Definition: **O'Brien, Edna** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*


Summary Article: **O'Brien, Edna**

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As the author of 16 novels, six collections of short stories, a dozen plays, and several works of nonfiction, Edna O'Brien is one of the most prolific Irish writers. Yet, in spite of this steady flow of writing and her wide readership on both sides of the Atlantic, critical recognition has been slow in coming. Until the mid-1990s critics relegated her work to the realm of "women's fiction" and analyzed it for what it revealed of the author's own life and love affairs. More recently, however, critical reinterpretation of her work has led to its recognition as an important testimony to sociopolitical realities in twentieth-century Ireland and as a powerful representation of universal human desires and obsessions.

Edna O'Brien was born on December 15, 1930 in a small rural village in the west of Ireland. Being raised on a farm in this closed Catholic community left an indelible mark on the author, as did her experience of the unhappy marriage of her parents. O'Brien was educated at a convent school and later attended the Pharmaceutical College in Dublin. In 1952 she eloped with Czech Irish author Ernest Gébler. The couple settled in Wicklow before moving to London, where O'Brien still lives. The marriage ended in 1964 and O'Brien raised their two sons alone.

In 1960 Edna O'Brien came to fame with *The Country Girls*, a remarkable first novel that chronicles the development of two Irish girls, Kate and Baba, from childhood in a rural village, through religious indoctrination in a convent school, to the brink of adulthood and independence in Dublin. Critics in England and America praised the novel for its originality and appeal. Yet in Ireland the novel was banned by the Censorship Board for its profanity and its outspoken treatment of women's bodies and sexuality. The novel was followed by *The Lonely Girl* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964) and reissued with a new epilogue in 1987 as *The Country Girls Trilogy*. In the trilogy, a gradual darkening from novel to novel can be noticed as the girls' hopes and expectations turn to disillusionment and despair.

The most remarkable feature of the trilogy is the opposition and interplay of the romantic, submissive, and naive Kate and the irreverent, opportunistic, and funny Baba. While Kate is struggling with the impossible ideals of Irish femininity, Baba radically rejects these ideals but is equally unable to realize a fulfilling sense of self. The trilogy thus offers a powerful critique of the limiting roles prescribed for women in literature and in life (Byron). Kate's romantic quest for wholeness and identity through love would become a familiar theme in O'Brien's fiction. In *August is a Wicked Month* (1965) and *Casualties of Peace* (1966) O'Brien also depicts young women with failed marriages who are having affairs in a doomed quest for emotional fulfillment and a stable sense of self. This quest can be traced to the original, prelapsarian unity with the mother, which the protagonists seek to regain through sexual union (Pelan). Yet, as Anita Brookner observed in *The Spectator* (Oct. 15, 1988), "no compensation for the
loss of the mother is possible ... all men in the world could not replace the original closeness.”

The sexual explicitness of these two novels further reinforced O’Brien’s reputation as “the Irish Colette,” a reputation that O’Brien to a certain extent consciously marketed in readings and interviews. Yet, with the formal and narrative experimentation of her next three novels, O’Brien also sought to prove that this image did not preclude a serious engagement with literature. Thus, the second-person narration of A Pagan Place (1970) has the unsettling effect of making the reader “a second player,” standing simultaneously inside and outside the fictional world (Herman 1994. Night (1972) is constructed as the interior monologue of Mary Hoolihan and abounds with intertextual references to the tradition of Irish femininity from Cathleen Ni Houlihan to Molly Bloom. Mary is also a descendant of Baba in The Country Girls in her rebellious rejection of what is “properly” feminine. Johnny I Hardly Knew You (1977), finally, is narrated by an unreliable narrator: a middle-aged woman who has murdered her younger lover. Love and loss, obsession and disappointment are again the main themes here, but they intersect with reflections on female power and control (D’hoker). In general, however, critics were not enthusiastic about O’Brien’s narrative experiments which did not seem to square with the received opinion of her as a spontaneous confessional writer.

By contrast, O’Brien’s short story collections of the 1960s and 1970s received far greater praise. The Love Object (1968) is a significant first collection in which O’Brien demonstrates her skill in penetrating the female psyche. Although set in different European countries, the collection is remarkably unified: all female characters are obsessed with a “love object” – a rug, a new sofa, an (older) lover – which promises a transformation of their lonely existence. While their inevitable disappointment can in part be blamed on the insensitiveness of the males these women pin their hopes on, it is also, as Schrank & Farquharson (21–2) have pointed out, the “working out of the emotional dialectic of the romantic in the absence of any social awareness or political consciousness.”

O’Brien’s next collection sports the nicely ironic title A Scandalous Woman: Stories (1974). For while the women in this collection may be called scandalous by their judgmental neighbors – or by the reader – the men are truly to blame. Backed up by a rigorously patriarchal system, they either turn women into sacrificial victims or cause their descent into madness, as in the title story of the collection. The tales in Mrs. Reinhardt and Other Stories (1978), Returning (1982), and Lantern Slides (1990) provide variations on these themes. All of these stories tend to be one or another of two types: urban stories in which an exiled, middle-aged Irishwoman is trying to cope with love and loss in a hostile environment, or rural stories of Irish childhood and adolescence. Recurrent themes in both types of stories are alienation and loneliness, the restrictions of patriarchal society and the love-hate relationship with the mother and the mother country – a theme that O’Brien also explored in her famous non-fiction work Mother Ireland (1976). Several of the stories also reveal the influence of Joyce in their depiction of individual and national paralysis and in their intertextual references to his work.

After the publication of Johnny I Hardly Knew You, O’Brien told the Paris Review that she felt she had “written all [she] wanted to say about love and loss and loneliness and being a victim and all that” and that she was now hoping to “develop, to enlarge” (Guppy 24, 26). The attempt to chart new territory proved difficult; the usually prolific author did not publish a new novel for 11 years. Nor did The High Road (1988) or Time and Tide (1992) really fulfill expectations, since these novels stage rather typical O’Brien heroines trying to come to terms with failed relationships. A relatively new element in The High Road is the lesbian relationship between the protagonist and her Spanish lover. While this affair initially promises a more fulfilling kind of love, it is brutally terminated by the conservative, patriarchal
powers of the Spanish village where the novel is set. *Time and Tide* is a moving exploration of motherhood, both in terms of the strong but debilitating mother–daughter bond and in terms of the daughter-as-mother who tries to cope with the loss of her grown-up sons.

A truly new departure in O'Brien's oeuvre was announced with *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), the first novel of her so-called trilogy of contemporary Ireland. This novel takes up the difficult topic of Irish nationalism as an IRA gunman from the North seeks shelter in the big house of a dying woman in the South. O'Brien treats both characters with remarkable compassion and insight and offers a nuanced view of the conflict. *Down by the River* (1996) deals with another issue dividing contemporary Ireland: abortion laws and the rights of women. It is based on the famous “X case” in which a young girl, pregnant as a result of rape, is barred from traveling to Britain for an abortion. *Wild Decembers* (1999) tackles the Irish obsession with the land as it traces the increasingly violent battle between Brennan and Bugler, two neighboring farmers. Although this novel, like so many in O'Brien's oeuvre, ends in death, the ending is not entirely negative. In fact, all three novels of the trilogy end on a tentative note of hope, as if O'Brien foresees a positive future for the island if only it can transcend its violent past (King 2000).

*In the Forest* (2002) continues in the line of the trilogy with O'Brien's reworking of a recent, traumatic event: the murder of a young woman, her son, and a priest by a madman. To the dismay of some critics and readers, O'Brien offers insight into the psychology of victim and murderer alike, suggesting that the latter is as much a victim of hypocrisy and neglect as the former in rural Ireland.

In *The Light of Evening* (2006), finally, O'Brien returns to one of the familiar themes of her fiction, the ambivalent relationship between mother and daughter. And she treats the theme with greater objectivity and understanding than ever before. If in earlier stories and novels, the narrative perspective – and the reader's sympathy – lay squarely with the daughter (Weekes 2006, *The Light of Evening* offers for the first time a full drawn and convincing portrait of the mother. The lives of both mother and daughter in *The Light of Evening* are clearly autobiographical and O'Brien has even drawn on the loving and admonishing letters her own mother wrote to her every week. This sensitive and moving account of two unhappy marriages makes one realize, in retrospect, how mistaken critics have been in calling O'Brien's earlier fiction, from *The Country Girls* to *Time and Tide*, "confessional." Still, even if this initial reception may have hampered the serious critical study of O'Brien's fiction, it also stands as an ironic testimony to the emotional honesty and lasting power of her work.

SEE ALSO: Censorship and the Novel (BIF); Feminist Fiction (BIF); Irish Fiction (BIF); Joyce, James (BIF)

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


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