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Edna O'Brien, 2009

<https://www.britannica.com/art/autobiography-literature>

“Edna O'Brien: An Interview With Maureen O'Connor”

Maureen O'Connor is the author of *The Female and the Species: The Animal in Irish Women's Writing* (2010); editor of *Back to the Future of Irish Studies: Festschrift for Tadhg Foley* (2010); co-editor, with Kathryn Laing and Sinéad Mooney, of *Edna O'Brien: New Critical Perspectives* (2006); and co-editor, with Lisa Colletta, of *Wild Colonial Girl: Essays on Edna O'Brien* (2006). Currently a lecturer at University College Cork, Ireland, O'Connor recently agreed to discuss Edna O'Brien with *Critical Inquiries Into Irish Studies* co-editor Elizabeth Redwine.

CIIS: You begin your wonderful “Edna O'Brien, Irish Dandy” piece with O'Brien's memory of seeing an elderly Maud Gonne in St. Stephens Green in the 1950s and being inspired to write. Can you reflect on O'Brien, Gonne, and female forms of Irish heroism?

O'Connor: From the beginning of O'Brien's career, and even before then, she has been fascinated by Irish female heroism, from the warrior queens of ancient legend to the everyday sacrifices of the rural housewife, who not only denies her own comforts for the sake of those around her, but, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, also continues to stubbornly maintain the possibility of a secret second self, a glamorous alter-ego who is not an impoverished drudge, but someone who appreciates and indulges in luxuries and lovely objects. In a contribution to the 2017 essay collection, edited by Rhona Richman Kenneally and Lucy McDiarmid, *The Vibrant House: Irish Writing and Domestic Space*, I have written about the significance of the cheap, yet precious objects that are kept in the never-used “good” rooms by the put-upon wives and mothers in O'Brien's fiction, the way that these objects comprise “a hidden history of small refusals to submit to patriarchal expectations of women's total self-abnegation in post-Independence Ireland” (201). These women are implicitly, and occasionally explicitly, linked to the legendary

Irish queens who also appear frequently in the fiction, including the novels *Time and Tide, Night* (1972), *The High Road* (1988), *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), and *Wild Decembers* (1999), as well as in numerous short stories. The self-conscious irony of O'Brien's juxtaposition of these fabled queens with contemporary characters deliberately underscores the humiliating narratives of damage, including physical abuse, endured by women under patriarchy. In *Some Irish Loving* (1979), a selection of Irish texts ranging from mythological cycle legends to contemporary work, in the introduction to "The Female" section, O'Brien half-humorously remarks that "considering their background I am surprised that all Irish women are not lying down on railway tracks uttering and wailing ejaculations for the coming train" (148). That background includes the early myths of "devouring women," which she realizes are "not peculiar to the Irish race, although those early queens Deirdre, Gráinne and Maeve merrily wrought treason, crime, havoc and disaster in the wake of their wilful lovings. . . . Woman as temple and sewer is true for all male thinking and her roles as sorceress, sow, enchantress, and she-devil is well and fulsomely propagated" (147). Historical figures are also of significance to O'Brien, from Gonne and Markievicz back to Eileen O'Leary, subject of the 1986 *New York Times* article, "Why Irish Heroines Don't Have to Be Good Anymore," quoted in the article of mine your question referenced, in which O'Brien regrets the passing of "the glorious tradition of fanatic Irish writing which flourished before sanctity and propriety took over" (13), a tradition she defines as beginning with O'Leary's 1773 lament for her dead husband. The act of writing frankly as an Irish woman, where and when she has done so, places O'Brien in this heroic tradition.

CIIS: How do you think O'Brien's view of Ireland as woman counters/continues the traditions of Cathleen ni Houlihan, Dark Rosaleen, and the Shan Von Vocht?

O'Connor: I read O'Brien's recourse to the traditional figuration of Ireland as woman—most famously in *Mother Ireland*—as an indictment of the way in which patriarchal Roman Catholic Ireland treats women, and especially mothers, rather than an entirely enthusiastic endorsement of the cliché. In that famous *Mother Ireland* opening paragraph, she says that "Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare" (1), not the most flattering catalogue of identities, though it includes Rosaleen. Irony is a significant element in nearly everything O'Brien writes, alive as she is to contradiction and paradox in general, and especially when it comes to ideals of Irish womanliness, culminating in the oxymoronic paragon of virgin mother. None of this is to suggest that she does not see Ireland as similar to the much beloved mother. Her 2006 novel, *The Light of Evening*, is dedicated, "For my mother and my motherland." Mothers and the motherland are objects of deep, "umbilical" (to use her own word in *Mother Ireland*) attachment, but also frustration and regret, as the love they inspire is instrumentalized to cultivate and maintain repressive regimes of control, especially control of women, body and mind. O'Brien has a writerly susceptibility to the evocative symbol, yet she is never seduced away from her truth-telling imperative, remaining always, beneath the lyricism, brutally honest. Some of this feminized imagery of Irish identity can be reclaimed to symbolize female empowerment.

CIHS: Do you have thoughts on O'Brien as the Irish writer in exile, living in London all these years with her imagination still deeply rooted in Ireland?

O'Connor: Like her literary idol, James Joyce, O'Brien has claimed to need to move out of Ireland in order to write about her homeland rather than be destroyed by it. She has also often commented on the impact of her childhood environment—the nurturing, inspiring beauty of the natural world as well as the emotional, physical deprivations and even cruelties she endured—as crucial to the development of her imagination and creative sensibilities. In this context, she describes herself as “sunken” in her earliest experiences and sensations. The fact of her living principally in London since 1958 (despite frequent and extended visits to Ireland, where she owned a second home for a number of years) has often provided ammunition for those critics who accuse O'Brien of being out of touch with the country. Her state-of-the-nation novels of the turn of the twenty-first century (*Down by the River*, *House of Splendid Isolation*, *Wild Decembers*, *In the Forest*) were often dismissed on these grounds. A prominent Irish feminist (whom I will not name), in conversation, derided *Down by the River* as absurd and melodramatic when it first appeared, telling me that the incest in the novel couldn't happen these days, because of Childline! (Childline is a 24-hour help line for children experiencing abuse, run by the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children). This academic seemed determined to ignore the fact that—apart from the incest—the novel was based on real events, not to mention the reality of domestic sexual abuse suffered by Irish children every day, despite the existence of a telephone number they can ring. What O'Brien has always been guilty of, in the eyes of some Irish critics and other officials, is exposing shameful truths, such as the reality of Magdalene laundries and mother and baby homes, which have appeared in her fiction since at least *August is a Wicked Month*, published in 1965, in which a character describes herself as having “been brought up to believe in punishment; sin in a field and then the long awful spell in the Magdalen scrubbing it out, down on her knees getting cleansed” (27). One of the dangers of remaining in Ireland for O'Brien would be a loss of confidence and support, which she needed in order to keep telling the truth as she has bravely continued to do to the present day. O'Brien was not appreciated or supported by “official” Ireland—despite always having numerous champions in the Irish literary world—until the twenty-first century, when she began to win Irish literary awards and receive positive reviews in the Irish press.

CIHS: O'Brien has published many collections of short stories and won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award in 2011 for the collection *Saints and Sinners*. As Frank O'Connor wrote in his influential 1962 study of the short story genre, *The Lonely Voice*, “Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society . . . [and] as a result there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel—an intense awareness of human loneliness . . . The novel can still adhere to the classical concept of a civilized society, of man as an animal who lives in a community, . . . but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community—romantic, individualistic, and intransigent” (18-21). How has O'Brien contributed to the Irish short story tradition defined by O'Connor?

O'Connor: Loneliness as the defining experience of the human condition is certainly a theme running through O'Brien's short stories. The closing sentences of her 1982 story, "Conner Girls" expresses this clearly: "I realized that by choosing his world I had said goodbye to my own and those in it. By such choices we gradually become exiles, until we are quite alone" (45). While O'Brien can be seen as providing a signal example of O'Connor's "lonely voice" theory of the short story, I would argue that the romantic trope of ruggedly individualistic, defiant outsider evoked by O'Connor does not quite map onto the lonely exiles of O'Brien's short fiction. The protagonists of her short fiction are undeniably heroic in their loneliness, but their loneliness does not speak to intransigence, as much as to a longing for community, a dedication to the idea of community, even if they are rejected by it. They are not consciously opting for or nurturing an outsider experience. For example, Curly, the young man in O'Brien's 2011 story "Inner Cowboy," is an outsider, a bit slow, too sensitive, and too devoted to his granny to be accepted by the macho men in the quarry where he works or to initiate the kinds of relationships he craves. Nevertheless, he feels a deep connection to everyone and everything around him, so much so, that he is willing to sacrifice his own comfort and possibly his own life—the story leaves his cause of death ambiguous—to be of service to those who are relying on him as well as to strangers (when he reports the cover up of an environmental accident) and even animals in distress. Another story from the *Saints and Sinners* collection, "Shovel Kings," is an even more poignant portrait of, again, male loneliness, the recollections of an elderly London labourer who left Ireland as a young man and who, after a failed attempt to return "home," realizes he is hopelessly exiled, marooned, even. Like Curly, he longs for connection and community. Without these things, his life has dwindled to insignificance. In contrast to this short story experience, in the novel, *The Little Red Chairs* (2015), Fidelma can only become a force for change in the world, creating a kind of international community of refugees, by becoming one herself, by exiling herself from the only community she knew for decades and accepting the painful isolation of an outsider identity, a more "romantic," perhaps paradoxically communal iteration of possibility for loneliness as a conscious, heroic choice.

CIIS: How do you think the *Country Girls* trilogy shifted the terrain for writers and readers – male and female – in Ireland?

O'Connor: The list of Irish writers, male and female, who have credited O'Brien with granting them a freedom to tackle difficult subjects and expose the raw and painful elements of the Irish experience, is a very long one. That freedom that was not widely available to writers across class and gender before she led the way, began with the *Country Girls* trilogy. Some significant names include Colum McCann, Donal Ryan, Eimear McBride, Martina Devlin, June Caldwell, Anne Enright, Frank McGuinness, Dermot Bolger, Catherine Dunne, Alan McMonagle, Louise O'Neill, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Sean O'Reilly, Danielle McLaughlin, Claire Keegan, and Louise Nealon. Every one of the writers named here have testified in one way or another to the crucial, enabling legacy of O'Brien's work. O'Brien has not only written about controversial subjects in her fiction and withstood the ensuing critical attacks but has also written serious journalism and opinion pieces about such subjects, including her outspoken objection to the 1983 amendment to the constitution, known as the "eighth" amendment, that guaranteed the

unborn the “right to life” regardless of the risk to the mother, subsequently repealed by popular referendum in 2018. Despite her erstwhile reputation for writing disposable women’s romance fiction, she has been serious from the first, involved since the 1960s in campaigns, for example, against the atom bomb, the Vietnam war, and the treatment of republican prisoners during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. She has provided an example for Irish writers of standing up for artistic integrity while granting a voice to the voiceless and linking the cultural to the political.

CHHS: Sophie Hillan writes that “it may prove to be the case that Edna O’Brien is utterly in touch, under the guise of near-magical realism, with the very issues that still lie at the heart of Irish life. . . sectarian violence, sexual repression, and the land” (144). It seems that since *Country Girls*, O’Brien has increasingly turned from her own autobiography as inspiration to contemporary history. How do you see this shift in her trilogy of contemporary Ireland: *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), *Down by the River* (1996), and *Wild Decembers* (1999)?

O’Connor: I would add *In the Forest* to this list of what I see as state-of-the nation novels that are arguably the best of her career. The outrage ignited by these novels recalls the furor over *The Country Girls*, but as vociferously as these novels were objected to by some Irish commentators, by the late twentieth-century, it had become much more difficult to deny the truthfulness of the representation of Irish culture, public discourse, and politics, especially the impact of the political on the personal. Discussions often focus on the sensational aspects of these novels—murder, incest, rape—but what is most remarkable about these stirring works is the new emotional depths O’Brien touches in a startling, troubling sympathy newly extended towards the most unsympathetic of characters. As she has said in interviews, raising boys gave her new insights into the male experience, which had been so predominantly negative in its impact on her as a girl and young woman. These novels painfully, vividly dissect the disastrously ramifying damage done by the kind of isolation discussed above and the brutality of masculinist technologies of warfare and manliness (what we now call “toxic masculinity”), and rampant institutionalization of the poor and vulnerable, a truly shameful legacy that Ireland is still only partially, reluctantly coming to terms with. There are still victims of industrial schools, mother and baby homes, the Magdalene laundries, and the once-widespread practice of symphysiotomies, for example, who have yet to receive minimal or any reparation or recompense. Ireland is, as ever, struggling to catch up with O’Brien. The appearance of this kind of fiction might be connected to the issue of exile I mentioned earlier. It may have taken this long for O’Brien to write her way out of her own rich and insistent past, or to discover, by “returning” to Ireland in these novels (though the country has remained a consistent setting for plays or short fiction throughout her career), new applications and contexts for those profoundly shaping personal experiences.

CHHS: How do you see the convergence of elements of folktale and the contemporary history of conflict in her 2016 novel *The Little Red Chairs*?

O'Connor: As I noted previously, myth and folklore have always featured in O'Brien's work, not just Irish bodies of lore, but European fairy tales and Greek mythology. In O'Brien's fiction, mythology, fairy tales, and folklore offer powerful alternative systems for organizing knowledge while simultaneously testifying to the ingrained nature of binarized thinking and hierarchical, taxonomic impulses. As Angela Bourke has demonstrated, fairy and folklore in Ireland historically have been put to sophisticated social uses. In discussing the appearance of fairy and folk tales in contemporary feminist fiction and poetry, Bourke has observed that such narratives, in both their traditional and adapted forms, "carry the potential to express profound truths and intense emotions" and "are particularly well-suited to the expression of ambivalence and ambiguity" (200). In his first appearance, the character of Dragan in *The Little Red Chairs*, definitely evokes a "big bad wolf" kind of threat, as well as Dracula-like qualities (not only the echo in his name), Dracula being a recurring folkloric figure in O'Brien's writing. Dracula, like Heathcliff, another familiar masculine type in the fiction, personifies the masculine romantic ideal as both protean and violently threatening, a perverse source of his appeal. About her own infatuation with Dracula, O'Brien confessed in a 2005 interview with Susan O'Grady Fox, "When I think of it in retrospect, obviously it was complete romantic masochism." However fairy tales, as Susan Brownmiller has observed, "are full of a vague dread, a catastrophe that only seems to befall little girls" (343). They can enchant women into unrealistic expectations and complicity in the perpetuation of their subordination. Jack Zipes observes of modern European fairy tales, they have "caused nothing but trouble for the female object of male desire and have also reflected the crippling aspect of male desire itself" (80). To return to the topic of toxic masculinity, as O'Brien is fully aware, the theme of patriarchal violence extends from the domestic to the international, a theme endemic to folklore and central to nationalist and global struggles for dominance and possession and of painful relevance to contemporary geopolitical realities.

CIIS: O'Brien's *Country Girl* memoir from 2012 begins with the question from her mother: "Are you or are you not a good girl?" How do you think her memoir tracks how questions like these haunt writing women?

O'Connor: It is interesting to note that this question haunts the memoir as well as *The Light of Evening*, a novel that draws heavily on letters written to O'Brien over the years by her own mother. The mother, as both an individual presence and a cultural influence, certainly haunts O'Brien, a version of Woolf's "Angel in the House" who has to be killed by the women writer in order for her to express herself without constraint. The daughter who becomes distant and neglectful recurs in a number of O'Brien's texts, such as the memorable 1978 story "A Rose in the Heart," in which the narrator, like Eleanor in *The Light of Evening*, misses her mother's death and funeral, returns to the family home, longing for a "sign" or "murmur" of her mother, but "instead a silence filled the room and there was a vaster silence beyond as if the house itself had died or had been carefully put down to sleep" (140). The life-long struggle to disconnect from the much-loved mother, specifically as a carrier of admonitions to practise "lady-like" propriety and modesty, is a theme throughout O'Brien's work.

CIHS: For O'Brien's most recent novel, *Girl*, from 2014, she traveled to Nigeria and interviewed young women survivors of Boko Haram abductions. This novel read as both a departure and a continuation for O'Brien. How do you think this novel tells a new kind of story for her? O'Brien began that novel as a response to a newspaper article about a girl found wandering with a baby after escaping from Boko Haram. What do you make of O'Brien's focus on the current moment in her writing about these girls? How is this novel a continuation of her earlier themes and a departure?

O'Connor: O'Brien's last two novel are astonishing testimonials to O'Brien's artistic integrity, her unwavering determination to challenge herself and strike out into new territory. In *The Little Red Chairs* and *Girl* she inhabits experiences and sensibilities far removed from her own, with varying levels of success, perhaps, but never as an act of disrespect. Her powers of sympathy are vast and intense. As she has told me over the years, writing a book like *In the Forest*, for example, a novel that provoked outrage in some quarters, because a child-murderer was treated sympathetically, leaves her shattered, completely drained. *Girl* explores, in yet another agonizing variety, O'Brien's most enduring theme: the struggle for women to realize full personhood under patriarchal domination. Reviews of *Girl* echo this reading of the novel's place in O'Brien's oeuvre; Alex Clark, for example, notes the novel's "sense that women will be marked out for control and punishment wherever they are and in whatever circumstances or historical context," while Terence Rafferty's review forestalls any possible objections to the text's subject matter, its potential to "stir up a bit of a scandal, that's something she has spent her whole long career learning to live with. She'll survive, in that room of her own where the words come to her, out on the rim with all her lonely girls" (38).

CIHS: The aging Irish writer has become its own trope; how do you see the way O'Brien has written about age and death? (I read her describe her grave in Ireland beautifully in a recent *Guardian* interview.)

O'Connor: In the prologue to her memoir O'Brien recalls a visit to a National Health clinic, where she is told that "with regard to your hearing you are a broken piano" (ix). Nothing is too grim to be rendered lyrical, human, and even humorous. The most heartbreaking and sustained fictional treatment of aging and death in her work is the novel *The Light of Evening*, in which Dilly, a character based on O'Brien's mother, is dying of cancer, waiting to see her daughter—a famous novelist—and remembering her youth, her brother's torturous death at the hands of the British during the War of Independence, her own flight to New York, her early romances, and her disappointing marriage on returning to Ireland. *House of Splendid Isolation* is another text in which the aging woman is tormented by memories and regret, as well as loneliness and feelings of irrelevance and impotence. However, death is a constant in O'Brien's fiction, whether it is the death of past generations through famine and war, the death of children in accidents, the contemporary deaths of victims of violence, or the deaths of animals. Death is implicated in female embodiment, intimately, inextricably linked to childbirth, a reality that contributes to the re-mythologizing of the Irish female we've been discussing, which represents the woman/the mother/the land itself as at once victim of violent masculine subjugation, and an implacable force, threatening in its intimacy with both birth and

death, two ultimately inseparable experiences. Death both determines and undermines the self in O'Brien's work, a dynamic that, crucially, enables the liminality essential to creative imagination. O'Brien's handling of illness, decay, and death is really fascinating, complex and sophisticated. I have included some observations about this aspect of her fiction in a 2015 *Women's Studies* article about Irish women's writing, and it is the subject of a chapter in my forthcoming book in which I discuss her "humility about the limits of conventional subjectivity and human consciousness when confronting death and abjected otherness, even in its most 'revolting' forms, including bodily waste, grants imaginative insight and freedom, however forbidden and improper." O'Brien's bravery and matter-of-factness about mortality, including her own, are oddly comforting and inspiring. I think it is part of her astonishing selflessness, her enormous generosity, that has given us this magnificent body of work.

CIIS: What do you see or recommend as the future direction for O'Brien scholarship and criticism? How would you direct or advise a Ph.D. student writing a dissertation on O'Brien today?

O'Connor: Academic work has only begun to explore the possibilities for fully assessing O'Brien's oeuvre. So far, feminist psychoanalytic analyses have dominated the early serious scholarship, for obvious reasons, but I have more recently seen, in students' work particularly, from undergraduate to PhD, an interest in exploring the ecocritical and ecofeminist dimensions of her complex and sustained engagement with the natural world. My forthcoming book on her fiction brings to bear a number of ecocritical discourses including feminist new materialism, reflecting my own theoretical interests. I can imagine future examinations of power and class in addition to the many discussions of gender and sexuality that have already been undertaken. Her formal experimentation has also inspired insightful readings, but I feel a great deal more of that kind of analysis, that moves away from thematic preoccupations, could yield fascinating, fruitful results. It has only rarely been recognized that the most powerful of O'Brien's writing pushes language and genre into unconventional shapes. In addition to appreciating and judging her texts as significant works of literature, I feel the work will stand as important historical documentation of a time and place that only barely remains in memory. As many commentators, from Philip Roth to Anne Enright, have noted, O'Brien's attention to and painstaking recreation of detail is sharp and singularly evocative. In a 2015 review of *The Little Red Chairs* for *The Irish Times*, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne observed that "her most distinctive talents are her astonishingly acute powers of observation and her ability to describe in the most simple and appropriate words people, things and places, which gives her writing its uniquely beautiful texture – rich, sensuous, alive and colourful." In other words, she will potentially provide a rich resource for future work not only for literary scholars, but also for historians and social scientists. My core advice to anyone writing a dissertation on O'Brien would be to remain as open and receptive as the fiction is to new horizons of interpretation.

CIIS: Thank you so much.

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