of Caithleen's romanticism and the ways in which it traps her within destructive relationships, she is unable to propel Caithleen towards resistance because she is ensnared in the same heterosexual delusions. However, Baba's incredulous reaction to Caithleen's affair undermines Caithleen's romantic ideals and constant suffering because Baba is able to recognize that women cannot trust their well-being and happiness to men alone (Morgan 462). Caithleen's attempts to redefine her identity lead her to develop an emotional affair with another man, but she is unable to

consummate this relationship because she is trapped within a static understanding of women's roles that is based upon domesticity and the nuclear family. In contrast, Baba

buys into the Cinderella myth only insofar as it is a vehicle for upward mobility, the literal cash she acquires from Frank . . . But O'Brien does not present Baba as an entirely preferable alternative to Caithleen either, despite Baba's function as a reality check on romanticism run amok. Baba may survive in the end, but she cannot entirely escape the disabling effects of their masculinist culture. The sociopolitical limits of their rebellion force both Caithleen and Baba to surrender to the demands of compulsory heterosexuality, precluding any possibility for fulfillment outside patriarchal marriage . . . (Peterson 162-163)

The novel asserts that the women could not have pursued any other option but marriage because neither woman believed there were other possibilities that could provide them with the same opportunities of social and financial stability. Consequently, the narrative argues that mid-twentieth century Irish culture often prevents girls and women from establishing new gender roles and models of femininity.

While Baba clearly recognizes heterosexuality and its hegemonic form of marriage as a social script that distributes power and wealth, she, like Caithleen, invests in the power and promise of heterosexuality without exploring and addressing its paradoxes. Caithleen's romanticism is juxtaposed with Baba's cynicism in order to highlight the heterosexual fantasies that most women are told and believe in. Caithleen consistently looks for men to rescue her and make her life better while Baba recognizes the fantasies as "Lord Byron lunacy" that perpetuates the myth of waiting for Mr. Right to come along (*Trilogy* 384, 527). Nonetheless, Baba meets and marries a man because she knows it is what is expected of her and that a husband will

provide her with financial security. Baba feels like “the bloody sacrificial lamb” when marrying Frank and views their marriage as a mercenary transaction, but still seeks romance and excitement with other men (386). Baba consequently recognizes the protocol and hypocrisy but still harbors, Greenwood explains, romantic daydreams about lovers and “longings, for songs, cigarettes, dark bars . . . nights out, life. ‘Romance’ in the form of a lover, though, brings abandonment and unplanned pregnancy” (29). Baba does not expect much from men and views herself as a martyr to society because of the traditional roles that she and many other women endeavor to fulfill. Baba states:

I was thinking of women and all they have to put up with, not just washing nappies or not being able to be high-court judges, but all this. All this poking and probing and hurt. And not only when they go to doctors but when they go to bed as brides with the men that love them. Oh, God, who does not exist, you hate women, otherwise you’d have made them different. (473)

Baba’s claim that women need to be different blames women for their roles within Irish society and indicates her own responsibility for the position she finds herself in as Frank’s disinterested wife and Tracy’s apathetic mother. Baba strives to separate herself from her mother, Caithleen and Irish ideals of womanhood but ultimately struggles to differentiate her life from the lives that her mother and Caithleen lead. As all of the women in the novel are unhappy and disempowered, the novel connects the women’s unhappiness and social ills to the models of Irish femininity that, according to the novel, create unrealistic expectations for women.

## **Conclusion**

O’Brien’s *The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue* is an act of resistance against the roles mandated to women by mid- twentieth century Irish nationalism and reinforced by the Irish

Constitution and Catholic Church. The novels illustrate the harmful effects of national identity and homogeneity as Caithleen and Baba struggle to create identities independent from both their nation's ideal and mothers' models. Ultimately, Caithleen and Baba are unable to circumvent their heritage but their narratives identify the harmful effects of a singular Irish national identity that creates unrealistic ideals. As Caithleen and Baba struggle with and against their models of femininity, O'Brien cements their suffering in the *Epilogue*, which was added to the *Trilogy* in 1986. The *Epilogue* is entirely from Baba's perspective and shifts between the present moment and the past as she reflects over the last twenty years of her and Caithleen's lives. Baba is back at the Waterloo train station where Caithleen once had a nervous breakdown and where Baba now waits for Caithleen's remains. "Oh, Caithleen," Baba questions, "why did you let the bastards win . . . why buckle under their barbaric whims" (513)? The bastards seem to be all the men who have let Caithleen down over the years as Baba recounts Caithleen's numerous heartbreaks and Caithleen's desire for a "male Florence Nightingale [who] might kneel and bandage and swoop her off to a life of certainty and bliss" (511). The only certainty Caithleen realizes is her death as Baba clearly believes that Caithleen has taken her own life while at a health farm recuperating from her latest failed relationship. Caithleen's body is found one morning in the swimming pool after she seemingly decided to take a midnight swim alone. "Alone and covert as always," Baba thinks, "not knowing whether it was deliberate or whether she just wanted to put an end to the fucking torment she was in" (524). The uncertainty surrounding Caithleen's death reiterates the characters' dual consciousness because Caithleen does not own her knowledge or intention. Caithleen's death reinforces the torment her identity has caused her because of her dependency on romance, marriage and motherhood as the essential attributes of her identity. Caithleen's happiness consequently depends upon her distorted expectations of romance, marriage and

motherhood that were formed through her relationship with her mother and notions of singular Irish femininity. Although Caithleen contests conventional Irish patriarchy and national identity at various points in the trilogy—her affairs with foreign men, living with Eugene out of wedlock, divorcing Eugene, her sterilization and unsanctioned female sexuality—she ultimately represents the harmful effects of Irish national identity and repeats her mother’s experiences instead of destabilizing them. Thus, Caithleen’s death by drowning, just like her mother’s drowning, is connected to a man and efforts to create or preserve the family unit.

In resisting Irish national identity and prescribed gender norms, the trilogy asserts the need for alternative models of femininity that are not based on singular notions of behavior and homogeneity. O’Brien’s depiction of Caithleen and Baba demonstrates that the institution of marriage is embedded in the subordination of women in Irish masculinist culture. The trilogy depicts Irish women’s experiences as being limited and constructed by social and political policies that enforce heterosexuality and prescribed gender roles for both women and men. O’Brien challenges perceptions of gender as essentialist because the women of the *Trilogy and Epilogue* do not completely fulfill the ideals of Irish femininity as they resist cultural restraints and seek to renegotiate their identities. Nonetheless, the women of the novels, particularly Caithleen, “often still discipline themselves to fit a model of sexuality which prioritizes male desires and defines women’s fulfillment in terms of ‘love’ and the giving of pleasure” (Jackson 36). In addition, women’s fulfillment in Ireland is also often attached to motherhood because of the importance of the family unit in Irish culture. The trilogy identifies the heterosexual family unit as the nation’s primary social institution and depicts the dysfunction and dissatisfaction that maintaining the stability of this institution can create for Irish women and children. Through Caithleen’s and Baba’s marriages—and their numerous affairs—the trilogy identifies

romanticism as reinforcing the nation's feminine ideal that the novel argues is unrealistic and destructive. Caithleen's and Baba's narratives demonstrate the difficulty of establishing alternatives to the nation's feminine ideal as they make decisions that align with the institution of heterosexuality and limit their agency. Thus, the novel connects the perpetuation of the Irish nation to women's agency and the heterosexual nuclear family. O'Brien's trilogy depicts the significance of the nuclear family in Irish culture and asserts that the nation's construction of family negatively affects women by prescribing women's subordination, passivity and sacrifice as necessary to ensuring the stability of the nation. Consequently, while Caithleen and Baba try to sever their national links by moving to London their reenactment of their mothers' lives emphasize the negative effects of the nation's feminine ideal.

Although Caithleen and Baba rebel against the feminine ideal they both ultimately fail to resist Irish masculinist demands and national norms. Baba, however, understands the cultural burden of Irish womanhood and its emphasis upon an idealized version of marriage and motherhood. Baba "recognizes that the Catholic ideal of womanhood, the Virgin Mary, is unrealistic and unfair. Likewise, she implicitly understands that failure to be submissive, chaste, and selfless often leads to women being labeled as impure, tainted, or simply evil" (Pelan, "In the Name of the Mother..." 24). Because Caithleen fails to recognize the "unrealistic and unfair expectations of Irish womanhood, she suffers more than Baba for their 'regenerate sexuality' and, thus, dies at the end of the *Trilogy and Epilogue*" (Pelan, "In the Name of the Mother..." 25). In response to Caithleen's death, Baba expresses her belief that Caithleen was tainted by Irish cultural ideals and hopes that Caithleen will have revenge on their homeland. Baba states:

[Caithleen's] son and I will have to take her ashes there and scatter them between the bogs and the bog lakes and the murmuring waters and every other fucking bit of

depressingness that oozes from every hectometer and every furlong of the place and that imbued her with the old Dido desperado predilections. I hope she rises up nightly like the banshee and does battle with her progenitors. (523)

Finally, the narrative reveals that neither Caithleen nor Baba is able to resist the Irish social scripts and gender norms that they were raised with and, as Rebecca Pelan notes, the women are not able to escape Ireland or evade their cultural roots (“In the Name of the Mother” 27).

In *The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue*, O’Brien portrays different forms of heterosexuality and gender that do not always conform to Irish masculinist values. Despite these alternatives, the novel’s women are unable to escape or displace the limitations of marriage, motherhood and the nuclear family as defined within the Irish nation. Thus, the novel depicts these institutions as limiting social norms that restrict women’s agency in order to ensure the future of the Irish nation. While sexuality can be a site for male and female power, heterosexuality is most often depicted as serving the interests of men in the *Trilogy and Epilogue*. In revealing the damage done to Caithleen and Baba by the nation’s restrictive social and gender norms, the novel criticizes Irish nationalism and singular national identity, particularly the nation’s feminine ideal. The trilogy asserts that Ireland’s feminine ideal depends upon the nation’s construction of marriage, motherhood and family as essential components to women’s identity. In addition, these institutions, according to the novel, reinforce social and gender norms that privilege men over women. The trilogy’s criticisms identify Irish nationalism and singular national identity as problematic and in the process suggests that Irish women’s identity needs to be reformed in order to create realistic and diverse models of behavior. This suggestion is emphasized through the trilogy’s epilogue and its depiction of the damage done to Caithleen and Baba because of the Irish nation’s social and gender norms. Caithleen’s and

Baba's failed marriages and dysfunctional relationships with their children stem from their intentions to fulfill the social and gender norms of their cultural roots. Through the characters' relationships the trilogy reveals how women and men implicitly and explicitly maintain cultural values that contribute to the subordination of women and propel the delusion of romance.

Although the novel argues that Irish culture propels the delusion of romance, Caithleen's dual-consciousness of the social and political norms that exploit women emphasize that Irish women are not only oppressed or innocent victims of Irish society and men, but are often complicit in their exploitation and subordination. The *Trilogy and Epilogue* consequently critiques the ways in which Irish men and women maintain national identity—especially gender norms—as Caithleen and Baba struggle to redefine their identities and break their inherited cycles. Although Caithleen and Babe seek to undermine national identity and gender norms, their inability to redefine the nation's feminine ideal proposes the need for more realistic and heterogeneous identities. Thus, by diagnosing the destructive effects of marriage, motherhood and family the trilogy asserts the need to establish diverse national identities and redefine women's roles within Irish society.



## 2 “Women in a Changing World”

### The Transformation of Irish Women’s Identity in Maeve Kelly’s *Necessary Treasons*

Maeve Kelly’s first novel is a feminist critique of twentieth century Ireland that seeks to reform national identity and oppressive gender biases that cause conflicts within Irish society and individual women. *Necessary Treasons* (1985) draws upon Kelly’s experiences as a nurse and activist by depicting 1970s urban Irish society in Limerick from multiple perspectives, but primarily from the point of view of Eve Gleeson, a young woman in her mid-20s who discovers the dark undercurrents afflicting Irish heterosexual relationships—namely domestic and sexual abuse—when she becomes involved with the Irish women’s movement. Kelly depicts societal gender divisions by juxtaposing Eve’s perspectives with those of Hugh Creagh, her middle-aged fiancé, and through Eve’s conflicted emotions towards conventional female gender roles. Eve’s conflict stems from her desire to be in a relationship with Hugh and her increasing awareness of societal injustices toward women and children. Eve’s acute sense of the power relations in Irish society leads her to question established gender roles and the absence of women’s rights within marriage and to become progressively more involved with the Irish women’s movement. Kelly’s novel connects the personal and political in order to highlight the need for women’s public participation to broaden women’s roles and create change in the home.

This chapter analyzes the novel’s depictions of gender and sexuality and the ways in which they define Irish identity, particularly within the institutions of marriage, family and Catholicism, and asserts that the narrative challenges singular national identity through its depictions of Irish women. The novel demonstrates the extent to which the purity of the nation obscured real women’s lives and experiences by depicting the realities of domestic abuse and sexual assault. Through the attention it pays to domestic and sexual abuse, Kelly’s novel

acknowledges the history of violence against women and participates in a more inclusive Irish history that recognizes the multiple narratives of Irish women's identity. By depicting the multiple narratives of Irish identity, the novel resists singular national identity and cultural consensus in order to advance postnational identity within the Irish nation-state. In particular, the novel asserts the need for women's political participation in order to create social change in both the public and domestic spheres.

Postnational identity "is defined by dissonance and divergence in contradistinction to the uniformity of nationalist thought" (Hansson 219). Kelly's novel depicts the dissonance of 1970s Ireland as the women's movement developed and women tackled social and political power imbalances that maintained cultural consensus and singular national identity. Kelly's novel rejects Irish nationalism because it established—through the 1937 Constitution—unrealistic expectations for Irish women and fails to acknowledge the empirical experiences of Irish women. In contrast, postnational identity counters the mythologizing tendencies of nationalism and encourages the acknowledgment of new, multiple social relationships and identities. Thus, I invoke the terms of postnational identity to assert that *Necessary Treasons* disrupts traditional narratives of Irish nationalism—including those of marriage, family and Catholicism—through its depiction of Irish women and the women's movement.

The primary term of this chapter—postnational—refers to the idea that nationalism ineffectively informs Irish society because a collective consciousness or singular identity does not exist. Irish national identity, the novel criticizes, depended upon a model of unity and fixed absolutes of behavior that created restrictive gender roles. For instance:

Twentieth century Irish nationalism defined the ideal Irish woman as a mother who inculcated her children, her sons in particular, [with] a love of country, of Gaelic culture

and tradition, of freedom for Ireland...She has no work of her own to do but rather fulfills the wishes of her sons or husband or brothers. She performs her role in public, not with an agenda of her own but rather as a living vessel through which the dead may speak. All of this bespeaks an air of self-effacement, of meekness, of indirectness.

(Valiulis, "Power, Gender, and Identity" 117-118)

Irish nationalism's depiction of women limited their public and private roles to domestic duties and failed to account for the diverse experiences and identities of Irish women. According to the novel, twentieth century Irish nationalism emphasized unity and singular perspectives while silencing the multiplicity and diversity of Irish experiences that a postnational identity seeks to acknowledge. At the crux of postnational identity is the concept of multiplicity because it resists singularity and recognizes difference and dissent. The novel's movement towards change and postnational identity is therefore dependent upon recognizing the multiplicity of Irish culture and identity.

Multiplicity of knowledge and experience has long contended with unity and did not suddenly appear in mid-twentieth century Ireland. Multiplicity is the belief in many truths, values and experiences that are not considered incomplete or abnormal but a part of culture. According to Daniel Borus, multiplicity is an effort to "fill in gaps in knowledge, settle nagging questions, and explain deviations from the norm" and that these explorations are challenges that take "place in the context of political and social uncertainties" (9). Borus contends that multiplicity was essential to dismantling understandings of women and minorities as inferior in twentieth century cultural and intellectual life (9). *Necessary Treasons* is an overt effort to challenge Irish unity—and singular national identity—in order to change Ireland's social and political reality, particularly women's oppression. The novel consequently uses multiplicity with

the intention of conceptualizing Irish identity as postnational in order to assert cultural truths that expose power imbalances. These truths include the gender imbalances within marriage, the family and Catholic Church that, according to the novel, have all attributed to the social ills of domestic violence and sexual abuse. The novel's portrayals of Irish women illustrate the various ways in which identity is comprised and that multiple identities can counter nationalism's homogenization and unity. Although the novel does not eradicate or move beyond nationalism, its representation of Irish identity as non-essential and multiple resists national identity and suggests that postnational identity more effectively epitomizes Irish culture and identity. While multiplicity does not account for all of the ways in which culture and discourse can be changed, it challenges unity—the belief in an inherent order—and acknowledges that there are many truths in the world (Borus 15). Kelly's novel explores the many truths of Irish women's lives in Ireland and through women's multiplicity asserts that women need to be politically active in order to resist their oppression and transform their lives.

Unlike other critical studies of *Necessary Treasons*, I argue that the novel's depictions of the homogenizing effects of Irish nationalism are dependent upon the organizing institution of heterosexuality, which the novel subverts in order to assert a postnational identity. In Irish society, as well as many others, "heterosexuality circulates as taken for granted, naturally occurring, and unquestioned" (Ingraham 358) but an examination of heterosexuality as an institution reveals that heteronormativity and gender are both socially constructed and essential to a nation's identity. In Ireland, the novel argues, the construction of heterosexuality and the institution of marriage have created substantial power imbalances that maintain the perception of marriage as natural and unchangeable. The novel demonstrates that the natural and unchangeable perceptions of heterosexuality and marriage have negatively affected women and limited them to

restrictive roles that align with the construction of an Irish national identity. Because nationalism operates according to principles of exclusion and inclusion, it creates and maintains essential or natural national identities that the women in the novel are forced to embrace or challenge.

*Necessary Treasons* ultimately counters natural and singular national identity by subverting homogenizing constructions of Irish identity and depicting the multiplicity, or fluidity, of identity. The differences between women are particularly important to the novel's subversion of norms and singular national identity because they suggest how women can transgress social, political and religious norms, as well as the norms of other women. The multiplicity of experience and values is explicitly connected to identity throughout the novel as the characters develop their own beliefs about gender, sexuality, Catholicism and marriage and even change the ways in which they are constructed. The characters' multiplicity is essential to advancing a postnational identity because postnational identity is based upon inclusion—the acceptance of dissent and difference—rather than exclusion, cultural consensus and singular national identity.

The novel emphasizes the multiplicity of identity in Ireland as Eve's story is conveyed in a linear fashion that is interspersed with Hugh's, Eleanor's and Adrian's first-person perspectives. The fact that Eve's movement towards self-conscious awareness and maturity is strategically advanced through her relationships with Hugh and Eleanor is significant because these opposing characters illustrate Ireland's changing gender politics. As Eve initially embraces a relationship with Hugh, a man twenty years her senior, she adheres to heterosexual norms and fails to question his possessiveness. Their "old-fashioned courtship" continues to progress even as Eve becomes increasingly involved with the local women's movement and establishes a relationship with Hugh's ex-sister-in-law, Eleanor. Eve's friendship with Eleanor ultimately creates a rift between Hugh and Eve because Eleanor challenges her beliefs about marriage and

the prevalence of marital violence. While Eleanor represents the successful triumph over marital abuse—through the attainment of her medical degree and the establishment of her clinic—she did not succeed without suffering the loss of her daughter. Hugh's disregard for Eleanor's abuse and loss highlights society's ambivalence towards women's rights and domestic abuse, particularly women's rights within the bounds of marriage and the nuclear family. Eve's recognition of women's limited rights within marriage leads her to end her engagement with Hugh just as Eleanor establishes a relationship with, and ultimately marries, her friend Adrian. These interweaving perspectives and relationships demonstrate the difficult and traumatic transformation of mid-twentieth century Ireland as nationalism's pillars of marriage, family and Catholicism were challenged.

The novel's focus upon marriage stems from its institutional role within Irish society as one of the most common experiences for Irish women and men. Throughout the novel Kelly depicts strained, broken and abusive marriages and relationships, but there is one couple that proves to be an exception: Eleanor and Adrian. Eleanor and Adrian are Hugh's friends who have known each other since medical school. Eleanor and Adrian's romance develops throughout the novel and the novel ends with the two happily married after giving birth to their son. By ending the novel with Eleanor and Adrian, Kelly lends hope to her view of the institution of marriage in Ireland and demonstrates that women can negotiate their positions via the same power structures that produce and restrain them. The novel, then, is not a total condemnation of the institution of marriage but of hegemonic forces that encourage and compel women to stay in restrictive and abusive relationships because of insufficient social and legal recourses.

*Necessary Treasons* is a feminist text that exposes the conflicts within Irish society as women and men grappled with the feminist movement in the 1970s. The novel examines the

development of feminism in Ireland and the subsequent turmoil—particularly the attacks upon feminism—this movement created in order to argue that political participation is necessary to create change in Irish society. As Christine St. Peter notes, “Resistance to feminism put into tension with some women’s growing belief in the necessity of feminist action in Ireland forms the core of Maeve Kelly’s *Necessary Treasons*” (Changing Ireland, 163). The novel is a feminist text because it emphasizes the importance of women’s rights within marriage and argues that feminism—particularly the women’s movement—is necessary to enact change for women in Ireland. The novel depicts the “intricacies, ambiguities, hypocrisies of the law, civil and religious, as it relates to marriage, and particularly as it relates to women” through Eve’s involvement with the women’s movement and domestic abuse shelter (Kelly 223). Eve’s growing consciousness throughout the novel reveals the complexity of women’s status in Ireland as many women complicitly engage with their own subordination. The novel consequently “offers the country’s most sustained narrative attempt to understand the psychosocial history of the development of feminist consciousness in an Irish setting as well as one of the most complex explorations of the reasons why Irish women should not yet celebrate ‘liberation’” (St. Peter, Changing Ireland 163).

The novel contends that Irish women should not celebrate liberation yet because of the social forces, including marriage, the nuclear family and Catholicism, that limit women’s opportunities and maintain conventional attitudes towards women and their place within society. Hugh demonstrates how Irish citizens struggled with recognizing the legitimacy and necessity of the women’s movement when he thinks that “‘women’s rights’ seemed to him an outrageous waste of time when there were so many real issues of injustice to be fought” (39). While Hugh does “concede that women were sometimes at a disadvantage” he is never able to fully recognize

the need for women's rights and therefore repeatedly challenges Eve's ideals and her involvement with the women's movement. However, while Eve's growing consciousness is central to the narrative, the novel is about more than Eve's involvement with the women's movement because it depicts the complicated nature of social movements and the resistance, as well as extremism, they can create. Ultimately the novel demonstrates that marriage, family and Catholicism are central to Irish national identity, and therefore the Irish women's movement, because these social institutions established and maintained rigid practices in Ireland. The novel consequently contends that the institutions of marriage, family and Catholicism must be challenged and reformed in order to create change for women.

### **'Her Life within the Home': Confronting the Institutions of Marriage and Family**

Legislative regulations are challenged within the novel as the narrative demonstrates that the socially and politically idealized versions of Irish families did not correspond with the lived experiences of actual women. The novel challenges collective consensus and singular national identity with the aim of changing Ireland's perception of women, marriage and family, as constituted by Catholicism and the 1937 Irish Constitution, in order to create social change and advance postnational identity paradigms. The novel demonstrates that the institution of marriage was imperative to collective consensus and singular national identity because the Irish Free State and, subsequently, the Republic of Ireland enshrined the institution of marriage within nationalist discourse as the foundation of the nation and the basis of social order (Article 41.3.1). The Irish Constitution guaranteed the protection of the family and that women would not be obligated to leave their homes—and thereby neglect their families—because of economic necessity (Article 41.2.2). Thus, the Constitution states that “by her life within the home, woman gives the State support without which the common good cannot be achieved” (Article 41.2.1). The 1937



Constitution's assertion that women belonged in the home reflects the role of gender in building the Irish nation based upon ideas that regarded politics and public life as masculine spheres while "women were confined to a single identity, the domestic" (Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women* 12). The 1937 Constitution reflects the nationalist movement's agenda that upheld the nuclear family as the foundation of society and maintained restrictive gender constructions in order to distinguish Ireland from England and assert its moral superiority.

In contrast to the ideals of the 1937 Constitution, *Necessary Treasons* reveals that for many women life within the Irish home was not good and that it was necessary for them to leave their home in order to survive. These "treasons" against the State—leaving the family home, separating from their husbands, seeking employment—allowed women to live without daily physical and sexual assaults but left them socially and financially disadvantaged. The women's movement consequently brought attention and resources to the issue of domestic abuse in Ireland during a time when the State offered insufficient support. The characters of the novel demonstrate that women were at the forefront of social change in the twentieth century and that those changes were necessary for the very survival of many women.

*Necessary Treasons* details Eve's increasing consciousness that heterosexuality, and thereby marriage, is a complex institution in Irish society that often limits the rights of women. One way in which the novel exposes the limitations of marriage is through Hugh's sisters. The novel begins with Eve's first trip to Hugh's family home in County Clare to meet his sisters, a trip that reveals both Eve's and the sisters' conflicting opinions of the institution of marriage. All four of Hugh's sisters remain unmarried and live isolated in the Creagh's family home. The sisters are educated but stayed at home because their options beyond marriage were limited within Irish society even though they are from the upper-class and had greater access to money

than most women of their time. Hugh's sister Ruth explains that they are unable to leave the Creagh home because its use—not ownership—for their lifetime was their only inheritance. Ruth tells Hugh, "Suppose we wanted to sell the house? Suppose we wanted to live somewhere else? Fiji or the Canaries. Somewhere warm. Just because we stayed at home out of a sense of duty doesn't mean we didn't have ambitions" (33). The Creagh sisters have limited rights and opportunities but clearly prefer to acquiesce to the duty of family and home than to the duty of marriage. The use of their family home allows the sisters to enjoy limited independence in rural isolation while also allowing their brothers to pursue their ambitions. While the sisters initially seem to live outside the bounds of traditional patriarchy, their sense of duty and conventional beliefs about marriage and family uphold patriarchal gender roles. The Creagh sisters consequently limit themselves and other women, including Eve, to conventional domestic roles that support the nuclear family. Eve's interactions with the sisters consequently reinforce her increasingly negative perception of the institution of marriage because the Creagh's matriarchy coincides with Irish nationalism's maintenance of rigid gender divisions that, according to the novel, emphasize women's subordination and domestic roles.

Although the Creagh sisters' ambitions did not include marriage they encourage and expect Eve and Hugh to marry as soon as possible because they continue to adhere to the patriarchal system of familial relationships that entrenched the nuclear family unit as the essential or singular experience of Irish society. While the sisters primarily have negative feelings towards the institution of marriage—at least when it pertains to them—they consistently make remarks about women accepting their fate because "they got married and they had their babies" (24). These statements are not made out of jealousy but out of relief that they escaped the fate of marriage and motherhood. The sisters are aware of the limitations of marriage and

motherhood in Irish society but also reinforce these limitations through their treatment of Eve and their perception of the families that populate the local beaches during the summer. Ruth explains, “Women should be at home, minding their babies and looking after their husbands. That’s why they got married. And that’s why we didn’t get married. We knew what it would be like so we decided to stay single. We had plenty of offers” (90). The beautiful sisters chose to remain single so they could maintain their individual agency within the confines of Irish society’s expectations and limitations. By choosing spinsterhood over marriage and motherhood the sisters enjoy a limited independence within their home as they pursue their interests in gardening, music and food, interests they might not have been able to cultivate if they had married.

The Creagh sisters were able to escape the social pressures of the 1940s and 1950s that compelled many women into marriage because of their socioeconomic background. The Creagh women had the option of living in their family home instead of marrying, but many other women from the time were compelled to marry because they did not have the same socioeconomic means. The novel illustrates the importance of economics and education in providing women with alternatives to marriage as demonstrated by the Creagh sisters and Eleanor. The sisters fail to acknowledge the opportunities their heritage provides them, or the lack of opportunities available to other women, and continue to propagate conventional marriage ideals despite their own aversion to the institution. Eleanor, once married to Donogh Creagh, warns Eve that if she marries Hugh she will marry the Creagh sisters too and that despite their independence the sisters are part of the same sexist world that limits and abuses women (25). The sisters fail to recognize their complicity in limiting social expectations of marriage and family, and thereby women, because they seek to preserve the family—“the fundamental unit group of society” (Irish

Constitution, Article 41)—and singular national identity. The sisters fail to recognize the role their socioeconomic background played in allowing them the freedom to stay unmarried and instead adhere to sexist attitudes that limit women to the home as wives and mothers. The sisters' inability to recognize their role in upholding restrictive standards highlights prevalent attitudes and conflicts that the novel seeks to change.

The sisters demonstrate their sexist attitudes repeatedly throughout the novel as they continuously ridicule the women's movement and note that women belong in the home. Kelly writes, "'It's all these women's libbers.' Florence's face turned red and her eyes glittered with rage. 'They should be at home in their little boxes where they belong. They don't know their place. With all this education no one wants to do the menial work. Who will do the menial work in the future'" (89)? The sisters are concerned about the future and the division of labor within the home because they see their way of life—and the way they were raised—slipping away. In another conversation about Eve and the women's movement, Honora notes that Hugh doesn't like Eve's involvement with the movement, and the sisters, particularly Honora and Florence, also do not agree with Eve's choice to be active in the women's movement. Honora explains that "women shouldn't argue" and states, "They have lost all respect. They bring us all down. It's horrible. All this talk of battered wives. I expect they look for it. They probably won't cook their husband's meal for him and he gives them a little tip" (64). Honora's perception of abused women reflects dominant attitudes that blamed women for domestic abuse, the breakdown of the family and, subsequently, the deterioration of the nation. Through the sisters' perception of domestic and sexual abuse the novel discredits such simplistic views and highlights the absurdity of blaming women for their own abuse. This all too common perspective is contrasted with Eve's

growing consciousness in order to illustrate the tensions that existed in mid-twentieth century Ireland, particularly amongst women as feminism and the women's movement evolved.

In the novel, the clearest indication that heteronormative marriage and the nuclear family are problematic stems from Eve's evolving consciousness as she recognizes the social and political constraints that often limited Irish women to the home and family. Eve's conventional beliefs are first challenged when she attends a lecture about "Women in a Changing World" and meets a group of older women who seek to organize meetings and demonstrations in order to change family law. Their ambitions stem from the many women unhappily married in 1970s Limerick—often because of domestic and sexual abuse—who have limited resources and opportunities. At the novel's outset, Eve believes their aspirations are futile because "it's hard to know the rights and wrongs of family quarrels. And there are no guidelines" (66). Eve's initial perception of these issues as family concerns reflects the common belief that the family should regulate itself because the nuclear family was the primary and ideal social unit of Irish society. As the ideal social unit, the Irish nation-state sought to preserve the nuclear family as the representation of Irish morality and nationalism. The novel's criticism of marriage and the nuclear family challenges Irish national discourses that present the family as "the bastion of moral righteousness" (Conrad, *Locked in the Family Cell* 10) by depicting treasons against national identity. Eve's involvement with the women's movement and the domestic abuse shelter highlights the limitations of Irish nationalism and the ways in which women challenged and reformed national gender roles.

The novel challenges the nation-state as the primary reference point for singular collective identity by depicting multiple identities and experiences that transform the possibilities for Irish women. The limitations of marriage and motherhood—the primary or essential

identities for most women—are revealed through Eve’s engagement with Limerick’s women’s movement. At their weekly meetings Eve encounters the distressed women who repeatedly contradict the conventional family image. Kelly writes:

Every other Wednesday they sat in a small room, hardly bigger than a cubicle, and heard the stories of the women who came to them for help. At times the complaints seemed monotonously repetitive and Eve wondered why the women seemed unable to help themselves. Until, that is, she learned how unskilled they were, unable to find work to support themselves; and even when they did, who would mind their children? [...] Eve herself felt infected by the same rage and frustration, especially since there was so little practical help they could give. Where could they go, the women with children who were kicked out of their homes in the middle of the night by a violent husband? Where could they get accommodation they could afford, the women with children who had been suddenly abandoned by the traditional breadwinner? Whether deserted or married, it seemed the result was the same: pain and grief. If marriage was not the problem, what was? (67)

Eve’s speculation about whether or not marriage is a problem indicates that nationalism’s preservation of the family ineffectively supports women and children because it depends upon a singular national identity that fails to provide or acknowledge alternative experiences and identities. While the acknowledgement of diverse experiences counters the repetition of accepted gender roles, Eve wants the women to engage in national discourse—socially and politically—in order to help construct new gender identities that destabilize national binaries. Eve’s frustrations with Ireland’s legislation reflect singular national identity’s inability to address women’s rights because of its alignment with the nation-state and cultural consensus. Consequently, the

narrative's emphasis on difference provides "a third force, a third Irish identity" that destabilizes national identity and gender binaries (Foster 246). One way in which the novel institutes a "third Irish identity" is through its criticisms of marriage and the social and political limitations that often consigned women to subordinate positions within the home. While the novel does not seek to abolish marriage, it does want to change how women engage in marriage and establish a new vision of marriage that is not based upon restrictive gender constructions and national identity. By destabilizing the Ireland's construction of marriage, the novel resists the homogenization of the nation and transforms national identity along postnational lines.

Through Eve's involvement with the domestic abuse shelter Kelly exposes the limits of women's social and political rights that in the novel's postnational paradigm advances criticisms of Irish national identity and its subordination of women. Eve's changing ideals are clearly rooted in her experiences with the Irish women's movement and the domestic abuse shelter she helps to establish as she increasingly questions the roles of women and men in society and the traditional constructions of social and political order. In questioning how to help these women successfully support themselves and their children, Eve cannot help but question the role of the institution of marriage within twentieth-century society. The novel therefore asserts that marriage limited women's choices as their husbands held social and legal authority over women and children. According to the novel, most Irish women defer to their husband's authority because "they think they're stupid. [...] They really believe they know nothing, They think men know more. They think men are cleverer. They think men are stronger. They feel helpless" (Kelly 100). The women's helpless feelings are reinforced by the illegality of divorce and their inability to escape abusive marriages. Kelly presents the everyday struggles of women and examines, as St. Peter notes, "women's maternal 'destiny' and the ways this role puts women into positions of

dependency” (166). Most of the ancillary female characters within the novel are victims of domestic violence and dependent upon the men within their lives. The women’s dependency and lack of resources depict women’s limited social and political rights as symptomatic of Irish national identity’s deficiencies.

Marriage is presented as a prevalent and expected experience for most of the women within the novel and, consequently, Irish society. Through Eve and the abused women she encounters, the novel criticizes the institution of marriage and the social and legal conditions that compel so many women to remain in unsuited or abusive marriages. Throughout the twentieth century many believed that the Irish family unit was the cornerstone of society and that the government or other individuals should not interfere with family business. This attitude applied to family disagreements that often left women and children the victims of violence and abuse. The novel asserts that social and political changes need to occur in order to address physical and sexual abuse in both the family unit and Irish society. Thus, the novel critiques the nation-state with the intention of affirming the Irish community’s right to protest and asserting the need for women’s political participation. In the novel, Ann Collins leads the women’s movement in Limerick and establishes the first domestic abuse shelter in the city because she can no longer ignore the numerous women and children suffering within their families. Ann explains:

‘I believe that something terrible is going on within the family. Maybe it has always gone on. But I’m not prepared to sit back and do nothing. These women need our help. Are we going to spend the rest of our lives arguing and debating about how to help them? Let’s just do it. [...] up until now few people cared enough. You know the attitude. What happens behind the closed doors of the home is private. It’s a little kingdom ruled by the



stronger partner. If that stronger partner happens to be a paranoid male, well, there's going to be trouble.' (169)

Unfortunately for Irish women in abusive relationships and marriages, there were few legal options available throughout most of the twentieth century. In 1976 the first Family Law Act was passed that mandated that employed spouses must financially provide support for their spouse and children, which granted women some financial support if they choose to leave their husbands, but overwhelmingly men often retained ownership of homes and assets. While there were several Family Law Acts passed throughout the 1970s and 1980s, most notably the Family Law Act of 1981 that mandated the protection of spouses and children, it was not until 1996 that the first Domestic Violence Act was passed. In addition, divorce was legalized in 1996. Until the 1990s, however, married women with children often felt trapped within their marriages because they often could not financially afford to leave their abusive spouses and there were few laws to protect and support them. Consequently, a key issue for the women's movement within the novel is domestic abuse and the resources available to victims of domestic abuse.

The novel's juxtaposition of Eleanor Creagh and her female patients—many of whom are victims of domestic abuse—connects women's dependency to Irish national identity because her patients are often concerned with maintaining cultural consensus and norms, particularly the national ideals of marriage and family. As the narrative develops it is revealed that Eleanor once sought to maintain these ideals herself and in the process became a victim of domestic violence, which is the motivating factor behind her work with abused women. The contrast between Eleanor's experiences—from battered wife to successful doctor—and her patients further highlights the limitations of a singular national identity because most of her patients remain within their limited roles. Thus, the novel argues that it is only through protest and political

engagement that these women can free themselves and others from their abusive homes, demonstrating that the acceptance of cultural difference and dissent is necessary in order to advance social change and postnational identity because difference destabilizes cultural consensus and norms. While the novel depicts cultural difference and dissent, it ultimately seeks to resist the restrictions of Irish nationalism and establish reforms that move beyond the confines of the nation-state. Both Eleanor and Eve represent cultural difference and dissent as they seek to help women—and they often encounter the same women—at either the domestic abuse shelter or clinic. One client, Miranda Connors, is a frequent guest at both the shelter and clinic. Miranda has left her husband four times before but every time is persuaded by her husband to return. She has had eight pregnancies and four miscarriages, one due to her husband repeatedly kicking her in the stomach, but she still finds it difficult to leave her husband because of both her children and lack of self-esteem. When Eleanor tries to convince Miranda that she needs to leave her husband for good, Miranda responds by telling her that she needs a man and “sometimes he’s not so bad. Sometimes he can be very nice. [And besides] He’s the only one I’ve got” (133). Miranda’s belief that having a man—any man—is better than being alone emphasizes the harmful effects of cultural consensus and heteronormativity because she consistently defers to her husband’s authority instead of inventing new images of identity.

Miranda epitomizes the dependency of many women upon their husbands as she wants to protect and care for her children but cannot do this without the financial support of her husband. Miranda is trapped within the nuclear family and cannot envision an independent life because she believes in the social structures of society, particularly since she doesn’t have a career, access to money or childcare. Miranda’s situation highlights the importance of economics to establishing independence and moving beyond the constraints of marriage and national identity.

Unfortunately, Miranda feels compelled to maintain her marriage because she has few resources and limited social alternatives. While Miranda recognizes that she has limited options, she fails to criticize the institutions and power structures that marginalize her and continues to fulfill the expected gender roles of Irish national identity. In contrast, Eleanor recognizes power structures and questions the validity of social constructs that compel women like Miranda to stay in abusive relationships. Kelly writes:

Eleanor had heard the story so often and knew the pattern so well that she could foretell each chapter in their lives. She understood the anguish of broken relationships, of rejected love, the hopeless love of one human being for someone totally unworthy of that love, but she could not understand Miranda's refusal to leave her husband for the sake of her children. (132)

Eleanor understands that the women she repeatedly treats at her clinic are hurting themselves and their children more by staying with their abusive husbands than if they were to leave them.

Ultimately this is proven to be the case for Miranda as it is revealed that her husband has been molesting one of their daughters and, after Miranda once again leaves her husband to try to find a safe environment for her and her children, he locates them and tries to kill Miranda by stabbing her. Miranda's narrative not only illustrates the dangers of domestic abuse but also exposes the cultural tradition of marital and familial abuse that the national collective often ignored.

Unfortunately, the novel reveals that Miranda's situation is not unique as numerous women find their way to Eleanor's clinic and Eve's shelter. The novel explores women's dependency not only through the women who come to the domestic abuse shelter but through Eleanor's history and development. Eleanor married Hugh's brother Donogh when she became pregnant while they were both medical students. Thus, Eleanor was forced to abandon her career

and Donogh felt obligated to marry her because of cultural expectations and gender and familial norms. The marriage subsequently failed as the couple frequently argued and Donogh's unhappiness turned to violence towards Eleanor. Finally, Donogh beat Eleanor so badly that she turned to his family for help. Eleanor, an orphan, believed his family would care for their baby while she recovered from her injuries before trying to repair her relationship with Donogh. The family, however, protected Donogh and allowed him to take their daughter to England without warning, and Eleanor never saw her daughter or Donogh again. Although Eleanor's situation is similar to many of the other women abused in the novel, she is able to circumvent her circumstances because she is educated and able to complete her medical degree. Even though Eleanor is abandoned by her husband, she does not resort to dependency upon the Creagh family or another man, but acquires independence through her work and rejection of conventional social roles. Although Eleanor's independence and unconventionality often puts her at odds with others, including Eve, she is able to express her views about individual people, society and religion because she expresses her identity freely. Eleanor's depiction consequently counters male perspectives of Irish womanhood that are homogenizing and damaging by transgressing norms and traditional constructions of Irish femininity. Recognizing the limitations of national identity, Eleanor's depiction advances postnational identity by subverting the national—or masculine—identity norms.

### **The Catholic Standard: A Basis for Singular National Identity**

The dominance of the Catholic Church throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century resulted in the maintenance of rigid gender norms and sexuality, primarily through the institution of marriage. The control of sexuality set “definite relations and strict regulations about who could get married to whom, when, where and on what basis” (Inglis,

“Field of Irish Sexuality” 9). The Catholic Church helped construct Irish identity around fixed concepts of gender that empowered men over women and reinforced nationalist ideals. The ideal Irish woman was constructed in light of the Virgin Mary because women were believed to represent the purity of the Irish nation. With the support of the Catholic Church, legislation consequently limited women’s roles in the state and defined women solely within domestic terms: “women were mothers; women were wives; women minded the hearth and home” (Valiulis, “Power, Gender and Identity” 118). However, these domestic terms failed to account for the confinement and social problems that arose from the limitations of this social institution and which were largely ignored by both the Irish state and Catholic Church.

In the novel, the Catholic Church and its representatives are depicted as complicit in the denial of domestic and sexual abuse as problems within Irish society. As the Catholic Church fails to acknowledge or provide support for women trapped within abusive marriages and families, the characters become increasingly disillusioned with the Church’s position and their faith. Eve’s growing awareness of the social problems arising from gender relations and marriage leads her to question the Catholic Church and its silence on violence against women. Eve reflects:

When popes and bishops and politicians spoke eloquently on behalf of the poor and oppressed, for peace and political stability, when they talked about the sanctity of marriage, the sacredness of the family, and most of all when they preached against contraception and abortion, their silence on violence against women was deafening. She struggled to hold her faith [...]. (166)

Eve struggles with her faith because she understands that the sanctity of marriage is upholding social injustices that place women in subordinated and abused positions. The Catholic Church’s

failure to publicly condemn or censure violence against women upholds the national ideal of marriage and family that restricted women to domestic duties and disregarded marital abuses.

The novel gives expression to the voices and experiences of those women who have been abused or intentionally excluded from Ireland's narrative and criticizes the Catholic morality that informs and restricts individual identity. The novel demonstrates that physically and sexually abused women and children did not inform the official narrative of Ireland's national identity because these narratives did not coincide with the maintenance of Ireland's Catholic, moral identity. At the cornerstone of Irish morality are the nationally privileged images of Irish wives and mothers, which the Catholic Church supported and promoted as the ideal images of Irish femininity. In constructing an alternative national narrative, the novel rejects and undermines these images, as well as the role of the Catholic Church in women's lives, particularly through Eve's and Eleanor's criticisms that capture social contradictions. Eleanor expresses women's changing attitudes towards Catholicism and Irish morality when she reflects:

It was hard to believe she had ever been so idealistic, yearning for perfection, longing for truth. Her life had once been regulated and encompassed by faith in this one Church and yet she had been forced by her very need for truth to abandon it. [...] She couldn't remember [her prayers]. But she remembered that each day began with a dedication to God and ended with a renewal of commitment. And when she at last refused to make the commitment because no woman with a shred of self-respect could be a member of a church which so obviously despised and feared her, her denial was revenge for betrayal. (117-118)

Eleanor's declaration that the church despises and fears her reflects her loss of faith in the Catholic Church because of its misogynistic policies (Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by*

*Irish Women* 23). Eleanor's reflections counter national constructs of the Catholic Church and suggest the need to reform the Church's perception of women according to new images of Irish women. Until the Catholic institution is transformed, Eleanor maintains her censure of this institution that frequently reinforced restrictive gender dynamics with the purpose of maintaining the family unit. Thus, Eleanor is not alone in her mistrust of the Catholic Church as she notes "her women patients had [also] lost confidence in the wisdom of a celibate male clergy" (120). Eleanor's rejected faith and the lost confidence of her patients in the Catholic Church expresses critical self-awareness about Ireland's national assumptions. As the women acknowledge and convey alternative narratives they assert the emergence of postnational identity and transform collusive practices of social and political limitations. In doing so, the narrative dismantles national narratives of Irish morality.

### **An Alternative Notion of Identity: The Necessity of the Women's Movement**

Eve's involvement with establishing the domestic abuse shelter for women and children, and her growing awareness of the problem of violence within marriages, cause her to view marriage in a new and often negative light. After hearing numerous accounts of violence and sexual assault from the women at the shelter, Eve asserts that "she had never imagined marriage could be so terrible" (171). Eve's account of her work with the women's movement, and more specifically the domestic abuse shelter, illustrates the prevalence of domestic violence within Irish culture while highlighting the role that the institution of marriage plays in perpetuating this violence. Irish women were encouraged to marry because their primary roles were viewed as being wives and mothers—"the reproducers of the nation" (Valiulis, "Virtuous Mothers and Dutiful Wives" 109). Women were limited to these roles through legislation that regulated their access to the workforce, education, contraceptives and divorce. However, since the 1970s "major

battles between tradition and innovation have been fought over women's sexuality, reproduction, the structure of the family and the place of women within it" (Barry and Wills 1409). Kelly's novel reveals the burgeoning battles of the twentieth century as she depicts Eve's account of her personal struggles, as well as the social problems and changes she encounters, and introduces women struggling with the reality of their lives. Through the depiction of marriage and motherhood, the women of the novel contest conventional images of Irish women as national emblems of domesticity upholding the home and nation. Thus, the novel contends that the 1970s Irish home was often dysfunctional and crumbling under the oppressive control of men and the State.

It is clear that Eve's involvement with the women's movement changes her views about marriage and men and her eyes are both opened to the social structures that propel her world and are also coarsened by the oppression that she perceives to be everywhere. Kelly writes:

She was caught in a web of conflicting loyalties and ethics. It was hard to protect the privacy of the families involved and at the same time expose the injustices and hardships. But, almost worse than that, her view of Hugh became more and more critical. He was no longer just Hugh, but a man, one of them. She had never thought of people in stereotypical terms, sexual or otherwise, and it was a disconcerting, even painful, experience. She struggled to find balance. (178)

Eve's struggle to find balance leads her to end her engagement with Hugh and to her devotion to the women's movement. Eve acknowledges that she had begun to consider their engagement and subsequent marriage as a life sentence that she feared (214). And instead of marrying Hugh, Eve goes to the United States for six months to observe and participate in the American feminist movement in order to bring ideas back to Ireland.



In Ireland, the second wave of feminism began with the establishment of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement in Dublin in the 1970s. The expectations, according to Irish feminist Anne Speed, were that the "fundamental issues which women were discussing across the world" could be applied in Ireland and the movement "could move forward in a straight line" in a unified progression (Smyth, "States of Emergence" 46). As *Necessary Treasons* illustrates, Irish women were not unified in support of the women's movement and the narrative reflects various attitudes both within the women's movement and towards the women's movement. Throughout the novel Eve's idealistic participation in the women's movement is juxtaposed with the middle-class, middle-aged women with whom she works to establish the domestic abuse shelter. Confusion, Eve maintains, surrounds the women as they struggle with their feelings, seek to balance their commitments to their husbands and children, and hope to enact change. Kelly writes:

[Confusion] permeated discussions and committee meetings. They went around in circles arguing and agreeing as if caught in a treadmill. They seemed to be challenging assumptions and power structures without quite understanding the implications. Politically naïve, fearful of radical change, they wished for miracles. Only two or three had the support of their husbands. The others were either deserted or separated or attended the meeting[s] without telling their husbands. (70)

In the novel, most of the women active in the women's movement depend upon their husbands' approval or they feel compelled to hide the fact that they're involved. Even as Eve judges the new members and the likelihood that they'll stay, she limits the information she shares with Hugh and minimizes her involvement when discussing the movement and shelter with him.

Confusion, consequently, permeates not only the women's movement in Limerick but also Eve as she wrestles with her own emotions and expectations.

*Necessary Treasons* draws upon domestic abuse as an issue to destabilize conventional constructions of gender, marriage and family. In particular, the novel challenges constructions of the family unit and social controls that maintained that the Irish family was the cornerstone of society and a source of stability that should not be interfered with. Attitudes towards the privacy of the family maintained that "men were expected to control the family cell and moderate the relationship between the private and public spheres" in order to preserve the family and, hence, the nation-state (Conrad, *Family Cell* 7). The novel demonstrates that these ideals about society and the privacy of the family consequently led to abuses of power. In the Irish family many women were forced to tolerate abuse and degradation because there were few options available to them if they wanted to leave their husbands.

While there are few statistics about domestic violence and sexual assault prior to the 1980s, it is clear that the problem of domestic violence in Ireland persists and according to a 2008 survey conducted by Ireland's National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence, 78% of respondents consider domestic abuse against women to be a fairly common problem in Ireland (Horgan et al.). With 78% of respondents acknowledging that domestic abuse against women was a fairly common problem in 2008, it is fair to assume that it was a common problem in the 1970s as well. While it is unclear whether or not the incidence of rape, sexual abuse and battering has increased over the course of the twentieth century, there has been a rise in the number of women reporting rape and domestic violence since the 1970s (Smyth, "Paying Our Disrespects..." 206-207). Since the first rape crisis center was established in 1979 in Dublin, the number of reported rapes has risen from 76 in 1979 to 1,479 in 1990

(Smyth, “Paying Our Disrespects...” 207). More recent statistics demonstrate that domestic violence is still a familiar experience for Irish women as it is estimated that one in five women in Ireland have experienced domestic violence by a partner or ex-partner and in 2008 there were over 15,000 domestic violence incidents reported to the Irish Women’s Aid National Helpline (“Irish and Worldwide Statistics on Violence against Women” 1). Since the 1970s there has been a great deal of progress in supporting victims and raising awareness about domestic abuse and sexual violence crimes and the 2007 establishment of Cosc, the National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence, is furthering these efforts. Cosc is an Irish word that means “to stop” or “to prevent” and the purpose of the office is to coordinate government responses to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in order to improve the prevention of these crimes, the protection of the victims, and the treatment of perpetrators (“About Cosc”). Cosc has many of the same goals as those of the women represented in the novel, particularly Eve and Ann who work together to establish the first domestic abuse shelter in Limerick.

While there has been a tremendous amount of progress in Ireland when it comes to providing resources and convicting crimes of domestic abuse and sexual violence, the novel reveals that domestic abuse and sexual violence were prevalent problems in Irish society that were not being addressed until activists of the women’s movement sought funding for shelters and clinics and advocated for changes in legislation. The legislative changes enacted were critical to the success of Ireland’s domestic abuse and sexual violence organizations, clinics and shelters because the passing of new laws and acts meant that these issues were no longer viewed as private, family problems but as public, social problems. Even though changes in legislation began to occur in the 1970s with the passing of a new Family Law Act (1976) and the

establishment of safety and barring orders, many members of the court system resisted these changes when cases were first presented in court.

In the novel, when the brutalized Miranda Connors seeks to bar her husband from their home so she and her children can live there safely, her advocates find it difficult to locate a solicitor willing to represent her because her case would be the first debarring order in Limerick. Once they find a solicitor willing to argue the case, he warns Eve and Miranda that it will be a difficult case to prove and the judge's behavior clarifies that many men within the legal system considered these cases to be private issues. Kelly illustrates the Irish legal perspective when she writes:

‘These bills,’ he [the solicitor] said, ‘are drafted in too much of a hurry, the result of pressure from reform groups like yours. The language can be ambiguous, and it’s grist to the mill of some judges who have a natural contempt for the great unwashed, and particularly women, who are a nuisance, cluttering up the courts with marriage complaints. But our man is fair and you’ll get a fair hearing.’ (173)

Despite the caustic behavior of the judge, Miranda receives a fair hearing and is granted the barring order, but her husband has seven days to move out of their home and Miranda fears what he will do in retaliation before and after moving out of the home. Unfortunately, the barring order is only for three months and it is not clear what will happen at the end of those three months. Consequently, as Eve notes, it isn’t the perfect solution but it is the only solution they have available because even if divorce was legal Miranda’s husband wouldn’t want a divorce since he enjoyed having a “convenient doormat [and] punching bag” at his disposal (151).

As Eve becomes increasingly involved in the women’s movement and domestic abuse shelter, the novel conveys its purpose by asserting a politics that argues that feminism is

necessary to create change in Irish society, particularly in women's lives. The novel consequently creates didactic moments that explicate the narrative's perspective towards women's roles within society and society's overall ills. While these didactic scenes aren't skillful novel writing, they are effective dramatizations that convey the novel's political thesis. Thus, "Eleanor functions as feminist analyst within the novel, a role that teeters occasionally on the brink of bald didacticism but which is always played out in narrative dramatizations" (St. Peter, *Changing Ireland* 166). In these moments the plot is interrupted while Eleanor—or sometimes Eve—reveals her thoughts about Irish society or womanhood in a style that verges upon lecture. For instance, Eleanor states, "'And don't give me history. History is crap. Men invented history and God at the same time because they were too lazy to draw the water and hew the wood, and the hunting was poor, and they had to have some excuse for their idle ways or the missus wouldn't let them leap into the hay with her'" (Kelly 60). Eleanor articulates the anger of many women within a political context that conveys the gender imbalances of Irish society.

The primary manner in which Eve publicly addresses the gender imbalances in Irish society is through public demonstrations and protests. While Hugh is aware that Eve participates in these protests he is unprepared when he encounters the protestors while stuck in traffic. He abhors the women's public tactics and is horrified when he finds Eve in the crowd with her "own private banner: BATTERED WIVES ARE YOUR MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS" (113, emphasis in original). Hugh, however, is not the only one horrified by the actions of the women as many citizens voice their anger at the women. The protest depicts the anger and resistance to the women's movement as:

A car pulled up beside him [Hugh] and its angry occupant shouted, 'They've had a rush to the head. Too much freedom they have. Go home and cook your husbands' suppers,

you little—’ He trailed the epithet off under his breath. ‘A good whacking is what they all need,’ he confided loudly to Hugh. ‘Keep them in their place.’ Hugh ignored him but the man continued, ‘They should be down on their knees this minute, praying to the Blessed Mother of God in the church. I’ll tell the priest on yiz,’ he roared to the group just ahead of him. ‘Not that they care. Church or state they don’t care for. Hoors all.’ (Kelly 113)

Hugh does not join the angry man in his rants against the women but his silent condemnation of their actions reveals his revulsion at what he considers their “display of vulgarity” (113). While Hugh does not vocalize his feelings to the women protesting it is clear that he loathes their actions as much as the man screaming “Hoors” out his window does. Hugh’s inability to recognize the suffering of Irish women trapped in abusive relationships, unable to divorce their husbands, and unable to open a bank account without their husband’s signature or even acquire a job because of the marriage bar, exposes society’s complicity in restricting women’s rights. The subsequent conflicts that arise between Hugh and Eve lead to the deterioration of their relationship. As Eve becomes increasingly aware of gender imbalances she resists traditional gender roles and deepens her commitment to the women’s movement.

### **A History of Oppression: Examining Women’s Rights from the 1680s to the 1970s**

Hugh’s inability to recognize contemporary social issues is contrasted with his interest in a series of family letters written by a long-dead female relative, Honora Creagh. These letters highlight the history of violence within Ireland and its colonial relationship with Britain. The eight seventeenth-century letters center upon the period of 1685-1688 and the Jacobite-Irish challenge to British hegemony (St. Peter 164). The letters depict Honora Creagh’s struggles after the death of her husband and sons and the amputation of her own legs. She hopes to die but in the meantime makes the decision to reject her Irish customs and will no longer speak the Irish

language or attend the Catholic Church. Instead, she chooses self-preservation and concedes to only speak English and to convert to Protestantism. Honora's rejection of her Irish identity allows her to survive because she denies the multiple facets of her identity. Honora trades one national identity for another in an effort to adhere to the nation-state's standards of an essential or singular national identity. Hugh empathizes with the long-dead Honora Creagh but is unable to empathize with the battered women within his contemporary society, even though many twentieth-century women were forced to make similar concessions. Hugh should empathize with Honora and twentieth-century women because both his long-dead relative and female contemporaries seek social and political balance that accepts cultural dissent and difference.

This historical thread throughout the novel ultimately exposes the history of oppression within Ireland and illustrates James Connolly's often cited claim that Irish women were the slaves of slaves (46). The juxtaposition of the 1970s with the 1680s illustrates the history of privilege and domination in Ireland as the British—or Anglo-Irish—were often privileged over the Irish and men privileged over women. In particular, Irish women experienced oppression that restricted them to the domestic sphere and outside the realm of Irish politics. The oppression of Irish women in the twentieth century consequently supports Rona Field's claim that:

The subordination of women is exacerbated within groups that are oppressed groups in the context of the larger society. In such groups the male is forced into a subordinate, subservient role to his masculine counterparts in the majority group. Since power and masculinity are generally equated, his only recourse for expressing his 'masculine potency' is through sexual domination of the women in his group. (qtd. in Pelan, *Two Irelands* 20)

The novel demonstrates that there is a connection between the national movement and women's movement because of the oppression that initiates them both. From the oppression of the British regime the nationalist movement emerged and led to social change via Ireland's independence. The novel therefore argues that the women's movement is another social movement arising from oppression within Ireland that seeks to address women's rights and Irish legislation that limits women to the home. The novel is consequently interested in more than Eve's changing consciousness because it reveals the "violent experiences of colonization, England's colonization of Ireland, [and] men's [colonization] of women and children" (St. Peter 164). Furthermore, the novel asserts that certain forms of nationalism have been necessary and legitimate to the resistance and liberation of Ireland, while other forms of nationalism have further developed discrimination and confinement. Although Irish nationalism led to Irish independence, the process of establishing the Irish Free State further marginalized women. The novel suggests that Ireland's colonization did not cease with Irish independence but continued with the colonization of Irish women into positions of dependency and subordination, especially within the domestic sphere and institution of marriage. Eve seeks to resist Irish men's colonization and in doing so reveals the historical constructs of national identity that are based upon natural or given forms of gender, sexuality and ethnicity. The novel consequently proposes that Irish women must move beyond constructions of the nation-state and national identity in order to transform Irish identity and realize social change. In doing so, the novel supports a postnational perspective in which the community recognizes that it has created itself and is also prepared to reform itself.

Hugh's failure to recognize the construction of national identity through the confines of gender and sexuality demonstrates the need for women to resist their colonization by critiquing national identity and instituting social and political changes. Hugh is still trapped in a colonial



mindset and does not recognize the connections between Ireland's violent past and the present moment. He admonishes Eve to wait for things to get better instead of actively advocating for social change and reform, which further indicates the need for a postnational shift of consciousness. Eve is unwilling to passively wait for women's lives to improve because she believes change will not occur without active participation in the women's movement. While Hugh is focused on the suffering of the past, Eve is focused on the suffering of the present and neither one of them can understand the other's opinions. Their increasingly diverging opinions are illustrated over a discussion about Hugh's interest in the past. Kelly writes:

'It's very sad,' Eve said. 'But it's over. Awful things happen today as well. And we can do something about today. We can't change the past.'

[...] 'I suppose it is hard for you to understand just how much the people around here suffered,' Hugh said.

'I wish you wouldn't be so patronizing. You never listen to anything I say. In the past few months I have met scores of women who are suffering in the most terrible way—being beaten, being humiliated, not given money. I've tried to tell you.'

'Look, Eve,' he said, 'don't bring up that business of battered wives again. We have a social welfare system, we have social workers, we have our own government, we elect our own representatives in government. These women have a vote. You have a vote. Why don't you use it?' (100)

Hugh believes that contemporary problems are much simpler than the complex situations of the past. For him, abused women are culpable for their circumstances and the programs in place to address their concerns are adequate. Eve cannot tolerate Hugh's views and her work with abused women and children shows her that much more needs to be done for all Irish women. These

points of contention—Eve’s involvement with the abuse shelter, public protests and women’s rights—ultimately lead Eve to end their engagement.

### **Challenging Irish Heterosexuality and Reimagining Conventional Marriage in Ireland**

While heterosexuality and the institution of marriage are imperative to the novel, as well as Irish society, the narrative does not depict heterosexuality and marriage as being entirely oppressive because it ends with the possibility that men and women can engage in heterosexuality without reinforcing the hegemonic social constructions of gender and marriage. Eve, however, is unable to recognize that it is possible to engage in heterosexuality and marriage without maintaining or furthering Irish social, political and economic constraints. Therefore, while heterosexuality and marriage are central to both the novel and Eve’s growing consciousness—particularly through her relationship with Hugh and her encounters with victims of domestic violence—the novel ultimately depicts an optimistic perspective towards heterosexuality and marriage through Eleanor and Adrian’s reconciliation. Thus, Eve’s increasingly negative perspective is juxtaposed with Eleanor’s realistic, yet positive, attitude towards men and marriage. The contrast between Eve’s idealism and Eleanor’s realism illustrates the continuum of Irish feminism as women voiced various responses to the women’s movement and the issues of gender, sexuality and nationality. Heterosexuality and marriage are central to these issues and even as both Eve and Eleanor recognize the hegemonic role of heterosexuality within society their reactions reveal the development of the politics of sexuality in the twentieth century. In Ireland, “some of the major battles between tradition and innovation have been fought over women’s sexuality, reproduction, the structure of the family and the place of women within it” (Barry and Wills 1409). And for that reason, *Necessary Treasons* depicts the

“treasons” of Irish women as many women sought social and political changes, beginning with conceptions of Irish womanhood and the family unit.

While Eve and Hugh’s relationship deteriorates throughout the novel, Eleanor and Adrian’s relationship flourishes as the two friends reconnect and discover, through their disagreements and discussions, their love for one another. Eleanor, Adrian, Hugh and Donogh were all good friends in medical school before Donogh and Eleanor married. After their marriage, the four friends rarely saw each other as Donogh became increasingly angry and violent and Eleanor became increasingly isolated (219). Eleanor occasionally saw her old friends but these friendships hinged on Donogh’s reactions. Kelly writes:

One evening Adrian called to see her and when he saw her bruised face he insisted on her going to his flat. She knew Donogh was having affairs and she thought he would be glad to be rid of her. Instead he nearly beat down Adrian’s door and in the end Adrian had to call the guards. It was all so humiliating. (219)

Eleanor once relied on Donogh and his betrayal changes her view towards marriage and conventional gender roles. This is evident throughout the novel when she presents her didactic lectures about social structures and gender roles. Eleanor no longer relies on her male friends to rescue her and her friendships with Adrian and Hugh have deteriorated since they were in their twenties. Hugh and Eleanor have maintained a relationship because of her desire to sustain her relationship with the Creagh family in hopes of being reunited with her long-missing daughter and Hugh’s sense of familial obligation. Although Hugh does not seem to sympathize with contemporary victims of domestic abuse, his reaction when faced with Eleanor’s abuse demonstrates that he reacts with compassion when faced with an actual situation of domestic abuse. While Eleanor’s outspoken assertions and independence often irritates Hugh he endures

her barbs because of their past friendship and his guilt over his brother's actions. Adrian, on the other hand, has rarely seen Eleanor over the past twenty years but has maintained his friendship with Hugh. The three share a contentious relationship that is used in the narrative in order to reveal social issues and arguments surrounding particular topics, such as women's rights, Irish literature, family relationships and love.

Eleanor and Adrian's relationship is definitely unconventional as the forty-year-olds discover love and comfort in their incessant disagreements. Nevertheless, their love and eventual marriage demonstrate that the novel is not a condemnation of heterosexuality and the institution of marriage, but an endorsement of new standards for marriage that are based upon mutual understanding and respect, instead of social propriety and destructive gender constructions. Eleanor and Adrian's relationship consequently reveals that marriage does not necessarily have to be a bad institution, but that the social, political and religious forces that propel women and men into unsuitable marriages and maintain harmful gender stereotypes and roles are dangerous. Eleanor's relationship with Adrian consequently demonstrates that it is possible to identify as heterosexual and participate in marriage, while still challenging the hegemonic constructions of heterosexuality and gender (Richardson 53). Although Eleanor and Adrian do not agree on many issues—including women's rights—they are able to allow each other to be themselves without forcing each other to change. Eleanor explains that their ability to live happily while often disagreeing depends on their understanding of the same rules, which includes fighting without hatred (221). Eleanor tells Eve that she's comfortable with Adrian and can relax and be her real self, even if that includes being contemptuous, witty, dotty or motherly (221, 227). Eleanor also notes that there are "necessary treasons" that women must make in marriage and life in order to survive. For Eleanor, her treasons include her marriage to Adrian because this action seems to

contradict her previous assertions about society, men and marriage. However, her treasons for and against marriage demonstrate the continuum of identity that resists essential models. In the novel, the characters' "treasons" against men and the State are opportunities for Irish women to confront the regulation of gender roles, sexuality and morality. Emphasizing the importance of these treasons is the novel's proclamation that they are "necessary" treasons. They are necessary because traditional methods of invoking change, as advocated by Hugh, have created few social and political changes for women in Ireland. Consequently, the characters must engage in "necessary treasons" in order to advocate for women's rights and create change within Ireland's restrictive social institutions, including the institutions of marriage. Therefore the novel does not present an either/or choice—that women have to choose between marriage and women's rights—but that women can work towards social change within heterosexual relationships and the institution of marriage in order gain greater rights within the institution of marriage.

The few successful marriages of the novel keeps readers from being disheartened about the institutions of marriage and family by illustrating that it is possible to be active in the women's movement while also happily married. Another woman in the novel who chooses to be active in the women's movement and is happily married with children is Ann Collins. While the novel depicts only a few moments of interaction between Ann and her husband Clem, it is clear that they understand and respect one another, even though they do not always agree about the way Ann helps the abused women who come to her for help. This depiction of marriage, as well as Eleanor and Adrian's relationship, establishes marriage as site of transformation for national identity along postnational lines. The novel consequently does not condemn the institution of marriage but asserts that Ireland's construction of marriage and the family has created power imbalances that privilege men over women. It is therefore necessary for Eleanor to commit

treason by negotiating new power relations with her husband that destabilize the Irish constitution's representation of marriage and family. The novel demonstrates that gender, heterosexuality and the family unit are closely intertwined and that they do not only have to be sites of oppression but can also be sites of challenge and change. The novel therefore seeks to move women to take action as the narrative highlights the oppressive experiences of many married women and the limitations they experience because of the institution of marriage. The narrative therefore proposes to reconstitute identity outside a national frame of reference that limits citizens based on gender and sexuality in order to create social change.

### **The Fluidity of Identity: Women's Multiplicity and the Subversion of Restrictive Institutions**

*Necessary Treasons* is interested in confronting the dominant ideologies of twentieth century Ireland and exposing the harm and damage these gender and sexuality constructions create socially and politically. The novel depicts the reality of women's lives—particularly the prevalence of domestic abuse—and encourages women to enter the public sphere and to become active in initiating social change. Consequently, the novel challenges “the entrenched images of women in Irish society through a variety of means” (Pelan, *Two Irelands* 50). These means include the juxtaposition of politically active and inactive women who represent the conflicts within Irish society and the women's movement. Ultimately, the novel criticizes the ideologies and legislation of 1970s Ireland as being oppressive and argues that women's opportunities are limited due to restrictive gender and sexuality policies that uphold the family as the fundamental and ideal social unit.

The novel's treasons ultimately advance the narrative's challenge of national identity by illustrating the multiplicity of Irish women's identity in order to counter nationalism's fixed

concepts of gender and sexuality. The novel engages in national discourse with the intention of destabilizing restrictive binaries (Man/Woman, Catholic/Protestant, Unmarried/Married) and gender constructions. By moving beyond binaries, the novel suggests the necessity of postnational identity as an alternative to the essential or exclusive references to a single national identity. The novel's recognition of the multiplicity of women's identity develops women's freedom to subvert cultural, religious and other public expectations in order to express their identities freely. The novel consequently seeks to unite women in order to dismantle dominant, masculine hegemony and assert women's multiple subjectivities. The novel therefore aligns with Irigaray's claim that "if we inhabited a social order in which femininity [was] fully recognized, cultural expressions of womanhood would be multiple [...]" (Mookherjee 298). The novel's representation of women's multiplicity constructs new images of Irish femininity that challenge dominant social and political depictions of Irish women. By connecting women's multiplicity and identity the novel asserts a postnational identity that aspires to move beyond historically and socially constructed national Irish identities. As a result, the novel depicts the need for women to acknowledge their oppression and to counter that oppression through protest and social change.

The novel argues that the social and political forces that maintain the homogenization of women's identity need to be changed in order to challenge women's oppression. The novel therefore criticizes the tools of female oppression, particularly the institution of marriage, with the intention of subverting conventional models of Irish marriage and masculinity. Through its depiction of marriage and masculinity, the novel not only acknowledges Irish social problems but advocates for social activism and change. In particular, the novel's depiction of domestic violence challenges conventional marriage and the legislation that entraps women in abusive relationships. The novel seeks to reform marriage through social and political means in order to

address the primary form of women's oppression in Ireland Ireland's conventional understanding of marriage is criticized within the narrative but the novel ultimately does not condemn marriage. The institution of marriage is not condemned within the novel but the social structures and forces that propel women into marriage and prevent them from leaving unsuitable or abusive relationships are condemned. Thus, the novel is a "narrative performance of the ways gender as a social construct can be damaging, and how personal transformations and collective resistance can challenge those constructs" (St. Peter 168). The novel's resistance suggests that identity should move beyond national constraints and the myth of national origins. One way in which the novel asserts that women's oppression can be combated is by defining identity along multiple, diverse and inclusive lines that advance a postnational understanding of identity.

*Necessary Treasons* is one of the few novels to provide a fictional account of the Irish women's movement and the discourses women active in the movement were engaging in. Furthermore, the novel's depiction of the women's movement asserts the importance of the movement and women's ability to create social and political change. Thus, the novel "enacts the rationale of the movement, its historical development, discussions of political strategies and barriers, analyses of the patterns of problems among the [abuse shelter] clientele, and the embattled but effective female collectivity that makes the institution possible" (St. Peter, *Changing Ireland* 168). While the novel depicts the rationale and historical development of the women's movement in 1970s Limerick, it also asserts women's multiplicity in order to demonstrate how women can "dislodge the patriarchal mode of identity formation" (Mookherjee 302) by transgressing Ireland's social, political and religious norms, as well as the norms of other women. The novel argues that women must break the homogenizing relationships between men and themselves. Consequently, even as the novel depicts the movement and its participants it



also acknowledges the need to redefine Irish women's identity as postnational—moving beyond national identity constraints—in order to acknowledge the multiplicity of women's identity and the varied responses and values that establish cultural dissent. In the novel, the women's movement advances the characters towards the recognition of cultural dissent, particularly when it comes to women's roles within Irish society, and criticizes the acceptance of cultural consensus and homogenization.

Although the novel ends with little resolution, the narrative's advancement of postnational identity by moving away from cultural consensus and essential or singular national identity encourages changes in consciousness. In contrast to St. Peter's assertion that the novel ends bleakly with the status quo still intact, I argue that the novel actually ends in encouragement because the status quo is challenged and will continued to be challenged by politically active women, such as Eve and Eleanor. The novel consequently affirms the necessity of the women's movement and women's continued action in order to demonstrate that further social and political changes need to be enacted but that progress has been made through the establishment of the women's shelter and the women's renegotiation of their heteronormative roles. Juxtaposing the tragic and the joyous, the conclusion provides brief accounts of what has happened in the six months since Eve left Hugh, Eleanor and Adrian announced their engagement, and Miranda Connors left her husband. Eve traveled to the United States and returned empowered by the progress she witnessed in California and determined to revitalize the Irish women's movement and Limerick's domestic abuse shelter. Unfortunately, the abuse shelter fell into disrepair while Eve was absent because Ann Collins—the local women's movement leader—became ill and was subsequently diagnosed with cancer. Ann is destined to die but it is clear that Eve will continue her work and advance the movement. In the meantime, the shelter's first victim, Miranda

Connors, is stabbed by her husband and while the narrative does not clarify whether or not her wounds are fatal, her husband's release from prison after serving six months for breaking the court's debarring order, lead to her wounds. Throughout the narrative Miranda represents the numerous Irish women abused by their husbands and her final depiction reinforces the novel's call for social and legislative changes that would protect women and children from their abusers. However, the violence and tragedy of the Connors' family is juxtaposed with the birth of Eleanor and Adrian's son. Kelly writes, "New life. There was surely something new to be said about that and the mother, the vessel" (239). Their son represents the possibility of new perspectives and change in Ireland as the novel acknowledges that the dominant social structures are still in place and "well organized," but that social and consciousness changes are possible, as demonstrated by Eleanor and Adrian's marriage. While the institution of marriage remains in place, Eleanor is able to mold the institution to fit her needs and the novel proposes that it is possible to be a part of conventional institutions—especially since we can never entirely escape the hegemonic discourses that produce us—while still challenging these same discourses. The novel's conclusion therefore asserts that progress may be difficult and even painful but that changes in consciousness are possible as demonstrated by Eve, Eleanor and even Miranda. While these three women continue to develop their ideas about their roles within Irish society and what changes need to occur, from both a personal and political perspective, their actions and words challenge entrenched ideals that limit women's opportunities and resources. Thus, the novel concludes by emphasizing the need for women to be politically active in order to create change in both the public and domestic spheres.

### 3 **Dance of a Nation** Developing Postnational Identity in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing*

Even as the joy of summer permeates Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing* (1999), the narrative examines the concealed experiences of Irish childhood and reveals the social mores that order and confine Irish identity. The novel begins by questioning the perceptions of official geography upon which the nation-state coalesces and by which it orders the assumption of a singular collective national identity and experience. In considering the assumptions upon which maps are constructed, the novel challenges foundational myths and the exclusive reference to a unified, singular Irish social experience by contesting the perception of the nation-state as the primary reference point for identity. The novel consequently prompts an understanding of multiple Irish experiences and identities that disrupt singular national identity. In this chapter, I employ Gerard Delanty and Joseph Ruane's understandings of postnationalism in support of my assertion that *The Dancers Dancing* does not dissolve national boundaries but utilizes postnational ideas to promote awareness of an expansive Irish identity that is multiple and diverse. Thus, the novel argues against a singular collective national identity and advances postnational ideas via the characters' reflection and self-conscious awareness of Ireland's social norms.

Postnational identity is most often understood as being inclusive, positive and dependent upon multiple reference points (Delanty 20). Postnationalism consequently rejects the nation-state as the primary identity reference point and acknowledges that multiple identities exist within a state. Incorporating Jürgen Habermas's theories of postnational identity, Delanty claims that "national identity is seen as essentialistic while postnational identity is interpreted as an identity that has been radically deconstructed and is open ended" (20). Postnationalism rejects

the assumption of “an exclusive reference to a single identity” (Delanty 20) and the premise of a singular collective Irish identity but recognizes cultural differences and asserts the principles of inclusion over exclusion. While postnational understandings of identity subvert singular or essential national identity perspectives, it is important to note that a critique of a singular national identity or the nation-state does not imply the repudiation of all forms of nationalism (Kearney 57). Nationalism and postnationalism actually coexist within a complex and dynamic relationship that is more dialectical than linear (Ruane 192). While postnationalism as a set of ideas evolved throughout the twentieth century, we cannot assume a simple linear historical shift from nationalism to postnationalism because postnationalism and nationalism have developed simultaneously and continue to influence one another (Ruane 183). Consequently, postnationalism, as I utilize it, asserts not that the nation is remade or renewed but that the nation is no longer the primary reference point—or only reference point—for national identity. Delanty’s claim that national identity is based upon essentialist models that narrowly define Irish society provides a paradigm that rejects the territorial nation-state and normative political and social consensus in order to emphasize the characteristics of a more inclusive and fluid identity (20-21). With this theory in mind, I will demonstrate that *The Dancers Dancing* simultaneously employs nationalism and postnationalism with the intention of shifting the reader’s consciousness in order to encourage a postnational understanding of Irish identity.

*The Dancers Dancing* resists the cultural ideologies and traditions of 1970s Ireland and exposes the gaps between lived experiences and official history in order to advance a postnational understanding of Irish identity. Although *The Dancers Dancing* does not denounce Irish nationalism, the novel seeks to understand some of the prevailing ideas and images encompassing gender, sexuality and ethnicity, as well as class, in order to criticize the national

perceptions that shaped most Irish citizens of the 1970s, particularly those ideals that privileged one person over another. Through the use of gender, sexuality and ethnicity, *Ní Dhuibhne* addresses the complexities of women's identity in Ireland and challenges dominant ideas and images that define Irish women. Consequently, the novel cannot be reduced to one national perspective but depicts multiple identities present within the state. The novel subsequently destabilizes Irish national identity and reveals that a singular collective identity has been destructive, particularly to Irish women. One of the most destructive aspects of singular national identity, according to the novel, is that Irish identity is defined as male and masculine, and that men's voices and experiences have been privileged over women's.

Men's voices have been privileged through national ideals that upheld the nation-state as the primary source of identity and emphasized a singular collective identity based upon the homogenization of gender, sexuality and ethnicity. The novel demonstrates that these categories define national identity as masculine, heterosexual, Caucasian and Catholic. Thus, the novel reveals that national identity "operates as if it were simply 'out there' producing the way we ought to be and acting as a kind of external 'guarantor' of a set of desired social/political arrangements" (Finlayson 91). In particular, the novel asserts that the nation mirrors men because Ireland is defined as one nation, one gender and one sexuality that is "embedded in what men are and what women are assigned to be" (Mayer 18-19). Throughout the novel masculinity is connected to singular national identity while femininity is connected to multiple national identities because Irish national identity has traditionally emphasized one set of experiences—male experiences—in order to establish the perception of a collective national identity. Consequently, the novel's depiction of women and girls' experiences cannot be contained or encompassed within standard depictions of Irish nationality because their experiences expose the

impossibility of maintaining a coherent national collective. In addition, the novel emphasizes the role that class structures play in defining Irish identity and asserts that viewing class primarily through the father's occupation or homeownership is limiting and superficial. The novel's depiction of class demonstrates that class often narrowly defines individuals within traditional bonds of belonging or nationhood that coincide with restrictive identity traits. By exposing these attributes—gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class—and their role in forming individual identity, the novel contends that gender, sexuality and ethnicity create cultural differences that Irish national identity ignores and silences because they offer the greatest potential for dissolving national identity norms.

The novel's characters demonstrate that identity is interactional and not based on natural or singular identity attributes through the characters' negotiation of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class via linguistic exchange and social performance. As the girls struggle to establish a sense of self, the novel portrays the hierarchical social relationships between the girls, their teachers and parents. Ultimately, the narrative brings its characters and subsequently its readers to self-conscious awareness of the social norms scripting gender relations, sexual identities and ethnic definitions that constrict human behavior in Ireland. While gender, sexuality and ethnicity are social structures that clearly remain in place throughout the narrative, the novel demonstrates that singular definitions of these attributes provide only an element of truth—"A truism. Half true like all truisms. Half false" (Ní Dhuibhne 3). Thus, while it may not be possible to escape the social structures of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or class, it is possible to revise individual responses and perceptions of these social structures and their unifying characteristics. The novel therefore explores the "in between, in between, in between, that is the truth and that is the story" by depicting the interactions of adolescent girls—primarily Orla Crilly, Aisling Brosnan, Pauline

Gallagher and Sava Doherty—as they reconcile their experiences with social expectations. The novel’s explorations ultimately lead to identity shifts as the young women challenge social boundaries and unified conceptions of identity attributes, particularly those based upon gender and sexuality, in order to establish their own sense of self and encourage a postnational understanding of identity that recognizes and accepts difference.

### **A Summer Journey: Ní Dhuibhne’s *Bildungsreise***

*The Dancers Dancing* is a developmental novel that depicts a journey from Orla Crilly’s life and therefore can be accurately characterized as a *Bildungsreise* (St. Peter, “Burn, Road, Dance” 30). The novel is about the summer journey to an Irish language camp that Orla and the other adolescent girls of the novel make from Dublin and Derry to the Gaeltacht. The omniscient narrator primarily portrays the narrative from Orla’s perspective during a two month period in 1972. Once Orla and her classmates arrive in the Gaeltacht they are assigned host families to live with for the summer. Orla and her best friend Aisling are assigned to live with the Dohertys and it is there that they meet Pauline and Jacqueline, slightly older girls from Northern Ireland. The four girls share the Dohertys’ home for the summer as their Banatee, the woman of the house, and her daughter Sava cater to them. While the Doherty women provide their best hospitality for the girls, Aisling, Pauline and Jacqueline constantly criticize the Dohertys and their home because they are unaccustomed to life in rural Ireland. Only Orla is accustomed to the Dohertys’ customs and rural lifestyle, and in fact knows well the nearby village of Tubber, because her father grew up there and she has visited many times with her family. However, Orla quickly makes the decision to suppress her Tubber knowledge and ignore her innumerable relations in order to maintain her Dublin sophistication and friends.

From the outset of the girls' journey the national axioms of gender, sexuality and ethnicity are predominant. As Orla and her classmates gather for their trip to the Gaeltacht, the novel reveals the social norms and divisions that shape and define the children's world, including gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class. These norms are clearly established in the fourth chapter—"The Unchronicled Jouissance of Summer Bus Journeys when You're Young"—when the children gather at their Dublin school, say goodbye to their mothers and finally board the bus for their journey to the Gaeltacht. Orla is careful to share her seat with Aisling because Sandra, her former best friend, has terrible flaws, including her speech impediment and unacceptable housing. Sandra "lives in a flat, not a corporation flat but any flat is bad enough. Respectable people live in houses" (Ní Dhuibhne 15). Orla's judgments of Aisling and Sandra, as well as the other children's groupings within the confines of the bus, illustrate the prevalence of "all the old social divisions of gender and class (ethnic homogeneity being the rule here), and the ways these will affect the children's potential *jouissance*, in all its possible connotations" (St. Peter, "Burn, Road, Dance" 33). The social divisions cannot be left behind, but, the novel questions, "to what extent must these old tales continue to define Orla?" (St. Peter, "Burn, Road, Dance" 33). *The Dancers Dancing* primarily depicts the social norms and divisions that shape and define Orla's world through her interactions with friends and family. Orla's model of the ideal Irish girl is established through her admiration of Aisling, whom she believes has no disadvantages. Orla observes that Aisling "has very curling auburn hair, frothing around her tiny face like a lion's mane, tumbling so far down her back that she can sit on its edges. She is slim enough to satisfy the very stringent standards of the time as to female size, and her clothes are always appropriate for the year and place and her age [...] That is Aisling. She has the best of everything, and is perfect in every way" (Ní Dhuibhne 11). Orla's assessment of Aisling depends upon her



appearance and the ways in which she fulfills gender and class norms. As Orla desperately hopes to sit with Aisling on the bus she fails to recognize the limiting social structures of national identity and the social divisions that construct essential notions of the true and good Irish people.

Orla's self-conscious awareness of the social norms that order and restrict her life highlights the limitations of a fixed Irish identity and reveals that the 1970s national ideal was based upon the exclusionary model of the heterosexual, Catholic and middle-class male. Orla's initial decision to reject her Tubber heritage highlights the limitations of these social norms—sexuality, ethnicity, class and gender—and their influence upon her beliefs and behavior. Ireland's social norms and singular national identity is reinforced by the omnipresent narrator's 1990s reflections that depict Orla's shifting perceptions and transforming consciousness. For instance, the narrator reveals that Orla and Aisling's "sexual talk, if that is what it is, is all focused firmly on themselves. To be attractive, to learn how to present the perfect Orla or Aisling, with gleaming hair and glossy, slender limbs enclosed in the most alluring and correct garment, is such a huge preoccupation that it is as yet an end in itself. The goal of it all is as vague and distant as the dream husband" (158). The narrator's reflection upon Orla and Aisling's preoccupations with appearances and dream husbands illustrates that Irish girls' limitations center on their domestic roles as wives and mothers. Orla and Aisling don't have specific knowledge about their sexuality but know they have the goal of marriage to fulfill as they dream of their husbands. The idle chatter between the girls further exposes the limitations of collective Irish femininity with the intention of developing the reader's awareness of these social and national limitations.

The narrator's reflections are intrinsic to the novel's advancement of postnational identity because the narrator critiques the social structures that shape the girls and their world in order to

promote social and political change. The omnipresent narrator may be the elder Orla, who “provides an ironic and detached commentary all the way through the novel on the gender and social constraints weighing on her younger self” (Ingman, “Nature, Gender and Nation” 520). Both the narratives of the 1970s and 1990s are set in the Donegal Gaeltacht, particularly in the small town of Tubber, and the Gaeltacht connects the past and present as the novel depicts adolescent Orla and subsequently adult Orla visiting Donegal. Although the events of the novel have already occurred, the novel is primarily narrated in the present tense, “which gives immediacy to the young girls’ experiences” and allows the two time periods to engage and examine each other (Tallone 180). This examination of Irish culture and social structures is initiated by Orla as the Gaeltacht leads her to view herself, her family and Irish society critically. Thus, as Patricia Coughlan notes, “Orla learns to see differently” (190). Ultimately both Orla and the reader see differently as the novel encourages the self-conscious awareness of the national paradigm while depicting moves towards postnationalism and the advancement of a broader understanding of Irish identity.

### **Maps: The Simultaneous Use of Nationalism and Postnationalism**

The novel begins its challenge of Irish nationalism in the very first chapter with a discussion of maps. The omniscient narrator visualizes the view of Ireland from an airplane and imagines the patches of landscape that early mapmakers visualized. The narrator’s perspective foregrounds mapmakers’ inability to capture the complex relationships and social systems that shape life in Ireland. Thus, new and varied perceptions of Irish identity are encouraged from the outset of the novel as the narrator visualizes the view of Ireland from an airplane—the flat earth—that map-makers imagine and illustrate on two-dimensional surfaces without consideration of the people living in those spaces (Ní Dhuibhne 1). The map-makers’ eyes, Ní

Dhuibhne writes, fly as high as airplanes to imagine the earth and create “the best, truest maps: at once guide and picture, instrument and toy” that capture the land, “the place you live in” (1). Ní Dhuibhne personifies the authority with which the map-makers and the nation-state assert their power over the land and its inhabitants when she writes, “This is what it [Ireland] looks like really! See you! Look!” (1). The narrative asserts that map-makers, in conjunction with the nation-state, establish a collective, unified perception of Ireland that the novel ultimately resists. Ní Dhuibhne explains that the “diminished, distorted images” of the cartographers only present normalized visions of the earth that do not account for the

chthonic puddle and muddle of brain and heart and kitchen and sewer and vein and sinew  
and ink and stamp and sugar and stew and cloth and stitch and swill and beer and  
lemonade and tea and soap and nerve and memory and energy and pine and weep and  
laugh and sneer and say nothing and say something and [the] in between, in between, in  
between [...] (3)

Thus, the nation-state’s territorial depiction of Ireland fails to capture the “in between” in which people actually live and construct a sense of self. Consequently, in contrast to authoritative maps and their rigid interpretation of the earth, this novel examines the cultural and social systems of Ireland from the perspective of Irish girlhood, which is a perspective that authoritative depictions of Ireland often fail to convey. While maps provide a “superior angle” that normalizes, disciplines, appropriates and controls the world, they “fail to convey the complex dynamic[s] of ‘class, gender, race, ideology, power and knowledge, myth and ritual’” that Ní Dhuibhne’s novel explores (St. Peter, “Burn, Road, Dance” 31). The maps of Ireland therefore represent a national perspective that the novel’s purpose is to criticize, as Orla moves from a state of unwavering confidence in the cultural and social norms of Irish society—and a desperate desire to fulfill

societal norms—to a state of female agency that advances a postnational understanding of Irish identity based upon multiplicity and cultural difference.

### **Challenging National Norms: Gender, Sexuality and the Regulation of Women's Bodies**

The novel demonstrates that gender is important to nationalism's assumption of a singular collective identity but also that gender offers numerous possibilities for undermining national identity by providing alternatives that shift characters and readers towards a postnational context. Gender plays a substantial role in constituting behavior and social norms for Orla and the other girls as they attempt to reconcile their burgeoning sexuality, changing bodies and ideals with societal expectations of Irish femininity. Most of the women and girls of the novel fail to fulfill societal expectations, even Orla's mother Elizabeth Crilly, as they struggle with and against the perception of a singular collective national identity. Elizabeth clearly believes that her place is in the home, yet she also has an occupation as a landlady and "breaks rank" with the perception that mothers should "do nothing" (Ní Dhuibhne 91). Orla's classroom debate entitled "A Woman's Place Is in the Home" emphasizes that women—particularly mothers—should simply be mothers because this is their primary role and duty as Irish women. This "do nothing" model was especially true for middle and upper-class women who were bound to both gender and class structures. The novel reveals that the national paradigm for Irish women was based upon social structures that narrowly defined gender and sexuality within the reproduction of the heterosexual middle-class nuclear family, which reinforced women's roles as reproducers and caretakers of the family. With national ideals established in the novel, the narrative exposes the discrepancies between singular collective identity and women's empirical experiences as the characters often fail to uphold the normative standards to which they uphold themselves and others. These discrepancies ultimately advance postnational ideals as the representation of the

women and girls' lived experiences produce social critiques and exposes identity alternatives. The narrative consequently establishes the heteronormative gender standards that shape and constrain Irish girls and women and subsequently reveals the ways in which girls and women also disrupt these national norms.

Orla initially strives to uphold national identity—the desired community collective—to the extent that she even rejects her own aunt because she wants to adhere to the assumption of inclusion and cultural consensus that insists on the importance of uniformity. The novel establishes Orla's adherence to the community collective when she boards the bus for Tubber and chooses to sit with Aisling over Sandra. Orla believes her friendship with Aisling will help her overcome her many deficiencies. The narrator observes that thirteen year-old Orla is

fattish. To be precise since judgments in this area can be so subjective, she is five foot four in height and weighs ten stone and twelve pounds, i.e. almost eleven stone, in her vest, pants and bare feet, in the morning before breakfast. She has a round pretty face to compensate, if anything could, and straight brown hair that can shine like a river, even though it hangs dull as a plank when it is in need of a wash. She would have been so pretty if only, if only ... ! The fat, and the clothes, and the background ... So many ifs.

(11)

The observation of Orla's "so many ifs" reinforces the perception that Orla is striving—and often failing—to uphold national norms. Orla consequently keeps many secrets to ensure that she fits in with everyone else, including the fact that her Aunt Annie lives in Tubber. Faced with the fear and shame of having Tubber relatives, as well as her many other shortcomings, Orla tries to be like Aisling—would actually settle for being anyone other than herself—because she does not want to reveal her inadequacies.

Orla's fears about her identity primarily stem from her mother's critiques and it is with Elizabeth's encouragement that she cultivates a façade that adheres to Ireland's social scripts. However, Orla's stay in the Gaeltacht repeatedly challenges her façade as she is forced to acknowledge her numerous identities and the differences between her and Aisling. Orla observes that she is

the daughter of Elizabeth, the niece of Aunt Annie, the cousin of the people of Tubber, and Orla the schoolgirl from Dublin, the friend of Aisling, the Irish scholar. She has to be two people at the same time, which is a hard thing to be, especially when you are thirteen and a half. Or she has to choose to be just one of them. That also is very hard—not the choice, which is simple, but the consequences. (35)

For Orla, the choice is simple and she embraces her schoolgirl identity in order to maintain her façade of normative standards and hide the knowledge and relations that differentiate her from her classmates. While this decision stems from her adolescent desire to fit in with everyone else, it also reflects her adherence to a singular national collective that narrowly defines identity and adheres to her mother's demands.

Elizabeth's domination has directed Orla's life until their summer separation allows Orla to physically explore the Gaeltacht and intellectually develop an interpretation of the social norms that impact and order her life. Elizabeth represents the authoritative figures and institutions that Orla has been taught to unquestioningly obey since she was a baby and their separation allows Orla to develop her own opinions and thoughts. The narrator—adult Orla—explains that adolescent Orla always does what she is told to do because “that is how it is for girls in 1972” (172). Ní Dhuibhne writes:

Doing what you are told is ethics, philosophy, morality, religion, all rolled into one. It is the key to happiness and peace of mind, to every kind of success. This is what girls believe. What other people tell you to do is always right. Other people are adults, teachers, the Church, the government. Or anybody else really who has ideas to force on girls. Trust them all, they know what's best for you. (172)

Orla initially clings to these social scripts as she snubs her friend Sandra, embellishes her father's career and ignores her Aunt Annie. Orla justifies these decisions through her desire to be like everyone else—the belief in a singular collective Irish identity—that limits her perceptions of herself and others. When Orla is separated from her mother she begins to critically consider the gender and class divisions that structure her identity as she develops a personal response to these social scripts. Orla's critical evaluation only begins because she is separated from her mother and able to examine the methods and customs of Irish culture when she is no longer as directly defined by them in the Gaeltacht. Ní Dhuibhne separates Orla from her mother because “the loss or rejection of the mother represents the beginning of the individuated female self [...]” (Dougherty 57). Dougherty emphasizes this point with Luce Irigaray's assertion that rejecting the mother is often necessary—even a “precondition”—to the “process of ‘becoming a woman’” (57). Orla's separation from her mother is a necessary precondition in order for her to perceive national forms of oppression, particularly oppressions based upon gender and sexuality. In the novel, the mother represents national norms and the limitations of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class. Through the mother-daughter separation, Orla comes to recognize the limitations of singular collective identity and that alternatives to a singular national identity exist.

The characters demonstrate how gender and sexuality intersect to reinforce the limitations of singular collective identity for women and girls because they are often confined to

the home and domestic duties. Orla recognizes that marriage and motherhood are defining features of Irish womanhood as her mother embraces these roles but also defies contemporary beliefs when she establishes a career as a landlady. However, Elizabeth's occupation ultimately aligns with her beliefs about women's roles within the home as she is the caretaker for her numerous male residents. Therefore, while Elizabeth recognizes that more women are defining themselves outside the bounds of the heterosexual family unit—indicated by her insistence that Orla receive an education and have a career—her prevailing beliefs focus on women's roles as wives and mothers who care for the family. Ní Dhuibhne writes:

[Elizabeth] belongs to a generation that categorises her as wife and mother, not lady driver. Ladies drive all right, in Dublin, lots of them. [...] Some ladies. But not ladies like Elizabeth, who have set rigid boundaries to the march of their personal experience, as they have guarded their rebellious bodies in unbreachable roll-ons, rigid nylon stockings that no breath of air could penetrate. [...] And mothers] most of them, almost all of them, 'do nothing', according to their children. And that is the correct thing. A working mother, no matter what she works at, is a bit of an abomination. 'Once mammy did some substitute teaching for a friend of hers. I really didn't like it when I came home from school and she wasn't there,' somebody [...] had said in a classroom debate called 'A Woman's Place Is in the Home'. All the girls nodded sagely, understanding [...] (89-91)

The sage understanding of the girls reveals that gender and class divisions operate in conjunction with each other to constrict women to the home. The presupposition that women belong in the home is strengthened by the debate's title, which does not question where women belong but boldly states that women belong in the home. In the novel, most married women, especially middle and upper-class women, do not have occupations because they are defined as wives and



mothers within the heterosexual nuclear family. The narrative consequently illustrates that it was unusual for middle-class women to have an occupation or roles beyond that of wives and mothers. The conviction of the girls and their mothers that women belong in the home reveals that Dublin is “a patriarchy largely colluded in and exercised, so far as Orla is concerned, by other women” (Ingman, “Nature, Gender and Nation” 520). Women’s collusion is established through Elizabeth’s support of social and political restrictions that limit women to the home and family even as she is financially forced to maintain a career as a landlady. Elizabeth’s contradictory position demonstrates the conflation of gender and class that often limits women and girls to the domestic sphere.

*The Dancers Dancing* reveals that Irish girls frequently have a shorter childhood than boys because girlhood is often merged with Irish womanhood in order to maintain the household and nuclear family unit. The narrative illustrates that adolescent girls are often expected to help their mothers in the home with household duties that include caring for siblings, cleaning, cooking and upholding religious beliefs. “Irish girls,” McGovern claims, “are thus hustled toward maturity earlier than boys because this early conditioning to certain narratives of knowledge entails a loss of innocence, a defining characteristic of childhood” (247). Orla is not only hustled towards maturity but her childhood is ultimately conflated with womanhood and domesticity as her mother relies upon her domestic assistance. Elizabeth believes that “Girls are often owl-fashioned, their eyes are cunning and knowing, peering from their polite and silent faces, while boys are innocent, lovable and cherished” (40). Since the age of two, Orla has been taught that boys must be nurtured and girls trained for their future roles within the heterosexual nuclear family. The differences between Irish girlhood and boyhood reveal that girlhood is often linked to womanhood—even motherhood—because Irish girls are more likely to be associated

with their mothers than with being children. The disparity between Irish girlhood and boyhood is evident when considering the differences between Orla and Roddy Crilly's treatments. Ní

Dhuibhne writes:

[Roddy] got colds often, he had to be kept warm, he had to drink a lot of milk – which Orla didn't get, milk being too expensive for girls, according to Elizabeth. (Girls are so hardy was another one of her sayings. They don't need much food or attention, not like boys. God if boys were as easy to rear as young ones wouldn't we be blessed? Boys were boys or lads or fellas. Girls were just young ones: they did not merit a generic name of their own.) (94)

Roddy is treated as the only Crilly child and Elizabeth spends her time caring for her son and her male lodgers—"the boys" whom she loves—with Orla's assistance. Despite Roddy and Orla's three year age difference, Orla is compelled to align herself with her mother instead of her brother insofar as she is not treated as a child but as another caretaker within the home. Orla helps her mother with the weekly shopping, makes the lodgers' lunches every day, and even cares for her mother when she is ill. Orla's childhood demonstrates that gender divisions primarily define women within the home as caretakers and reproduces—a narrow understanding of Irish female identity that the narrative ultimately challenges by exposing the limitations of the heterosexual nuclear family and its gender roles.

Orla's awareness and resistance to the social norms and limitations that shape her perceptions of herself and others are developed over the course of the five burn<sup>4</sup> scenes. Orla's journey towards agency is shaped by the Gaeltacht and her connection to the burn because it is only during her solitary sojourns to the local river that Orla believes she can be herself. The burn

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<sup>4</sup> In Ireland, the term *burn* refers to a small river.

scenes are essential to Orla's development because she is able recognize her maintenance of a national identity that does not acknowledge diverse identities and opinions. Orla realizes this critical perspective while in isolation at the burn because she "belonged with the river. She was nothing there, nothing more than a berry dipping to the water or a minnow floating under the surface of a pool. Nothing. And completely herself. Orla herself. Not Orla the Daughter of Elizabeth, Orla the Pride of Rathmines, Orla the Betrayer of Tubber. Just Orla" (86). Orla becomes aware of the social norms and roles that she strives to fulfill while alone in nature because she is momentarily liberated from the prevalent social pressures that she experiences every day. While at the burn Orla is able to temporarily escape the social and gender roles that define women and children's roles within the nuclear family because she is no longer a girl solely defined by collective national identity standards but a girl realizing that Irish social and gender norms have often defined and limited her opportunities. Ultimately, Orla's journeys to the burn demonstrate her resistance to society's limitations because she continues to visit despite warnings that she should not. Consequently, the burn allows Orla to learn that she does not always have to comply with social expectations in order to find self-acceptance.

While in the burn Orla discovers that she can challenge social expectations through her words and actions and that these challenges lead not necessarily to disaster but to momentary empowerment. Orla savors her time at the burn because she feels that she can do exactly what she wants to do without fear of social judgment. Orla subsequently experiments linguistically as she challenges social norms by saying—even shouting—all of the forbidden words she knows. Orla never knew she could say these taboo words, or that she even had a desire to, but the words of "extremely angry or extremely uncivilised men" easily slip off her tongue as she says curse words for the first time (Ní Dhuibhne 234). There are "a surprising store of words in Orla's head

that have never before emerged into the light of day, into the sound of day. Her own ears. She has hardly ever heard her own voice, listened to her own voice, and it gets louder and louder, clearer and clearer, as she gets used to it” (234). The solitude of the Gaeltacht allows Orla to listen to her voice for the first time because she is momentarily free from social pressures that permeate her self-awareness and relationships. Nonetheless, the naiveté with which adolescent Orla embraces her “own voice” in order to linguistically renegotiate her identity is countered by the narrator’s caustic tone and her ultimate realization that the burn is not free from social structures and norms. Orla’s steps on the earth bring the social pressures and norms crashing back into clarity as she comes across an infant burial ground on the banks of the burn.

The infant burial site—a *cillín*—represents the truths excluded from normative perceptions of the Irish countryside that exposes women’s experiences and agency in light of hegemonic sexual discourses that confine women and children within narrow confines. A *cillín* is a hidden burial site for unbaptized children and is indicative of Ireland’s culture of confinement that often buried instances of rape, incest, illegitimacy and abuse. Orla’s discovery of the burial site does not shock her but confirms her critical perception of Irish sexuality and gender. Orla is imbued with the knowledge that she always knew such a burial site existed because the skeletons represent the “material effects that the nation’s discursive regime has had on Irish lives, particularly women’s and children’s” (McGovern 249). Orla consequently unearths more than just her voice at the burn as the half a dozen infant skulls she unburies represent sexual limitations and the social pressures to conceal sexuality, particularly when it is not defined within the traditional family unit. These infant skulls therefore reveal the power of Irish hegemony as the social realities of rape, sexual abuse, illegitimacy and infanticide were obscured by national discourses that both shaped and censured normative sexuality. The unearthing of the

skulls fittingly supports the narrator's assertion that the Catholic Church and Irish State were "aiming to eliminate sex from the Irish way of life" (13). The burial site reveals that sex was not eliminated from the Irish way of life, but that women and their children were often subject to devastating recriminations for their sexual actions.

Ní Dhuibhne reinscribes rural Ireland, the ideal landscape of Irish nationalism, with depictions of an infant burial site and adolescent sexual activity in order to illustrate how Irish society seeks to deny, silence and erase these narratives and many others that reflect social ills. Throughout the twentieth century, Irish sexuality was defined within the family unit and normative heterosexual boundaries. Consequently, young, unmarried women were not supposed to be sexually active and during the summer of 1972, Tubber's teachers' "most urgent task" was to "prevent any sexual disaster" (62). Headmaster Joe has constructed a map of activities in order to prevent the disaster of pregnancy. "As far as he knows," Ní Dhuibhne writes, "[the children] are always engaged in walking to and from the schoolhouse, in learning or playing or dancing, in singing or eating or sleeping. [...] But there are intervals, interstices, crevices in the edifice he has constructed that he can't afford to know about" (79). Although the children's conduct is monitored by a strict schedule of events that normalizes their behavior, cracks begin to develop and create "in between" moments that allow the children to explore the Gaeltacht and their relationships with themselves and each other.

Orla's movements towards self-conscious awareness of the social norms that dictate her life are connected to her body and her explorations of the Gaeltacht, particularly the burn. Orla's journey to the Gaeltacht allows Orla to momentarily separate herself from her mother and her everyday life, but it is only when she begins to use her body to visit the burn that she moves towards self-conscious awareness and change. During Orla's visits to the burn she uses her body

to develop her autonomy and ultimately confronts Irish sexuality when she discovers the infant skeletons along the banks of the burn. The infant burial site demonstrates that

the guides Orla and her friends have inherited are neither natural nor innocent, as they attempt to contain the girls with particularly strict limits of gender, sexuality and class, marking them as ‘other’. But it is not just freedom of movement and thought that is curtailed; the human body itself is actually constructed via these kinds of discipline and, thus, one needs to use one’s body, as Orla has on her burn voyage, to achieve a deeper level of knowledge than the one on offer. (St. Peter, “Burn, Road, Dance” 41)

The use of one’s body is a form of individual agency that is explicitly connected to sexuality within the narrative. The descriptions of Elizabeth and other adult women in the novel illustrate that Irish women often constrained, concealed and guarded their bodies out of a desire to appear acceptable and in accordance with familial norms. Thus, it is only by using their bodies to explore boundaries that Orla and the other young women of the novel can begin to discover their individual agency and negotiate their social limitations.

The novel depicts the constriction and discipline of Irish women’s bodies that the girls navigate and subvert as they seek alternative possibilities for themselves. In Ireland, there is a long and distinct history of male domination that has controlled and signified women’s bodies as representations of Ireland (St. Peter, “Burn, Road Dance” 42). The novel captures the brutal discipline of women’s bodies when the narrator observes

Women in Dublin don’t want to acknowledge the existence of breasts: they haven’t got them, and if they have, those protuberances certainly don’t contain anything as messy, as repulsive, as animal, as *wet*, as milk. I ask you! Milk comes from bottles and Cow and

Gate cans, thank you very much indeed! Bosoms are dry pointy pincushions, tucked away in brassieres. And there they stay. (68, emphasis in original)

This passage illustrates how many Irish women tried to deny their gender and sexuality in an effort to regulate Irish femininity and normative heterosexuality. It therefore takes “the physical use of the body to form different possibilities and truths” for the young women of the novel (St. Peter, “Burn, Road, Dance” 42).

In *The Dancers Dancing* Pauline and Sava’s Gaeltacht experiences are interspersed with Orla’s to create a narrative of change as the young women negotiate cultural norms and use their bodies to achieve a sense of independence through their sexuality. The girls’ actions demonstrate that they are bound by the same cultural constructions even though they each come from different areas of the country: Orla from Dublin, Pauline from Derry and Sava from Tubber. Pauline, a fourteen year old student from the North, and Sava, the teenage daughter of Orla and Pauline’s host family, respond to social limitations similarly because they both explore their sexual boundaries. The novel establishes the expectation that the girls should ignore their sexuality and not engage in sexual activity, but in response to these social limitations the novel depicts Orla and her peers taking “desperate chances (some more than others, to be sure), experiment[ing] with sex, alcohol and cigarettes, and, like the burn, roar[ing] down the path to knowledge, flooding over the banks that would contain them” (St. Peter, “Burn, Road, Dance” 37). In particular, Pauline and Sava develop sexual relationships with boys they meet over the summer and use their bodies to subvert nationalist ideals about sex and gender that center upon the reproduction of the heterosexual nuclear family.

In contrast to the heterosexual nuclear family model that often emphasizes women’s passivity, Pauline is an active agent in her sexuality with the hope of enacting change in her life.

Pauline defies social norms by using her body to follow the path from the beach to the cliff and to convince Gerry—the college’s star student—to accompany her. Pauline is not the passive receiver of Gerry’s affections but instigates their relationship as their excursion up the beach’s forbidden path escalates their flirtation and the two begin to sneak out at night to meet at the boathouse. Pauline loves the night, the sea and the risk more than she loves Gerry but continues to spend her nights with him. Although Pauline’s behavior does not liberate her from dominant gender norms, her disobedient and risky actions recall the memory of “Irish women and children who were marginalized, dismissed and forgotten by an oppressive narrative of [Irish] national identity” (Smith 13). While Irish women have been sexually active throughout the twentieth century, their sexuality and the subsequent results were often concealed in order to maintain an essential or singular national identity. The novel’s depiction of Pauline therefore deconstructs essentialist notions of national identity because her narrative challenges traditional representations of Irish girls. Although the novel does not equate women’s sexuality with liberation, it does contend that women’s sexuality is powerful and that most women and girls—in particular Pauline—do not fully understand their sexuality because of social and political practices that obscure women’s lived experiences and limit sexual education. Although Pauline’s depiction subverts Irish national ideals that privilege the heteronormative nuclear family and the assumption that sex occurs solely within the confines of marriage, her actions further marginalizes women as sexual objects and emphasizes her lack of sexual knowledge. Pauline, like Orla, struggles with her identity and social standards but chooses to challenge social norms by using her body to explore forbidden sites in the Gaeltacht and establishing a sexual relationship with Gerry in hopes of finding liberation. While the summer session ends with the teachers wondering if Pauline’s pregnant—a concern that Pauline seems utterly unaware and



unprepared for—she revels in her independence and the naïve belief that she has achieved liberation. Consequently, while Pauline is unable to completely subvert the presupposition of a collective national identity, the novel is able to defy essential or singular identity because the girls’ representations provide alternative national narratives that advance social and political changes through self-conscious awareness.

Although Sava is from the Gaeltacht she also looks for liberation and change through her relationship with Sean, a boy she meets at a local disco. Sean and Sava’s relationship primarily revolves around the local music and pubs as they seem to have little in common. In the chapter “Sava and Sean have it off again” Ní Dhuibhne writes, “Sean and Sava have picked the Northern Lights, playing at the Texas Saloon, as their aperitif tonight. They are still in the ballroom, turning each other on in the hot sweaty embrace of the dance. The warm night wraps the hall, and waits for them” (211). The depiction of Sava’s life reveals an alternative national narrative because the novel represents the way she and many other young women throughout Ireland engaged in sexual activity during the 1970s. Sava’s relationship with Sean allows her to momentarily escape her everyday responsibilities and provides her with a sense of control as her active sexual engagement counters the depiction of Irish women as passive objects. However, Sava’s sexuality provides her with a false sense of power as her actions actually align her with women’s traditional roles of wife and mother.

Ultimately, the novel seeks to subvert the socially and culturally constructed category of Irish “woman” in order to shift from a national to a postnational paradigm. Thus, while Pauline’s and Sava’s sexual activity may place them in the same position as generations of women before them, the representation of their sexuality and the *cillín* provide an opportunity for Ireland to remember its past and acknowledge the varied experiences of Irish women. Although Pauline

and Sava's actions may have left them pregnant, and their stories could ultimately parallel those of the dead infants' mothers, they represent the reality of life for many young women and girls who fail to adhere to essentialist notions of national identity. The depiction of Pauline and Sava's narratives consequently represent the concealed Ireland that Ní Dhuibhne alludes to at the beginning of the novel when she considers the institution of maps and the places or stories maps fail to capture. In revealing the reality of Pauline and Sava's lives, the novel exposes the ways in which girls and women respond to institutional norms and the limitations of women's national identity. Ní Dhuibhne's deployment of body-maps therefore becomes

[...] symbolically important, both in representing the traditional social order her text challenges and in narrating the discoveries her characters achieve as they traverse the inherited definitions of the 'territory'. By providing a variety of different responses among the different girls (and boys) in Tubber, Ní Dhuibhne also demonstrates how their experiences, their knowledge, and their very bodies are being constructed discursively.

(St. Peter, "Burn, Road, Dance" 43)

Pauline and Sava's actions ultimately both fulfill and challenge heterosexual regulatory norms as they begin relationships with young men and engage in sexual activity with the intention of establishing their liberation from limiting social scripts.

Although Pauline and Sava reject the national ideal of Irish womanhood they fail to find roles that replace the dominant gender ideal and risk the social limitations of wife and mother. Throughout the twentieth century the intersections of nation, gender and sexuality have empowered masculinity over femininity in order to create social and political boundaries that limit Irish women and their bodies. Irish women's bodies and sexuality have been the primary articulation of national identity "because women's bodies represented the 'purity' of the nation"

and any corruption of the body was seen as an attack on the nation and national identity (Mayer 18). Pauline and Sava's actions consequently threaten the "purity" of the nation because their sexuality fails to sustain an essential or singular national identity. Pauline and Sava's sexual relationships defy heteronormativity because "the very worst thing that could happen to any family was that their unmarried daughter would get a baby" (Ní Dhuibhne 237). The censure with which these girls would be judged if they are pregnant indicates that they are unable to completely overcome heterosexual male constructs and norms through their sexuality but their potential pregnancies also demonstrate the limitations of state control over women's bodies. By actively establishing control over their bodies the girls subvert national identity by asserting their individual power over their sexuality and disputing the pure and chaste gender ideal of Irish womanhood. However, while Pauline, Sava and Orla experience a change of consciousness, the dominate social and political norms that control women's reproduction and choices remain in place. The novel's depiction of Pauline, Sava and the infant burial site consequently challenges boundaries of sexuality and gender by providing models of female agency and body control that undermine the silence surrounding issues of sex and illegitimacy and representing alternative narratives.

### **The Irish Question: Women and Ethnicity in Nationalist Ireland**

Throughout most of the twentieth century Irish ethnicity was homogenously defined as Gaelic, Catholic and Caucasian—and often male—which allowed few possibilities for alternative identities. These ethnic assumptions arose from Irish nationalism's desire to unify the country and advance a national culture and pride in opposition to British values. According to Rebecca Pelan:

The traditional identification of Catholicism as the one remnant of a native Irish tradition unable to be conquered by colonial regime played a crucial part in the establishment of the Republic of Ireland as an independent nation. In its rejection of British (Protestant) imperialism, post-independence Ireland wholeheartedly embraced the Catholic Church as its leader and savior to the extent that the laws of the newly created Irish Free State adopted Catholicism and its moral values as a vehicle for nationalist goals. (*Two Irelands* 14)

Thus, twentieth century nationalistic ideals were often anti-Protestant as Catholicism solidified its hegemonic position within Irish culture and became one of the defining features of a singular collective national identity. Religion has consequently played an integral part in defining Irish nationality and ethnicity and has often created social divisions between Protestants and Catholics. The divisions in Irish society were based primarily upon religion and class as two distinct ethnic groups—the Anglo-Irish and Irish—developed out of Ireland’s colonial past. The political and cultural response to Ireland’s colonial history ultimately constructed images that further justified an environment of containment and exclusion that emphasized singular collective identity.

Through Orla’s simplistic view of Irish ethnicity, the novel illustrates the ways in which Irish nationalism has crafted and maintained a singular collective identity that fails to acknowledge ethnic or racial difference. The conversations between Dublin’s Orla and Aisling and Northern Ireland’s Pauline and Jacqueline highlight the social conflicts Irish nationalism has created as the girls question what it means to be Irish. While the four girls settle into living together at the Dohertys, Pauline and Jacqueline’s Northern Irish nationality prompts their discussion of national identity and what it means to be Irish. As Pauline and Jacqueline depict

their backgrounds, the importance of the distinctions between Catholic and Protestant identity becomes alarmingly clear. The novel clarifies that in the Republic of Ireland Catholic identity clearly coincides with national identity, while religious identity and its correlation to national identity is much more complicated in Northern Ireland. The extended conversation between the four girls is only one example of the way in which the novel addresses ethnic identity, but this episode is representative of the novel's complication of ethnic identity for its characters and readers. In particular, Jacqueline illustrates the complexity of Northern Irish identity when she unabashedly explains that her father is in prison and that her family was denied public housing, details which prompt Orla to reflect to herself that the northern accent conceals class. Ní Dhuibhne writes:

‘Fucking Brits!’ Jacqueline’s saucer eyes darken.

Aisling and Orla gasp. Fucking!

‘Why did it [their home obstruction] happen?’ Aisling feigns innocence, unusually for her – usually she doesn’t have to. Even she knows why, can guess why, but this acknowledgement embarrasses her.

‘Why do you think?’ Jacqueline snarls scornfully.

‘Because you are Catholic.’

‘Well ...’ Pauline begins.

‘Aye, you bet.’ Jacqueline butts in. ‘Catholics don’t get new houses in Derry, that’s the rule until now.’ (75-76)

This scene highlights social and political distinctions made between the two primary ethnic groups in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. These ethnic groups—the Anglo-Irish and native Irish—are socially, politically and religiously distinguished along

denominational lines as the Anglo-Irish are primarily Protestant and the native Irish Catholic. Ethnicity often includes the elements of customs, language, race and religion as nationalists often assert ethnic continuity in order to create a national identity based on both real and imagined attributes that often exclude or oppress a minority. Irish ethnic identity has consequently often been conflated with religion as post-independence Ireland asserted its Catholic identity and used Catholicism to establish the image of ethnic homogeneity. Twentieth century Irish nationalists emphasized the ethnic and class divisions between the Anglo-Irish and Irish in order to uphold the native Catholic middle class as an ideal concept of Irish national identity. Thus the term Catholic came to imply more than a religious denomination as it frequently implicated social and political beliefs as well. In the novel, Catholicism's value as a nationalist ideal of Irish ethnic identity is critiqued through the young women's discussion and Orla's questions about Pauline's heritage and desire to learn the Irish language.

The novel critiques Irish nationalism's creation of ethnic homogeneity and singular collective identity through Orla's growing awareness of the norms that have shaped her beliefs. Pauline and Jacqueline's circumstances in Northern Ireland directly challenge Orla's belief that Irish ethnicity is primarily defined via religion. This is clarified by the surprising admission that Pauline's father is Protestant, while her mother is Catholic and once worked at her father's factory, and by the subsequent questions that arise about Pauline's heritage and her desire to learn the Irish language. As the girls question Pauline, who seems tired of queries about her Protestant background, Orla silently wishes that Pauline was a "proper" Protestant because she's always wanted to meet one. The fact that Orla has never met a Protestant, or possibly anyone of another faith, has reinforced her assumptions of Catholic homogeneity. Orla further illustrates the Catholic assumption when she asks Pauline, "'Why do you want to learn Irish? If your father

is a Protestant?’” (78). Orla’s question highlights how Irish nationalism often defines its communities by religion, but also demonstrates her growing awareness of Ireland’s conflation of religious and ethnic identity. Pauline challenges Orla’s assumption of Catholic, ethnic identity and responds with her own questions that illustrate the deficiencies of ethnic homogeneity. Ní Dhuibhne writes:

‘Why do you want to learn Irish?’ Pauline is scornful.

‘Well ... I am Irish,’ Orla declares.

‘So am I well. So is he. Ye don’t have to be Catholic to be Irish do you?’

Orla wishes she hadn’t asked the question. She blunders on.

‘Well, I mean ... you’re Northern Irish. It’s different isn’t it?’ (78)

Orla has clearly defined Irish identity within strict ethnic and class boundaries and Pauline and Jacqueline’s backgrounds challenge and ultimately complicate her understanding of Irish identity. Orla therefore learns that ethnic homogeneity does not exist but only creates exclusions that fail to acknowledge cultural differences in Ireland. In order for Orla to accept Pauline’s right to study Irish she must expand her understanding of national identity and acknowledge that multiple collective identities exist within the nation-state.

### **The Best of Everything: Class Divisions and Social Power**

Although Orla fixates on Pauline’s Protestant background, the primary division between Jacqueline and Pauline’s experiences in Derry derives from their differences in class. While religion and class have traditionally been associated in Ireland, Pauline notes that class is the most distinguishing characteristic between her father’s Protestant family and her mother’s Catholic family. Pauline observes that she is the only one in her family to navigate the distance between the Protestant and Catholic families as she maintains relationships with both families

and that these visits highlight the class differences between the two. Pauline regularly visits her father's mother—a Protestant—and notes that she prefers her home, Waterside, to her Catholic grandmother's home because Waterside is big, elegant and exciting. Pauline explains that “the main difference between the two grannies was that one was rich and one was poor, not that one was Protestant and one was Catholic” (126). While Pauline's observations illustrate the class divisions in Irish society, the novel proposes that class divisions are exercises of social power that influence people's actions and more often than not terminates opportunities. The novel uses class divisions to illustrate how many men and women—particularly women—were in weak, dependent social positions. In the novel, the depiction of class emphasizes the social exclusions that were used to privilege one person over another, especially men over women, as well as Ireland's maintenance of rigid, hierarchical relationships. The novel therefore asserts that class exercised considerable control over Irish identity and that gender discrimination exacerbated class deprivation.

Orla's mother repeatedly emphasizes the importance of class, often equating education to money, because Elizabeth Crilly simplifies social complexities and ills into one issue: money (Ní Dhuibhne 133). Consequently, the class structures and norms of 1970s Ireland preoccupy most of Orla's thoughts as she anxiously tries to fulfill her mother's expectations of what it means to be Irish, successful and a girl. Throughout the novel, Orla repeatedly conveys her desire to be normal because she “wants to get exactly what all the other girls get” (248). This desire is reinforced by her mother's insistence that she only befriend particular girls from her school based upon their class status and appearance, which is demonstrated by Orla's friendship with Aisling. Aisling represents Orla's class and gender ideal because “Aisling Brosnan had no disadvantages, in Orla's eyes [...] She has the best of everything, and is perfect in every way.



This she does not realise herself, but Orla noticed it long ago. It is for these reasons that Orla has to have Aisling as a friend” (11). Orla believes that her friendship with Aisling will elevate her own class status because Aisling dresses well and comes from a middle-class background. These criteria illustrate Orla’s seemingly simplistic view of class and gender as she acknowledges the importance of appearance in fulfilling unifying perceptions of national identity. For Orla, Aisling represents the class and gender ideals that she is striving to fulfill in order to realize social acceptance. Orla’s perception of acceptable Irish identity clearly hinges on class as she frequently criticizes her family’s lower-class status and envies Aisling and the other girls who seem to fulfill the narrow strictures of Ireland’s collective social norms. Orla’s critical perspectives are reinforced by her mother who encourages Orla to live “life as it should be lived” (Ní Dhuibhne 11). Elizabeth’s assertion clarifies that Orla needs to be wealthy in order to live life and implies that the Crillys are unsuccessfully living life. Orla consequently strives to be a good student, daughter and citizen in order to present and maintain a middle-class façade that she hopes will allow her to fulfill her mother’s edict and lead to a good life. Orla’s façade consequently requires her to omit information about her family and even lie in order to maintain her appearance of class acceptability.

Even though Orla believes in the importance of maintaining social norms, particularly class, she begins her journey to the Gaeltacht conflicted as she knows she must decide between sitting on the bus with Aisling and her former best friend Sandra Darcy. Although Orla cares about both girls she believes she must sit with Aisling in order to maintain the façade of her middle-class social status. Fortunately for Orla, Aisling sits with her on the bus and she no longer has to worry about choosing between the two girls and their social differences. Since Orla is often consumed with concerns about maintaining social norms she often disregards her

friendship with Sandra in order to cultivate her friendship with Aisling. Before the trip, Elizabeth encouraged Orla's friendship with Aisling while discouraging her friendship with Sandra, which only reinforced Orla's beliefs in stringent class divisions and a singular collective national identity. Elizabeth finds it unacceptable that Sandra's family lives in a flat instead of owning their own home and presumes that they are lower-class because they have a lease. The distinction of homeownership seems critical to Elizabeth's perception of class and social acceptability as she urges Orla to advance her friendship with Aisling and dissuades her from being friends with Sandra, even though Orla enjoys Sandra's company. Ultimately, Orla and her mother are impressed by Aisling's class status because her father is an educated journalist and the Brosnans, like the Crillys, own their home. These facts allow Orla to resolve her conflicting emotions about her friendships and justify her decision to sit with Aisling on the bus.

At the crux of Orla's economic and class concerns are her family's financial history and unusual living arrangements. Orla's family was forced to consider new ways to earn an income when her father was on an extended strike several years ago. In order to save their home and provide for their children, Elizabeth decided to rent rooms to young men working in Dublin. The strike was the start of the lodgers and from then on the Crillys have shared their home with six strangers. Orla explains, "Ever since the day when she was eight and had lost her room, the house was more like a shop or some public place than a house where you would go find shelter from the outside world. The outside had come inside now. There was no escape from it" (94). While Elizabeth's decision allows the family to successfully survive the strike and subsequently provides comfort and indulgences, such as Orla's trip to the Gaeltacht, Orla is embarrassed by her landlady mother and ashamed of her family's living arrangements. These circumstances also

make Orla inordinately concerned with class and wealth as she fears her classmates will find out about her family and she will no longer find social acceptance with her peers.

Although Orla's concern with class stems from her family and their working class status, her mother repeatedly emphasizes the power of money and asserts that money is the key to life. Elizabeth has worked hard to cultivate a middle-class façade and her perspective illustrates the role that class can play in defining individuals in Irish society. The novel clearly illustrates the importance of class and wealth to identity—particularly Dublin identity—and how class can be used to narrowly define individuals. Elizabeth embodies a narrow perspective on identity that centers around class and wealth and imposes the belief that class, and therefore money, is the primary way in which individuals create meaning and value for themselves. Elizabeth is adamant that Orla will be “well-off” one day and that her life will be “different from Elizabeth's” (Ní Dhuibhne 96). Elizabeth believes that this will happen through Orla's ability to earn an education and, subsequently, money. Ní Dhuibhne writes:

Money is the key, Elizabeth teaches Orla, the key to everything that is good in life.

Money is beauty and civilisation, money is refinement and flowers on the table, money is Chopin preludes on the piano in the front room and books on shelves in the bedroom.

Money is low voices and gentle smiles. To Orla all these things seem complicated and many faceted ... But Elizabeth has simplified the complexities. They all boil down to one thing: money. The key to money is education, the other part of the theory. You get an education in order to get money, and that is all you need to get, in this life. Get it. Orla's got it. She's got it that she's to get it, and then she'll get Elizabeth's approval. (133)

Orla's friendship with Aisling and her middle-class façade demonstrate that “she's got it” as she internalizes Elizabeth's values and simplifies the complexities of identity to wealth. This

internalization also causes Orla to create unrealistic expectations as she dreams of the luxurious and adventurous lives of some of her favorite fictional heroines. Since Orla cannot live the life of her fictional characters, or even of Aisling, she often feels inferior because identity “is formed just as much on the basis of what *it is not* as on what *it is*” (Daber 84, emphasis in original). Orla has a clear sense of what she believes acceptable identity is and is not based upon her mother and dominant social norms that emphasize a singular collective formation of identity that idolizes middle and upper class social divisions. Orla consequently embraces this perception of class but also realizes that her family is unable to fulfill these expectations, which often leaves her feeling bad about herself and her family.

Although many adolescent children are embarrassed by their families, Orla’s embarrassment almost exclusively derives from their class status and inability to fulfill the expectations of a limited national identity. Orla’s inferiority primarily stems from her family’s economic status and parents’ careers, which leads her to rarely invite friends to her home. Employing narrow identity limitations, Orla harshly judges family and friends as acceptable or unacceptable. Orla’s beliefs support her judgment that her family is abnormal, and even socially unacceptable, although she never articulates this to her mother. Orla therefore lives a secretive existence as she “never tells anything about her family because everything about her family is too shameful” (Ní Dhuibhne 153). Nonetheless, Orla is often forced to discuss her family because of frequent conversation topics that center on career and, consequently, class. Orla’s embarrassment and shame is most acutely demonstrated when discussing her father’s career. Ní Dhuibhne writes, “The topic of conversation is ‘What Does Your Father Do?’ It is a subject that raises itself constantly, among the girls themselves, in class, at school, on the street. What Does Your Father Do? Orla never wants to answer it, and usually she does not” (87). Orla’s awareness

of the importance of this inquiry, emphasized by the capital letters used when she thinks about the question, illustrates the importance of class and career to identity. The capital letters also imply that these aspects of identity often overshadow any other accomplishments or aspects. Orla's realization that occupation is often more important than any other characteristic, particularly when it comes to men, demonstrates that this is a limiting aspect of identity. Ní Dhuibhne writes:

[...] somehow occupation is the defining feature as far as fathers are concerned. Nobody asks, 'Is you father nice? (yes), What age is he? (don't know), What colour are his eyes? (blue), Can he sing? (yes, and play the mouth organ), Can he tell jokes?' (not really). Occasionally someone will ask, 'Where does he come from?' meaning what county in Ireland. The one question everyone asks is, What does your father do? What your father does is what defines your father, as far as other people are concerned. More significant, it is what defines you, if you happen to be a child. So it seems to Orla. (87)

Even though Orla understands the falsity of defining a person by a single characteristic, particularly their occupation, she continues to maintain social conventions and tells her friends, as instructed by Elizabeth, that her father is a building contractor, an embellishment of his true occupation as a bricklayer. Orla consequently recognizes the constraints of class, particularly via occupation, and also accepts the importance of this restrictive norm.

Orla relies upon her middle-class façade and does not want to risk losing this façade by revealing the fact that her father is actually from Tubber and that she has many relatives living in the area, including her Aunt Annie. Since Orla has never had to integrate her family life, particularly her rural Tubber relatives, with her school life, she struggles with reconciling the different identities she has created. She primarily does this to fulfill societal expectations of Irish

identity with the intention of being like everyone else. She also wants to maintain her friendship with Aisling and is afraid her background could ruin this. As Orla's urban and rural identities collide, she initially shields her friends from her heritage and ignores her family in order to uphold social norms. Orla consequently realizes that she's created two identities:

Orla the daughter of Elizabeth, the niece of Auntie Annie, the cousin of the people of Tubber, and Orla the schoolgirl from Dublin, the friend of Aisling, the Irish scholar. She has either to be two people at the same time, which is a hard thing to be, especially when you are thirteen and a half. Or she has to be just one of them. That is also very hard – not the choice, which is simple, but the consequences. (35)

The simple choice for Orla is to be the schoolgirl from Dublin and she decides that her Tubber identity will have to be suppressed. Orla notes that “she is so used to hiding things that the decision to do it is automatic” (35). This suppression ultimately creates greater social anxiety for Orla as she fears everyone will find out about her dual-identity and she will no longer be accepted by her Dublin friends and community.

Orla's decision to hide her background and avoid her Tubber relatives stems from her perception that her friends would no longer accept her if they knew about her family's economic status and oddities. Ní Dhuibhne writes:

It has been clear to her for years that all her friends would hate her if they knew what she was really like, and especially if they knew what her family was like. The inferiority of Orla's family to the families of Orla's friends is immense. It is an ocean that no bridge or ship or airplane or seagull or albatross or anything could ever cross. Friends on one side, family on the other. If the friends got wind of it ... she'd be done for. It's friends or family, and she is thirteen and a half. She needs friends. (36)

Orla's concerns are only reinforced by her mother's actions as Elizabeth portrays herself and her family as being middle-class, encourages Orla to only be friends with girls from middle and upper-class backgrounds, and embellishes the details of their Tubber visits to claim that they have a summer home in the Gaeltacht. Elizabeth's behavior illustrates to Orla the absolute necessity of conveying a certain façade to be accepted by others. Thus, as St. Peter notes, "Orla fears, not without cause, that a loss of her carefully crafted urban identity will result in the loss of her friends" (34). While many adolescent girls are embarrassed by their families and hide certain details from their friends, Orla's concerns are rooted in more than adolescent insecurity because they reflect her mother's financial anxieties and the class divisions that structure society. Consequently, according to St. Peter, while "the narration captures the brutal snobbery and meanness of young adolescence" the narrative also captures the way class status shapes "one's experience, one's way of knowing, [and] even one's body" (34). Orla's awareness of her class status and dual identity—"Orla of the city and the country"—leaves her in a precarious situation as she learns to negotiate the social structures that have shaped her.

Aunt Annie is at the crux of Orla's anxiety because Annie epitomizes abnormality and disrupts Orla's desire to be "normal" like everyone else. Annie embarrasses Orla because she is mentally and physically disabled, separate from the "family norm" (Ní Dhuibhne 167). Ní Dhuibhne writes:

There is plenty wrong with [Aunt Annie] that Orla can see: she is out of kilter, not plumb with the world. Her face is crooked, her mouth is crooked, and she walks with a clumsy and awkward gait; her feet cannot be relied upon to meet the ground at every step. ... Her voice emerges not in the rhythmical singsong of the native accent or the flat tones of Dublin, but in a jerking staccato, screeching one minute, inaudible the next. Observing

Auntie Annie you understand that normality exists in being even. Normal people are people who are more or less identical to everyone else, and who fit, tongue and groove, foot and slipper, into their place. Normal people are in tune ... (164)

Aunt Annie is out of tune with not only the norms of Dublin but Tubber as well. The norms, “however complex and strange, a mixture of old and new” are known to everyone, Orla believes, but Aunt Annie (164). The people of Tubber, Orla observes, do not mind Annie’s abnormalities and care for her since she lives alone and her brother, Orla’s father, lives in Dublin. Orla, however, is extremely mindful of Annie’s abnormalities and wishes her aunt did not exist. Her feelings towards Annie are rooted in her awareness of class and social divisions and her fear that she will lose her friends if she, or a member of her family, is different from everyone else. Aunt Annie, Orla asserts, is not an asset but a threat, a hindrance to her social status. “Auntie Annie,” Ní Dhuibhne writes, “even more certainly than the lodgers, will pull her down, down to rock bottom, where she will be left alone, alone and unloved. That is what she fears” (166). Orla’s awareness of her identity is initially so skewed by her reliance upon the social scripts provided by her mother and society that she cannot perceive herself or her family without criticism. However, it is when she comes to recognize these limiting social structures that she moves beyond the narrow definitions of singular national identity and acknowledges her aunt’s relationship.

### **Conclusions: Multiplicity and Postnational Identity**

*The Dancers Dancing* depicts Orla’s educational journey as she learns to examine the rest of the story and discover the “in between” that the standard or influential social narratives fail to depict. Although recognition of the “in between” narratives and social norms does not result in liberation from these national narratives, it can lead to resistance and the recognition that



multiple—or alternative—narratives exist. *Ní Dhuibhne* begins the novel with the depiction of maps because they are representative of the national collective identity and mores that restrict Irish girls and women. The novel consequently establishes national social norms and then depicts the girls' negotiation and resistance of these norms and singular collective identity. Ultimately, the girls hope to enact change in their lives as they experiment with identities and practices that are deviant because they fall outside social norms, particularly the heterosexual nuclear family. While Pauline and Sava reject dominant female roles they have yet to find certainties to replace them with and consequently risk the same fate as their mothers—limited to the household and the duties of wife and mother. Pauline and Sava challenge heteronormativity through their sexuality but fail to circumnavigate the roles assigned to Irish women because they ultimately depend upon the hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity. In contrast, Orla challenges heteronormativity without succumbing to traditional roles because she is able to recognize the links between gender, sexuality and nation that have structured Irish femininity and social limitations.

Orla's summer journey propels her towards acceptance and agency as she explores the burn and develops a self-conscious awareness of the social norms and roles assigned to women. Orla's growth is prompted by her separation from her mother as she is able to constitute herself outside of the nuclear family while in the Gaeltacht. Prior to her summer journey Orla maintained rigid social norms that reinforced her desire to be like everyone else. However, Orla recognizes that she isn't like most of her classmates and in the Gaeltacht she is forced to confront her many identities. Orla's ultimate reconciliation and acceptance of her identities are symbolized by her recognition of her Auntie Annie, who represents abnormality and alternative national identities. Annie's body defies constructions of heteronormative Irish identity because

she was born with physical abnormalities that inherently challenge social norms and fail to comply with a singular collective national identity. Orla's resistance is also connected to her body as she uses her body to travel the burn. The novel consequently connects individual agency and autonomy to the body as Orla realizes that her identity is not fixed and that she can resist social norms and behaviors. Orla's insight develops during her isolation at the burn because she shifts from a position of self-criticism to social criticism and comprehends the patriarchal assumptions and definitions that shape her life. When Orla visits the burn she recognizes alternative identities that establish new narratives and spaces for Irish womanhood because she momentarily escapes the dominant social norms that influence most of her decisions. The narratives exposed during her trips to the burn undermine the authoritative and often unrealistic perceptions of women by confronting the issues of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class and changing the way women have been represented in 1970s Ireland.

The recognition of alternative narratives and multiple identities ultimately advances a postnational understanding of Irish identity because the novel challenges Irish nationalism's ideology. *Ní Dhuibhne* employs the *Bildungsreise* in order to critique dominant ideologies surrounding gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class with the purpose of undermining the ideal of singular national identity. The novel consequently demonstrates that identity is formed through multiple attributes and identities that challenge a singular collective national identity. The novel therefore establishes the possibility of postnational identity through the characters' increasing self-awareness and acknowledgement of multiple identities. The novel reveals the simultaneous effects of national and postnational identity through the eyes of central female characters and provides a gendered critique of hegemonic Irish ideologies through perspectives that identify the assumptions of everyday life and resistance to many of those assumptions. Employing gender,

sexuality, ethnicity and class, the novel argues that the singular national collective has silenced and ignored individual responses and narratives in order to maintain nationalism and the myth of a community collective. By depicting symbolic representations of Irish womanhood and then subverting these images, the novel advances an understanding of postnational identity that acknowledges difference and multiplicity. The novel therefore rejects notions of cultural consensus and singular national identity as illusions in order to assert the multiplicity and fluidity of Irish identity. In other words, the novel conceives new possibilities for shaping and reshaping narratives of identity that incorporate alternative national narratives—or realities—into Ireland's truth.

## 4 “The Wrong Girl”

### Identity, Exile and Family in Anne Enright’s *What Are You Like?*

At the crux of Anne Enright’s *What Are You Like?* (2000) are the concepts of identity and the categories by which identity is formed and defined. From family, gender, and sexuality to nationality, the characters within the novel grapple with the foundations and categories by which their identities are constructed and prescribed and frequently come back to questioning who they are. The question of “who are you” or “what are you like” is repeatedly posed by the novel’s protagonists—Maria and Rose—because of their impulses to understand their past and the entirety of circumstances surrounding their birth and identity. Although the women are on similar paths of self-discovery, the impetuses behind their impulses differ because they are twins who were separated at birth and raised with varying degrees of awareness of their background, although neither knew about the other. Considering the depiction of national identity within the novel, I argue that *What Are You Like?* destabilizes conventional forms of Irish national identity by illustrating the reductive and damaging effects of an essential or singular construction of Irish national identity. The novel argues against the proliferation of a singular national identity and proposes that individual identity is much more complex than twentieth century Irish social and political norms suggest. As the novel’s women struggle with their identities, the novel asserts that the national ideal of a singular identity is broken because it repeatedly victimizes Irish women. Although the novel does not move beyond the idea of the nation and national identity, postnational theory supports the novel’s depiction of Irish national identity as complex and multiple. As a result, postnational theory is reflected in the novel’s shattered ideal of singular national identity as it imagines complex Irish identities that do not depend upon fixed gender

roles or behaviors. Thus, the novel is not postnational but utilizes the tools of postnational theory in order to complicate Irish identity and define it in opposition to the past and cultural myths.

As previously defined, postnational identity rejects the premise of a singular national identity and provides a non-essential and inclusive model that is based upon the multiple experiences and behaviors within any given culture (Delanty 20-21). Although Gerard Delanty contends that postnational identity does not depend upon the past, *What Are You Like?* suggests that national identity cannot be revised or redefined without acknowledging the past and understanding the historical narratives concealed by Ireland's restrictive culture. Thus, the novel's characters continue to be influenced by Irish nationalism and national identity but do not conform to the ideal of an essential or natural Irish national identity because the novel asserts the impossibility of uniformity. Postnational theory offers the reader an understanding of Enright's engagement with identity and multiplicity as she interrogates the national narratives of mid-twentieth century Ireland and imagines the ways in which these national narratives affected women and their identity. Through Maria's and Rose's narratives, *What Are You Like?* argues that collective and individual identities constantly evolve and cannot be confined to singular national narratives, such as that of Mother Ireland, the Virgin Mary, or Cathleen Ní Houlihan<sup>5</sup>. In "Anne Enright and Postnationalism in the Contemporary Irish Novel" Heidi Hansson confirms this point about identity when she contends that "the national narrative is a means of producing communal memory and uniting people who may have little more in common than their residence within a certain set of borders ... [and] the story of nation then becomes a monolith, a grand narrative of the kind questioned in postmodern literature and thought" (216-217). While Hansson

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<sup>5</sup> Cathleen Ní Houlihan is a mythic female figure that is often used to represent Ireland in literature and art. She is often depicted as an old woman, a metaphor for Ireland, who needs young men to rescue her in order to encourage young men to fight for Ireland.

argues that Enright's novel ultimately rejects both the nation and nationalism, I contend that the novel makes use of the nation and nationalism, particularly the nation's ideal metaphor—the nuclear family—in order to destabilize traditional social order, especially the domestic sphere and gender divisions, and demonstrate the need for new relationships and social roles. The novel emphasizes the need to create new identity ideals by demonstrating that the nuclear family is a broken ideal. The Delahunty family portrays this ideal as broken, and its damaging effects upon every member of the family, particularly Maria, suggests that the nuclear family ideal—as constituted by Irish nationalism—is both unrealistic and harmful. Postnational theory provides us with one way to understand the novel's deconstruction of the nuclear family ideal and its complication of that ideal by depicting multiple familial identities and formations.

*What Are You Like?* primarily portrays Maria's and Rose's experiences during their twenties as they seek to understand what it means to be both an individual and part of a family. The novel moves between the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, as well as between Ireland, England and America in order to represent multiple perspectives on the death of Anna Delahunty, Maria's and Rose's mother, and the twins' separation and subsequent identity struggles. Within these shifting times and places, the narrative reveals the circumstances surrounding the twins' birth and separation, as well as their journey of reconciliation. The novel's non-linear style emphasizes the twins' disjointed existence and the fact that their identities are constantly evolving. As the narrative shifts from the past to the present and from one character's perspective to another, the novel rejects the "coherent and linear" national narrative in favor of a "disjunctive narrative style [that] foregrounds the complexity of the past and prevents any sense of linear causality" (Hansson 221). It is apparent from the novel's non-linear narrative that identity can never be narrowly defined or restricted to particular attributes. Consequently, the novel challenges

Ireland's social and political institutions and practices—particularly that of the nuclear family and Catholicism—by rejecting the possibility of a natural or singular national identity.

In Ireland, the nuclear family has been indispensable to nationalism and to the definition of Irish national identity. Irish nationalists often depicted the family as the “bastion of moral righteousness” and the “place wherein Irish heroes could be reproduced” (Conrad, *Locked in the Family Cell* 10-11). Irish nationalists consequently defined the nuclear family according to restrictive gender roles and narrow social ideals as they sought to establish a singular Irish identity in the twentieth century. The importance of defined social roles is depicted in the 1937 Constitution as the nuclear family is upheld as the ideal social unit and women are interchangeably referred to as wives and mothers. In addition, this constitution maintains that Irish women best serve their nation through their dedication to their home and family. Ultimately, this construction of Irish women idealizes a passive female figure who maintains social order by staying within the home. Social and legislative policies consequently often confined Irish women to the home and domestic duties in order to support the ideal of the nuclear family and national identity. While women were primarily constructed as protecting the nuclear family, they were also often depicted as threatening the nuclear family and social order by failing to conform to national ideals of marriage and motherhood. Thus, Irish social and political norms defined not only the nuclear family but the individuals within it in order to reinforce the ideal of a natural or singular national identity. The novel's dismantling of the nuclear family—through both Anna's death and Rose's adoption—challenges the perception of a natural or singular national identity by demonstrating that the nation's metaphor for moral righteousness and stability is a broken ideal that needs to be redefined in order to encompass past experiences and multiple identities.

Enright's *What Are You Like?* clearly questions the validity and usefulness of Irish nationalism because the notion of a singular national identity lead to Maria's and Rose's separation and identity anxieties. Thus, Enright's novel asserts that the formation of identity is a constant process that can be "linked" to postnationalism or a position that challenges and seeks to move beyond conventional nationalism because identity rarely aligns with essential or singular assumptions (Hansson 218-219). Building upon Hansson's claim, I argue that the novel supports a postnational understanding of identity through its criticisms of the social and political norms of mid and late-twentieth century Ireland. By depicting silenced narratives from mid-twentieth century Ireland, the novel contends that the social and political norms that create and impose the myth of an essential or singular national identity need to be revealed and deconstructed. Enright deconstructs singular Irish national identity through the novel's depiction of gender and sexuality, which contributes to the dismantling of the traditional nuclear family structure. The novel also contends that national identity is often based upon arbitrary conditions. The novel illustrates this point via Maria and Rose's separation at birth and the arbitrary decision that sends one daughter to Britain and keeps one daughter in Ireland. Through the separation of the twins the novel demonstrates that national identity is often based upon chance circumstances, which undermines the possibility of an essential or singular national identity. The novel consequently condemns essential or singular national identity as restrictive and harmful and offers the reader a postnational understanding of identity that does not depend upon limited experiences and behaviors.

Intrinsic to the novel's representation of late-twentieth century Ireland and postnational identity is the depiction of previously silenced narratives. The novel emphasizes that while national identity can form and inform identity, the formation of individual identity is ultimately a



constant process based upon multiple aspects including gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality. As the characters' identities evolve, the novel aligns with Ailbhe Smyth's belief that identity is like a scab: We cannot resist constantly pulling and picking at it, as if to see what lies beneath its surface. We come back to it again and again, defining it, stating it, restating it, debating it, as if the pulling and picking can uncover the eternal and essential truth. ("Declining Identities" 148)

Maria and Rose are in search of their past—their truth—but the novel does not seek to establish an essential or singular national truth because it exposes the history of Ireland's confining social and political practices—particularly Ireland's adoption policies—that lead to their separation. In shaping and reshaping past and present narratives, Enright exposes the ways in which intersecting categories of identity—gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality—were defined by social and political practices that sought to confine and silence identities that challenged Ireland's national narrative. Ultimately, the novel's depiction of separated twins represents divisions within late-twentieth century Irish society as the nation moved towards heterogeneity and away from social and political conventions that sought to homogenize and naturalize Irish identity. In particular, the novel demonstrates how the maintenance of the heterosexual nuclear family produced restrictive practices and gender norms that were harmful to both men and women.

The novel's depiction of mid and late-twentieth century Irish society destroys the perception of an essential or natural national identity by asserting that identity is constantly evolving and heterogeneous. The novel therefore develops a postnational understanding of identity by deemphasizing cultural consensus and asserting that the nuclear family and singular, or essential, national identity unsuccessfully answers the question of "what are you like."

Although Maria and Rose seek to understand their past by reconciling their individual identities with that of their biological family, their identities do not depend upon their families or a national collective. Through Maria and Rose the novel illustrates that knowledge of the past is important to their search for self; however, their reunion does not restore social order or the ideal of the nuclear family. Instead, *What Are You Like?* acknowledges the importance of familial connections to understanding a sense of self while encouraging a critical consciousness of the domestic sphere and its maintenance of gender divisions. Ultimately Enright “writes women back into history by fictionalizing their voices, thoughts, opinions, and feelings” in order to destabilize notions of Irish womanhood and domesticity (Moloney 10). The novel contends that Irish national identity as it is fails to account for women’s experiences because it is based upon static or essential notions of identity that were often used to silence women’s experiences. As a result, the novel rejects Irish national identity in favor of a postnational perspective that is based upon various experiences and models of femininity, particularly women’s various engagements with their gender, sexuality and nationality.

### **Identity and Ireland’s National Narrative: Moving from Singularity towards Multiplicity**

In the novel, identity is shown to be heterogeneous, constructed and fluid, rather than singular, essential or natural, and fixed. The novel consequently advances a postnational identity as it seeks to answer the “what are you like” question and asserts that its characters are not defined by a singular national identity—although the Irish nation and its social and political norms do influence them—but by the diversity of their experiences and thoughts. Thus, the novel challenges the notion of an essential or singular Irish identity by providing models—Maria and Rose—that diverge from national expectations. As Enright explores the stories of women and children often excluded from Ireland’s national narrative—particularly the maternal death and

adoption narratives—the novel connects the restrictions of national identity to gender and sexuality. Consequently, Maria’s and Rose’s gender and sexuality become the primary ways in which they assert their individual power and advance postnational identity. However, the novel aligns with Edward Said’s assertion that the “old authority cannot simply be replaced by new authority, but that new alignments made across borders, types, nations, and essences are rapidly coming into view, and it is those new alignments that now provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of *identity* that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism” (xxv, emphasis in original). Thus, the novel does not assert that postnationalism is replacing nationalism as another fixed category, but that postnationalism as a concept rejects the fixed or unitary categories of gender, sexuality and nationality and recognizes both the individual and institutional influences that create complex and varied identities. Postnational identity, then, allows for the multiple ways in which identity is created and performed.

Through its placement of Maria in Ireland and Rose in England, *What Are You Like?* resists national divisions and argues that binary divisions of “us” versus “them” were based upon essentializing notions of national identity that failed to account for the diversity of individual thoughts and experiences. The narrative contends that identity is often subject to circumstance as Maria and Rose are separated after their mother’s death. Expecting only one child, Berts does not feel prepared to raise two children and can barely acknowledge the existence of both babies as the nun prompts him to name the children and he simply states, “Maria” (86). Berts maintains that he cannot take both children and selects one child to raise while the other child is left with the hospital’s nuns for adoption. Sister Misericordia explains:

So when Delahunty came to get a baby she looked away, so as not to see which he left behind. She doubted whether he could tell between them, anyway — which he had

marked, and which left blank. And when she registered the remaining child, the word she went to write was 'Maria' because, quite simply, she did not care. Either or, she thought.

Either or. (89)

Sister Misericordia's depiction of Berts's decision to keep one child without even naming the other depicts the chance circumstances that often form identity. Rose's placement in England further suggests that national identity is often based upon chance because it is an arbitrary decision that sends her to England to be raised as a British citizen. The novel consequently suggests that attempts to define a national identity reflect social and political powers rather than individual identities and self-expressions. For instance, either child could have been raised by Berts in Ireland or either child could have been named Maria, but Berts's decision to choose one child and conceal the fact that Anna had twins causes both women—one Irish and one English—to feel alienated and lost as they strive to retrieve their past and reconcile their sense of individual identity. Through its depiction of Anna, Maria and Rose, the novel demonstrates that the ideals of national identity—particularly the nuclear family—do not conform to a fixed ideal but are fluid. Therefore, the women need to be aware of their circumstances and the ways in which identity and fate can intersect in order for them to establish their own sense of self.

Maria and Rose are able to use their gender and sexuality to explore and establish their own identities outside the problematic of the national family metaphor. Maria's and Rose's gender and sexuality ultimately do not work to restore social order but rather to create social change in the domestic sphere and gender divisions. In particular, as the women seek to understand and establish a sense of belonging, the ways in which they perform their gender with and against Irish social and political norms play an important role in dissolving static notions of Irish womanhood. Throughout the twentieth century Irish nationalism often sought to

homogenize women through motherhood and a singular identity that Enright's narrative exposes as an unrealistic and troubling ideal that obscures counter identities and narratives. In contrast to this homogenized version of Irish womanhood, Maria and Rose seek a relationship with their mother, not an essential or natural identity, but an understanding of the individual woman who gave birth to them. However, their mother's identity is most closely aligned with national myths that disseminated a single female identity based upon the nuclear family archetype. Their mother's death consequently challenges traditional perceptions of family and identity as her daughters uncover their past and reveal the instability of the nuclear family and singular national identity. Thus, their mother's death in the novel destabilizes the national ideal of Irish womanhood and promotes a multiplicity of identity and experience by demonstrating that the family metaphor is not ideal but broken.

### **Sacrificing Mother Ireland: A Condemnation of Gender Divisions and the Nuclear Family**

Crucial to the novel's subversion of the family unit is the sacrifice of the mother figure. The novel's sacrifice of Maria's and Rose's mother, Anna Kennedy Delahunty, condemns one of Ireland's national myths—Mother Ireland—that reinforced gender divisions and norms. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century the image of Ireland as a mother who both protected and needed protection became a national icon of solidarity. As Rebecca Pelan notes, colonial and postcolonial Irish attempts to address negative images of Ireland further marginalized women because there was a “constant denial of ‘real’ women through the portrayal of a feminized/idealized Ireland sacrificed in exchange for freedom” (*Two Irelands* 19). The image of Mother Ireland subsequently conflated motherhood and national identity, which reinforced restrictive gender roles for Irish women. Anna's narrative highlights Irish women's vulnerability and the models of femininity that made marriage and motherhood compulsory in

mid-twentieth century Ireland. In addition, Anna's death exposes the detrimental cost of abiding by the social and political norms that maintained such restrictive gender roles. The novel consequently makes use of conventional images of Irish women, particularly as wives and mothers within the nuclear family, in order to highlight the alternative and silenced narratives created by women and families who failed to conform to these restrictive standards. The novel demonstrates that women who failed to conform to the nation's social and political norms were often silenced and "forgotten by an oppressive narrative of national identity" (Smith 13). In the novel, the twins seek "to recover the lost stories of women, such as their mother's, in order to fill in the gaps in their own personal history and also in the history of their country and the global community, where women's tales are those most vulnerable to loss, distortion, and forceful silencing" (Powell 108). *What Are You Like?* is about loss and distortion as Anna's narrative is revealed and Maria and Rose discover the truth about their birth. Anna's recovered narrative demonstrates that identity is often influenced by nationality—as Anna strives to uphold the conventional roles of wife and mother—but also that identity is fluid and constantly evolves. Anna's death ultimately illustrates that cultural traditions and gender norms create only illusions of uniformity that often fail to account for the actuality of lived experiences. This is emphasized by the unconventional families created by Anna's death and their failure to conform to traditional standards of an Irish nuclear family. Thus, the dead mother and alternative families represent the impossibility of maintaining an essential or singular national identity and even the harm that can be created by attempting to do so.

Throughout the novel Anna is primarily depicted from Berts's perspective, which emphasizes the lack of control and input Anna has over her own life. It also reinforces her image as the nation's ideal Irish woman who fulfills her familial duties. The novel introduces Anna as a

wife who recently married Berts and is pregnant with their first child. Anna spends her days in their new home while Berts spends his days working for the city. Anna is primarily restricted to the home, which is emphasized when Enright writes:

It was hard to say how Berts's wife had used her day in the new house they had bought; moving from room to room, crossing from carpet to lino, pausing on the wooden saddle across the door. The nights he knew about, but something about daylight made her uncertain. It was winter. It was hard for him to imagine her there.

‘What do you do all day?’ he said.

‘This and that.’ (4)

Anna's response that she does “this and that” minimizes her work within the home and reinforces her childlike qualities. Anna is limited by her roles within the home and the narrative quickly reveals that she has developed an illness. Anna's repeated childlike and incorrect behaviors—“she put the bag into the clothes and not the clothes into the bag” (5)—emphasizes her inability to change and that the nuclear Irish family is not ideal but broken. Ultimately, her illness is indicative of the harmful effects of an essential or singular national identity because it develops from the sexist, restrictive culture in which she lives.

The progression of Anna's mental deterioration suggests that the Irish psyche, and Irish women in particular, have been irrevocably damaged by the social and political restrictions of a singular national identity. Berts's depiction of his increasing concerns over his wife's behavior highlights the connection between her illness and limited gender roles, particularly when he finally takes his wife to the doctor. For instance, while at the doctor's office it occurs to Berts that “apart from Mass, he had not seen his wife outside the house since they were married” (6). This scene emphasizes Anna's limitations, that even before her illness she had few freedoms

outside the home and little input into her life. As her illness develops the novel depicts her dependency upon the men in her life as she waits for Berts and her doctor to decide her fate. Eventually her doctor decides that her pregnancy has made her hormones “a little wild” and that she needs rest; however, “at the end of her fifth month they took her in” and Berts subsequently reveals that “the child [was] filling her stomach and the tumour [was] filling her brain” (6-7, 14). Anna’s gender clearly plays a role in her diagnosis because both her husband and doctor initially believe her odd behavior is due to her femininity and hormones. Anna’s cancer ultimately remains untreated because of her pregnancy and the belief that it would be more beneficial to save her child rather than her. Berts remembers:

How they wheeled her down to the operating theatre, her pelvis surging and her face blank. How they took out the child and turned off the machines, and waited. And later, when he touched her corpse, as he was obliged to do, he felt the size and carelessness of the stitches under the cloth and he knew that she had bled to death, and that it had taken her all day. (14-15)

The carelessness with which Anna is treated throughout her illness, but particularly when she finally goes into labor, demonstrates that Irish society does not value her life as much as the children she is able to produce. In particular, Anna’s final treatment emphasizes her gender and the fact that she is a woman who has decisions made for her rather than being a woman who has the ability and freedom to make decisions for herself. Anna’s death asserts the harmful effects of singular national identity and the nuclear family as defined by Irish social and political norms. Her death also marks the beginning of Maria’s and Rose’s identity struggles as they seek to understand their past and the gender divisions and social norms that impacted their mother’s death and their separation.



### **“That’s because I’m Irish”: Maria’s Fight to Understand a Sense of Self**

Although Anna is dead, she greatly influences Maria’s life as her father repeatedly compares the two and upholds Anna as a model of womanhood that Maria is expected to imitate. Maria is consequently raised to fulfill her father’s expectations, which include replicating her mother’s conventional gender roles and behaviors. For instance, Berts’s expectations of Maria’s chastity—and Maria’s momentary guilt after failing to uphold these expectations—are revealed when she describes the circumstances of her first sexual encounter while a university student in Dublin. Maria “was on the pill” when she decided to have a brief affair with a man from her college, which her parents discover when her stepmother finds her birth control pills hidden in her room. Maria has “only had sex once” when her father confronts her in order to caution her against having sex outside marriage. Enright writes:

‘When I met your mother,’ he said, ‘she was innocent. We both were. That was the way of it.’

They both heard his words, bare and helpless in the room. Maria hefted the duvet and turned her back on him. His lovely bride and their lovely love. It was bullshit. It was not her fault.

He sat on the end of the bed and said nothing. She started to cry.

‘Oh Daddy,’ she said. ‘What will I do?’ She was sobbing into the pillow. ‘What will I do?’ Berts sat there, patting her hip.

‘Sure, he isn’t worth it.’ (199-200)

Berts’s perception of sexuality derives from his relationship with Anna and his belief that sex should occur within the sanctity of marriage. However, Berts’s nostalgia for his deceased wife evokes Maria’s censure as she questions the romanticism with which her father upholds her

mother's memory. Berts's idealization of his deceased wife is the standard to which Maria is held as he ends his reprimand by telling Maria that she has her mother's eyes. It is clear that Berts constantly compares Maria to her mother and that Anna haunts their family as Berts continues to preserve and idolize her memory. The family's equation of Maria with Anna, particularly Berts's correlation of Maria and Anna, narrowly defines Maria within mid-twentieth century expectations of Irish womanhood and identity.

Maria contends with her father's idolization of his deceased wife and her family's expectations by rejecting her family and the standards by which they judge her. This rejection provides Maria with the freedom to establish a sense of her own identity. Maria begins this process by moving to New York and engaging in activities that undermines her parents' expectations and standards. Maria expresses her independence from her family—particularly her mother's idolized image—through her sexuality. While in New York Maria sleeps “with a couple of guys, just because they were in this town together and both at the same time. [...] Sex seemed to be the easiest solution, when you were the new girl in town. She didn't tell them she wasn't used to it” (110). Maria's perspective on sex directly counters her father's perspective that sex should wait until marriage and asserts her desire to take control of her life. Maria's sexuality is a form of social critique that allows her to assert her independence from her mother and father and break away from Ireland's nuclear family traditionalism. Consequently, Maria's sexuality is a site of identity production that provides a counter-narrative to the nationalist construction of Irish gender and sexuality. However, Maria mistakes “sex for everything else” (143) and her naïve perspectives ultimately emphasize her immaturity and inability to correctly perceive her sexual and familial relationships. The novel therefore connects Maria's Irish

identity with her psychological collapse as she seeks to understand herself and the relationships that have influenced her.

Maria's identity crisis constitutes the majority of the novel as her lack of knowledge about herself and her sister leads to her psychological breakdown. Maria's brief affair with a man named Anton leads to her identity crisis when she finds a picture of Anton and Rose in his belongings. Maria recognizes her image in the photograph but cannot comprehend how this girl could look so much like her. Enright writes:

She tried to extract her face from this girl's face, but when it came down to it, she could have grown up sixteen different ways. [...] She looked different, even though she was the same. It was hard to put your finger on it. She had the right mouth, but the wrong voice might come out of it. She had the same eyes, but they had seen other things. Her hair was the same, but the parting was on the other side. (37)

When Maria finds the photograph she is no longer confident in who she is because "everything she understands about herself and her family is destroyed because she can no longer trust even her own smile" (37). Ultimately, Maria confesses that she "always felt like the wrong girl" (37). Maria's confession reveals how she often felt alienated from her family because of their failure to tell her truthful depictions of her mother and their unrealistic expectations based upon an idealized version of her mother. While Maria could have "grown up sixteen different ways," the novel emphasizes the ways in which her Irish identity has formed her perceptions and the damaging effects of this identity. The twins' separation from each other stems from Irish social and political norms and the novel subsequently suggests that Irish national identity often damages women and their sense of self. This is frequently reinforced throughout the novel as both Maria and Rose psychologically struggle to understand themselves and their families.

### **“A Secret Sorrow”: Rose’s Adoption and Search for her Mother**

As Rose matures her decisions are often influenced by her adoption and desire to understand “what she’s like” because she wants to find a connection to her biological mother and family. Rose observes that “Her face was full of people she did not know, and they were fighting their way out of her. Some woman’s mouth, some man’s nose. Even the way she chewed might come from someone else, the tiny muscle that gathered on her chin” (126). Rose’s lack of knowledge about herself often leads to her unhappiness. Throughout her childhood and adolescence Rose seeks physical and emotional connections with others, particularly the foster boys her adoptive parents frequently bring into the home. Rose feels too far removed from her adoptive parents—an older couple—but also fails to develop healthy relationships with the foster boys who have had much more difficult lives than she has. Instead, she teases the foster boys and eventually even kisses and engages in sexual activity with these boys in order to create a sense of connection. This leads to her relationship with Anton—the boy Maria eventually meets in New York—and her first sexual encounter. Enright writes, “Rose kissed him. And under the high round of her pubic bone, a pain started to spread. It rose like dough, clinging and tearing from the bowl of her pelvis. The pain shot down like a needle and she pressed it against the leg of his jeans. She moved it against him but he rolled away from her, leaving her body open to the air. He stood up” (103). Rose is frustrated by Anton’s rejection and continues to pursue him while he lives in their home but their relationships never develops any further. Although Rose primarily uses Anton and the other foster boys for entertainment purposes, she never finds happiness in these relationships and continues to seek ways in which she can connect to others.

Rose is psychologically affected by her adoption and often engages in reckless and risky behaviors. Rose’s desire to connect to her adoptive and biological mothers leads her to

repeatedly shoplift from stores throughout London. As her shoplifting escalates, she observes that “At least, if they caught her, she would have something to talk to her mother about. Finally. Lots of earnest discussions about the pain Rose felt about being adopted, the unfairness of it all” (123). In addition, Rose remarks that she searches the faces of women shoppers and shop assistants for any resemblance or look of recognition in order to find her biological mother. “The question she asked of faces on the street, the question she had been asking all her life, was the simplest one of all. ‘Are you my mother?’” (148). Rose’s pain over her adoption permeates every aspect of her life as she wants to find out who her mother is and, ultimately, who she is. Rose does not believe she can understand herself without knowing and understanding her mother and biological family. For instance, Rose decides to pursue music because she has a natural talent that she believes she inherited from her biological mother. Enright writes:

She was four when she picked out her first tune on the piano, and ‘Oh, she’s musical,’ said her mother. ‘She’s musical!’ as though she was wonderfully unknown, full of surprises. All orphans are musical. So Rose was musical. That was what she was.

[...] This was why she played. Because she was musical. Because somewhere out there, her real, musical mother was listening. Somewhere out there, her real, musical mother was signing into the dishes, to the child she loved so very much but had to give away. (128-129)

Rose’s musings depict her transformation from a naïve and sensitive girl to a troubled and psychologically damaged young adult. Rose is clearly the product of a dysfunctional social and political environment, an environment that she does not even realize she comes from.

Rose’s failure to connect with her biological mother through her music or shoplifting leads her to pursue traditional avenues of information, namely the adoption agency that

processed her adoption. It is through her discussions with the adoption agency that Rose first finds out that she is Irish. Rose is shocked by this information because she always assumed her birth mother was British and that she was born in England. Consequently, while this information provides her with specific knowledge about her past and who she is, it also creates doubt and confusion in her mind because she has always considered herself English whenever she's thought about her nationality. Thus, she doesn't know what it means to be 'Irish' (139). Her mother explains that the reason they went to Mass was because she was Irish, which Rose never knew. "Most of the time," Enright writes, "Rose did not know who she was. She was a woman. But, until now, being an English woman had not come into it" (136). In an effort to understand who she is Rose makes a list of "things she could not forget, even if she tried" (140). Rose begins:

She was twenty-one years old. (Probably)

She was studying music. (More or less)

She was a woman. (?)

She was in bed with William/Will/Bill.

She was too full of things.

She was born with a hole in her head, a hold in her life.

Everything fell into it.

She started again.

She was Irish.

[...]

She was English.

She was tidy. She was polite. She hated Margaret Thatcher.

She was a mess. (140)

Rose's list illustrates that her identity is constantly evolving as she both finds out more about her past and develops as a person. Rose's continuous process of self-analysis counters attempts to define an Irish national identity by complicating interpretations of what it means to be Irish or non-Irish. The novel emphasizes that identity formation is a constant process and not a stagnant designation that fulfills national ideals. As Rose learns about her birth and Irish identity, the novel suggests that the ideal of a singular national identity does not exist and criticizes the social and political norms that concealed alternative identities and narratives. Thus, the novel makes a political statement by incorporating Rose's narrative and giving voice to the "other"—the abandoned and illegitimate children who were sent abroad for adoption.

### **Separation from Home and Family: Exploring Maria's and Rose's Exile and Alienation**

Central to Maria's and Rose's identity issues are their experiences of exile and alienation. The women experience exile both psychologically and physically as they are separated from their families and biological home. Thus, as Susan Cahill notes, "*What Are You Like?* is a novel palpable with a sense of absence" (87), and it is the absences—both known and unknown—in the women's lives that drive their psychological breakdowns. The juxtaposition of their separate exiles demonstrates the powerful effect of their separation and buried history as they both experience alienation and seek to establish connections with others. For the twins, their exile is defined by a sense of loss and exists in a "perilous territory of not-belonging" (Said, "The Mind of Winter" 49, 51). Although exile is often associated or even united to nationalism and national identity, the novel demonstrates that essential or singular Irish national identity has actually often created exile and alienation. This happens when men, women or children fail to uphold the Irish ideal—whether through their own actions or the actions of others—and are forced to conceal

their identities and narratives. The experiences of many Irish men and women were concealed in order to preserve the ideal of the nuclear family and Irish moral righteousness, including the experiences of homosexual Irish men and women, those women who found themselves pregnant outside of marriage, or victims of rape and abuse. Because these narratives—and the people themselves—challenged the ideals of a singular national identity they were concealed or banished by national institutions that exiled or alienated them. Maria and Rose are ultimately victims of the Irish nation and its institutions as they experience feelings of exile and alienation. According to Said, most people are “principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions [...]” (“The Mind of Winter” 55). While he is directly referring to those physically exiled from their homelands, this perspective can also be applied to those psychologically exiled from understanding their identity or familial connections. Rose’s exile was created by Anna’s death and her adoption, or exportation, to England, while Maria’s exile stems from her mother’s death but is physically self-imposed as she leaves Ireland for America. Maria and Rose are in “discontinuous states of being” (Said, “The Mind of Winter” 51) as they seek connections with their past. However, it is only through their experiences of alienation and exile that the twins are able to recognize their sense of loss and seek to recover a sense of self. Said explains that the exile experience is often endured in order to “restore identity, or even life itself, to [a] fuller, more meaningful status” (“The Mind of Winter” 53). Ultimately their exile and reunion allow the twins to recover their past and establish their individual identity and sense of belonging without restoring or perpetuating an essential or singular Irish national identity.

Ireland has long been associated with exile as its people have both willingly and unwillingly left the country. *What Are You Like?* is particularly concerned with those who have



had to unwillingly leave the country or have been lost. Cahill explains that *What Are You Like?* “is a novel of the lost, the displaced and the missing; a novel populated with abandoned children, dead mothers, missing siblings, uncanny doubles and separated twins” (87). In particular, the novel is interested in the buried narratives<sup>6</sup> of Ireland’s adopted children. Throughout the twentieth century, many women and children departed Ireland because they did not fulfill societal expectations. Ireland, in conjunction with the Catholic Church, consequently created an industry of exile that sought to conceal and suppress narratives that countered the national ideals of family and Irish identity. The departure of women and children who did fulfill the social and political norms of the time perpetuated the exile industry and silenced Ireland’s counter narratives.

Essential to the novel is the recovery of Anna’s narrative and the adoption practices that lead to Maria’s and Rose’s separation. Ireland’s adoption policies were primarily based upon the stigma of illegitimacy and unwed motherhood, and the novel asserts that throughout the mid-twentieth century these adoptions depended upon the ideal of an essential national identity. Unwed motherhood and illegitimacy did not fit into the ideal of national identity and a national industry of institutional care was subsequently created. Ireland’s industry of institutional care included mother-and-baby homes, delivery homes, adoption agencies, Magdalen laundries, and industrial and reformatory schools (Smith 25). These institutions sought to confine individuals, primarily women, deemed guilty of transgressing the nation’s strict moral codes (Smith 25). With the nation’s support, these institutions were predominantly established and maintained by the Catholic Church and were often one of the few resources available to women and children shunned by society. Most of these institutions were run by Catholic nuns who assumed control of

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<sup>6</sup> In “Twin Tracks and Double Visions” published in 2000, Enright claims that *What Are You Like?* is “a book about how things get buried.”

the women and their babies and “frequently disposed of the children without consulting or informing the mother beforehand” (Milotte 20). In the novel, Berts, in conjunction with Anna’s male doctors, decides that the health of her children is more important than treating her own cancer. Thus, Anna is allowed to slowly deteriorate before giving birth and having her children taken away. Anna is not consulted—or informed—about her medical care or about what should happen to her children. She consequently represents the women silenced by Ireland’s social and political norms and the harmful effects of these restrictive national practices. In particular, the novel criticizes the Catholic Church’s role in concealing Anna’s fate and Rose’s adoption as it maintained Ireland’s industry of institutional care.

The Catholic Church facilitated Ireland’s adoption industry throughout most of the twentieth century in an effort to control both Irish women and children. The stigmatization of unwed Irish mothers and their children throughout the twentieth century, particularly between 1920 and the mid-1970s, led to the departure, and in some cases the exportation, of thousands of women and children from Ireland (Milotte 18). Most women could not socially or financially afford to establish single parent homes and with few alternatives available they would often enter Catholic institutions in order to hide their pregnancies. Mike Milotte explains that the majority of women felt they had to give their babies away and that this perception created and sustained Ireland’s adoption industry “where the steadily growing practice of sending children abroad for adoption was not a matter of any significant public debate or comment” (13). According to Milotte, Ireland’s lenient adoption policies and restrictive culture created baby exportation businesses that were primarily administered by the Catholic clergy. Milotte explains:

It was the nuns who ran the fostering and adoption societies that arranged to have the children of these single mothers placed elsewhere. And in most cases, it seems, they not

only arranged, they decided too, assuming control in the belief that they knew best. So convinced were they of their right to decide that they frequently disposed of children without consulting the mother beforehand. Their moral authority to act like this was simply not questioned. (20)

The nuns' authority and actions led to thousands of adoptions, many of which were forced upon the birth mother, and reinforced Ireland's culture of confinement throughout the twentieth century. These adoptions were frequently allowed to occur because birth mothers had little authority or agency over their own confinement and child's adoption. The birth mother's desires and judgments were most often superseded by the nuns. Although the exact number of Irish children sent abroad for adoption between the 1920s and 1970s is unknown, there was a perception that Irish children were readily available for removal and adoption throughout this time period (Milotte 17). However, since the Catholic Church and clergy primarily supervised these adoptions there were certain expectations that the adoptive families had to fulfill, such as making donations to the Catholic Church and specific religious orders, pledging to raise the child in the Catholic faith, and providing proof of financial stability. The efforts to find good homes for these children often centered upon matters of faith and the religious upbringing of the child, which ultimately lead some children to be placed with unsuitable parents (Milotte 24).

In *What Are You Like?* Rose's exile and alienation stems from her mother's death and her father's refusal to raise two children, indications of Ireland's harmful social and political norms. Rose is consequently left in the care of Catholic nuns who send her to England for adoption. While the circumstances of Rose's adoption and exportation to England differ from most Irish children adopted abroad—primarily because her parents were married—her narrative highlights the hidden history of Ireland's adoption practices. Ultimately Rose's adoptive parents prove to be

suitable parents but she secretly yearns to know her birth parents, particularly her birth mother. In order to find her birth mother, Rose contacts the agency her parents adopted her through and subsequently encounters the Catholic Church's code of secrecy when the adoption agent tells Rose that it is often difficult to trace birth parents from Ireland. Rose recounts, "She said some of the records were distorted. That was the word she used, 'distorted'. She said, 'They didn't want the children to turn up on the doorstep. So they put the wrong things on the forms. Do you understand what I'm saying? They lied routinely. They lied all the time'" (149). The woman's assertion that the Irish agencies, particularly the Catholic nuns, "lied all the time" advances the novel's censure of both the Catholic Church and Ireland's social and political practices. In addition, this scene highlights the history of Ireland's buried narratives and the need to recover them in order to understand both the individual and collective past.

In contrast to Rose's desire to establish a relationship with her biological family, Maria exiles herself in an effort to understand her identity and establish independence from her mother's idealized image. Although Maria isolates herself from her family throughout the novel, her decisions prior to the summer of 1985 were influenced by their opinions as she pursued a college degree in engineering. In contrast, Maria loves New York and the independence she finds there during her summer abroad and ultimately decides to extend her stay beyond the summer. Maria feels that "she wasn't sure who she was yet, or who she might turn out to be," and releases herself from her family's expectations (111-112). Instead of finishing her engineering degree, Maria works as a maid because she "just liked being nothing. As though there was something coming out in her now that previously she had not allowed" (111-112). Maria relinquishes her Dublin life in order to realize a life that she can control without the condemnation of her father and stepmother. In Dublin, Maria's life was created for her by her father and stepmother and she

rejects this life in order to understand who she is. While Maria never had a stable sense of self in Dublin, her identity is immediately challenged when she encounters Anton and his picture of twelve year old Rose. Studying the picture, Maria sees her own eyes, teeth and smile but fails to recognize her clothes and the people in the pictures. She reflects that “she had been completely robbed” (25). In this moment, Maria’s identity is robbed as she tries to understand who this girl is that looks exactly like her but fails to understand that she was robbed of her sister as an infant. For Maria, this picture reinforces her feelings of alienation and loss as she further struggles with her identity and sense of self. Maria’s complicated relationship with her identity and sense of loss ultimately leads to her psychological breakdown and attempted suicide. Unable to understand Anton’s picture and the sense of loss that has permeated her life, Maria believes that she is lost and that “there is no one to find her” (152). As a result, Maria’s alienation and sense of loss leads to her desire to die because she is unable to reconcile her inability to form connections with her ambivalence about her mother’s death.

Finally, Maria’s and Rose’s psychological and physical exiles emphasize the narrative’s incoherency of identities and sense of displacement in order to demonstrate the impossibility of an essential or singular national identity. Nationalism as it was constructed in Ireland often created exile and alienation because of the social and political norms that enforced restrictive views of morality and the nuclear family. Through Maria’s and Rose’s depiction the novel emphasizes the multiplicity of Irish identity as the women seek to understand the truth about their birth and mother’s death. As Maria and Rose both experience exile and alienation the novel recommends acknowledging Ireland’s hidden history and altering what it means to be Irish. Thus, the novel asserts the need to alter the collective or national identity and to recognize Ireland’s alternative and silenced narratives. In doing so, the novel seeks to achieve a more

complete understanding of Irish experiences and identities in the mid and late-twentieth century. The novel therefore depicts concealed experiences created by Irish nationalism and the ideal of the nuclear family in order to challenge what it means to be Irish. The circumstances of the twins' birth and subsequent separation established simultaneous dimensions for the girls, including their awareness of multiple homes, families, mothers and, in the case of Rose, nations. As Maria and Rose become increasingly aware of these multiple dimensions the narrative depicts the harmful effects of an essential or singular national identity.

### **“They Were a Family”: Constructing an Irish Ideal and Finding a Place to Belong**

As my previous chapters have established, Ireland's twentieth century social ideals propagated Ireland's image of moral superiority by maintaining the nuclear family and women's roles as wives and mothers. The institution of marriage consequently became a social structure in which the state naturalized its authority over society and sustained Ireland's culture of confinement. As a result, the nuclear family served as an exemplary model and justification for all human action and regulation. In an effort to control national identity, women were subjected to regulation through the nuclear family with the expectation that they would reproduce the “heterosexual family cell that serves as the foundation of the nation-state” (Conrad, *Locked in the Family Cell* 21). The knowledge women had about sexuality and reproduction often began and ended with only an understanding that women were supposed to be wives and mothers. This national perspective was used to confine sex and sexuality to marriage in order to protect the innocence of children and young people, to define social roles, and uphold the nuclear family (Inglis 25). Tom Inglis asserts that alternatives to heterosexual married life—including homosexuality, sex outside of marriage, and illegitimate children—were considered threats to

social order, which necessitated the concealment of sexuality as essential to civilized society (25). Inglis writes:

Innocence was a virtue which was protected through modesty and purity. [...] The danger of immodesty and impurity [grew] when boys and girls [became] men and women, and only [receded] when they were united in the sacrament of marriage. [...] In the game of love and lust, it was the task of mothers to make sure they instilled a sense of modesty in their daughters and that they did not lose it. (25)

Women, both mothers and daughters, were primarily responsible for sexual modesty and celibacy, and they were also the ones most often punished when sexual acts occurred outside the sacrament of marriage, particularly if these actions led to pregnancy. Consequently, sex in Ireland was most often viewed as a transgressive activity and the unmarried mother was not considered a legitimate mother (Rattigan 4).

As *What Are You Like?* explores the multiplicity of Irish identity, the narrative also moves towards a plurality of family forms (Kennedy 1). Traditional Irish family structures were based upon the concept of the nuclear family and the social expectations of gender roles. Thus, men were expected to work and financially provide for the family and women were expected to care for the home and children. Intrinsic to the traditional nuclear family structure was the imbalance of power as men served as the point of reference between the family and nation-state because men were considered the head of household. Initially, Berts and Anna exemplify this idealized version of family life as Berts works for Dublin city and Anna stays at home to care for their home. Nonetheless, as Anna's illness progresses the narrative shifts away from this idealized version of the nuclear family and reveals the dark undercurrents and secrets of traditional family structures. The novel consequently suggests that the idealization of the

traditional family structure hides a range of internal divisions, inequalities and disparities of power that prescribes social roles and order. As the narrative negotiates the traditional nuclear family structure, it is suggested that “families are, and have always been, not just the source of comfort and support but also the source of oppression for some of their members” (Hughes and Sherratt 64). Maria and Rose find both comfort and oppression in their familial relationships as they negotiate their family structures and the power relations that lead to their separation. The narrative of the twins’ separation ultimately illustrates Irish social oppressions and the plurality of family structures that have developed since the 1960s.

After Anna’s death, Berts’s desire to construct a new family asserts the arbitrary and even accidental nature of familial relationships. Berts realizes that “he would have to marry again” after months of driving from one sister’s house to the next and failing to create a sense of home for his daughter. This leads Berts to date and eventually marry Evelyn. Enright writes:

[...] the child fixed on her. She amazed Evelyn with her hunger, took her first steps towards her. She tried out sounds, like small moves into the future, and one of them was ‘Ebbelyn’. That settled it. On the night they came back from the honeymoon Berts picked the child up from Bernie’s, brought her home and put her in her new room. The noise of her crying made his lovemaking so fierce that his new wife said, ‘You’ve put me into next week,’ and she stood naked before him before going downstairs to heat the milk.

They were a family. (13)

As the narrative moves from Maria’s approval to their marriage and lovemaking, the construction of their family seems to depend upon Berts’s sexual consummation and not on their sense of belonging or connections. Although the couple has two more children, the family remains disconnected from one another even as Berts and Evelyn seek to create the ideal nuclear



family. As Anna's replacement, Evelyn represents the ideal wife and mother—who does not become terminally ill—as she has two children with Berts, stays at home to raise Maria and her half-siblings, cares for the home and completes all the shopping. Evelyn does not romanticize her relationship with Berts but understands that she was wanted because Berts needed someone—anyone. Evelyn reflects that “Another woman would have done just as well [...]” (64). Evelyn's reflection reinforces the chance nature of Berts's family construction as almost any woman could have served as his new wife and his decision to choose Maria over Rose demonstrates. Although Berts's construction of his family maintains the ideal of the nuclear family, his decisions fail to acknowledge individual identities and ultimately undermine the importance of familial relationships.

The construction of families in *What Are You Like?* poses the question of what unifies and defines families, as almost all of the characters experience alienation and fail to believe they belong to their families. In particular, the novel questions what constitutes a family and familial relationships when Maria visits her mother's family. Maria visits Anna's family when she is eleven and fails to feel any connection to her uncles or grandparents. They also fail to connect to Maria but demand she fulfill the domestic duties her mother once performed. This is highlighted when her uncle asks her to prepare him a cup of tea and Enright writes:

She was in the middle of strangers. Maria looked around the table and no one took any heed. She looked at the jug. [Uncle Amby] could squeeze the milk out of a cow's wrinkly teats, but he couldn't squeeze it out of this. She picked up the jug. She poured, and the milk smelt of everything. Behind her, she felt her grandmother stir with relief.

All of that before he wanted sugar. All of that before she was left drying the dishes by the sink with her grandmother, who said,

They'll be yours, someday.'

'Thank you,' [Maria] said, wiping the plate and grateful for this, the one cracked reference they had made to the blood between them and her mother who had died. (49)

These exchanges illustrate that while familial relationships may be dependent upon biology, they do not automatically create a sense of belonging or connection. Thus, the novel criticizes the role of family in twentieth century Irish society and asserts that familial relationships do not always create bonds. In addition, Maria's interactions with her mother's family depict the heterosexist foundations of the nuclear family in Ireland that depended upon unequal gender relations. Clearly, Anna's gender dictated her treatment long before her pregnancy and illness as her family expected her to conform to Ireland's conventional gender roles.

While Maria's familial relationships depend upon coincidence, Rose's family is depicted as even more arbitrarily constructed. After all, it is Berts's decision to keep one child—and ultimately Sister Misericordia's choice as to which child will be Berts's and which will be adopted—that creates these two families. When one considers the ways in which Maria's and Rose's families are constructed, the nuclear family lessens in importance because the novel depicts the destruction of the nuclear family, with the conjugal couple at its core, and instead examines a range of other relationships. For Rose, this includes her relationships with her adopted parents, as well as the foster boys frequently brought into the home, and as she matures her boyfriends. Rose's awareness of her family's construction heightens her sense of the precipitous relationships between people. Although Rose cares for her adopted parents, she does not have a strong sense of self and feels like she is missing a piece of herself that she repeatedly connects to her biological mother. When Rose finally learns from the adoption agency that her father is unknown and her mother is dead, she immediately feels that "she is linked to nothing"

(Cahill 94). Rose reflects that “She had been running on a long leash. All her life, she had been attached by an invisible rope and when, finally, she got around to tugging on it there was no one holding the other end” (166). The novel’s depiction of Rose’s devastation after finding out her mother is dead emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the truth. Although Rose realizes that she is the same person whether or not she knows her biological mother, her desire to understand the past emphasizes the need to recover Ireland’s hidden adoption history and its connection to the nuclear family ideal. The novel consequently contends that the Irish family is much more complex than the national ideal suggests and that the national ideal needs to be redefined in order to account for the heterogeneous, constructed and fluid nature of familial structures and relationships.

The establishment and diversity of family structures are essential components of Enright’s novel as the narrative examines familial connections and demonstrates the coincidental and even voluntary nature of familial relations. The narrative negotiates the traditional nuclear family structure and questions what constitutes familial relations through Maria and Rose’s families and their individual desires for familial connections. Although the novel proposes that familial obligations are optional, they are only constructed this way because of the nation’s ideal of the nuclear family, which is repeatedly depicted as harmful and damaging. For Rose, in particular, “family and nationality are obviously even more of a coincidence, especially since the household is also filled with a succession of fostered boys who belong to the family for a short while and then leave” (Hansson 223). While the novel illustrates the coincidental—and even optional—nature of family, the novel also suggests that the Irish nation’s familial ideal must be redefined in order to reflect societal changes and the emergence of alternative arrangements. In the novel, the traditional image of the nuclear family is disrupted in order to demonstrate the

variety of families and familial relationships in mid and late-twentieth century Irish society. Consequently, the novel does not promote family decline but a redefining of family that allows for more varied and complex family formations. Clearly, the concept of family is important to the novel and influences the character, particularly Maria and Rose, as they yearn for acceptance and attempt to establish relationships—even familial relationships—with friends and strangers. The twins' similar desires stem from separate understandings of their past, as well as their relationships with their families, while much of the angst the women experience is connected to their identities as motherless children. Although Maria has a step-mother and Rose has an adopted mother they both struggle to understand these voluntary relationships that stem from their mother's death. With various perceptions of their motherless status, the twins endeavor to comprehend their relationships with their surrogate mothers and the circumstances that cause them to feel alienated from their families and society.

The novel further emphasizes the happenstance nature of family when the twins accidentally meet in Dublin and finally seem to experience a sense of connection and belonging. As the twins question Berts for the first time, they “sat on the sofa, turning into each other, now and then, and then back out to the room. The fact that there were two of them made it somehow easy. They could be happy and sad at the same time. When one smiled the other let her eyes drift around the room” (254). Although the novel emphasizes the arbitrary nature of family throughout the novel, this scene demonstrates that there can be natural or biological connections between family members. While Maria does not feel any biological kinship with her mother's family, she does seem to have a natural connection with her twin sister that reveals the importance of establishing intimate and authentic connections with others. However, while Maria's and Rose's reconciliation answers many of their questions about their identity and sense

of self, it does not heal all of their psychological wounds. Thus, Maria continues to seek intimacy by sleeping around and Rose continues to seek out information about their biological mother. The juxtaposition of Anna, Maria and Rose in the final pages of the novel suggests the importance of the maternal figure upon Irish society and the narrow ways in which the Irish mother has been portrayed. In addition, I argue that *What Are You Like?* completes the important task of capturing the lost narratives of women and children who were punished by Ireland's restrictive social and political norms and integrates their stories into Ireland's narrative in order to demonstrate that the national ideals of the nuclear family and singular identity are broken. The arrangements and definitions of family are important to the novel as both Maria and Rose seek to understand their past and current familial relationships. However, the twins' reconciliation does not restore the nuclear family ideal but proves that the national ideal is reductive and damaging in its singularity. Through its depictions of womanhood and family, the novel suggests that singular national identity and norms negatively affect Irish women, particularly the twins' mother, Anna. Further reinforcing the novel's negative portrayal of the restrictions of singular national identity and the nuclear family is Berts's denial and admonishment that "there's no need to tell the whole world" (255) about the twins' separation and reconciliation. Ultimately the twins' reunion reveals that struggles with identity, exile and family are often interconnected symptoms of a restrictive society that depends upon expectations of a narrowly defined national identity.

The novel demonstrates that identity is constantly evolving as the twins seek to understand themselves and their relationships with others, particularly their dead mother. While Anna seems to epitomize the ideal of Irish womanhood—living her life within the home as wife and expectant mother—her narrative ultimately reveals the damaging effects of restrictive

identity ideals as she receives little medical care and is allowed to die in order to save her unborn children's lives. Anna and her daughters consequently become victims of the Irish nation because of the social and political norms that inform their separation. In particular, national iconographies of Irish women have exemplified images and narratives of a collective, shared identity that was based upon the belief that women belonged in the home as wives and mothers. When Anna is no longer able to uphold the national ideal she becomes expendable and is left to slowly die on the surgical table. Thus, Anna's narrative undermines the possibility of maintaining a common or singular national narrative. As the novel depicts the women's narratives, Anna, Maria and Rose all demonstrate the impossibility of realizing an essential or singular national identity because of the conflicting individual interpretations, memories and experiences that influence individual expectations and actions. The novel consequently emphasizes that identity formation is a constant process as it depicts the twins from multiple contexts and through the lenses of gender, sexuality and nationality. In addition, as the novel shifts from a different character's perspective, time periods and places, the process and fluidity of identity is highlighted.

The novel contends that individual identity and subjectivity are developed within multiple contexts that are not unitary but heterogeneous. By depicting the death of the mother figure, the novel also emphasizes that identity is not entirely self-directed because there are forces upon identity that originate outside the self, including the influences of heredity and environment. The novel extends determining social forces to include nationality and family as these two identity categories are constantly questioned and challenged by Maria and Rose. As a result, Maria's and Rose's searches for identity are not reconciled through genetics, or ethnic background. In fact, the novel exposes and contests prevalent Irish mythologies in order to reveal

the impossibility of realizing ethnic or national homogeneity (Hansson 218). While the women's desire to discover their missing history and "what they are like" is initiated by the loss of their mother, they also share the desire to understand this separation from their mother—and the perception that there are missing components of their identity—as well as the profound alienation they experience as they struggle to achieve a sense of self. Thus, the novel argues that singular national identity is reductive and damaging and demonstrates through its female characters that Irish identity is actually heterogeneous, constructed and fluid.

In depicting Maria's and Rose's familial relations and their desire to recuperate the past, the novel depicts a narrative of loss that exposes Ireland's history of lost women and children. Anna Delahunty's death demonstrates how Irish women were often betrayed by sovereign acts that sought to populate the nation-state—preferably with Irish heroes—and maintain the nuclear family, while also exposing Ireland's adoption industry that regulated unwed mothers, illegitimate children, and other unconventional family structures. The novel consequently suggests that Ireland maintained a culture of confinement through social and political structures that naturalized the state's authority over the social and domestic spheres. In particular, Ireland's social and cultural infrastructure confined women to the roles of wife and mother within the nuclear family while women who did not fulfill these societal expectations were frequently punished. Anna, Maria and Rose are all victimized by Irish society because of restrictive gender roles that prescribe and reinforce an essential or singular national identity. A symptom of the harmful effects of Irish national identity upon the women is their psychological breakdowns. Hansson explains, "The reason for these women's madness is [their] inability to live up to the identities prescribed for them, a need to break out of a cage that is thwarted and results in madness instead. In Enright's novel both Maria and Rose suffer nervous breakdowns, but the

reason is rather that there is no role available to them” (227). Maria and Rose need a role but the novel argues that singular national identity fails to fulfill this need and instead creates their exile and alienation. The twins are therefore caught between the notion of singular national identity and their own individual identities as they struggle to reconcile their desires and experiences with national and familial expectations.

In contrast to singular national identity, postnational identity allows the women to acknowledge and develop their familial connections without prescribing specific roles or experiences for them to conform to. The novel therefore emphasizes that identity can be multiple and evolving even as the twins struggle to realize this perspective and seem trapped in the same patterns of behavior. Even as the twins contend with their identities—Irish, English, female, daughter, sister—the novel moves the reader towards a postnational understanding of identity through the recovery of narratives from the past, the twins’ sense of individual identity, and the way in which the narrative emphasizes the multiplicity of identity in contemporary Irish society. However, while the reader understands the need for more complex understandings of Irish identity the twins fail to fully realize or live this idea as they continue to struggle with national and familial expectations of behavior. The novel consequently concludes that it is difficult to circumvent singular national identity and national social norms as the novel does not move beyond the Irish nation but emphasizes its harmful effects. Thus, the novel is not postnational but reflects the climate of late-twentieth century Ireland as it argues against singular models of national identity and advances the theories of postnational identity.



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