

**Hollow Her Out: Gendered Corporeality and Violence  
In Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River***

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## Abstract

This thesis combines literary representation of hollow feminine bodies with contemporary cases of patriarchal authority over woman's bodies. *Attorney General v. X* [1992], a legal case reflected in O'Brien's *Down by the River* (1998), outlines control Irish courts hold over women (O'Reilly 131). Notions of feminine bodies as hollow, or as vessels for cultural, political, religious and filial meaning are long-standing. Their effects on female body identity are ultimately excessive. I outline how political and religious constructions divide experience by separating the feminine body from feminine identity. Aligning feminine insides with Ireland *herself*, the thesis illustrates entrenched ideologies of Irish feminine insecurity over *possession* of self and body.

Ireland is an interesting case because inseparable politics and religion create unavoidable, violent, and forceful oppression of woman's agency. Colonization of femininity further perpetuates the repressive culture of gendered corporeality, and validates masculine authority's possession of bodies as vehicles for cultural transference.

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And, for X, whose ordeal conceives freedom, even though her identity has been crossed out.

## Introduction

“...and here we see another phase in that oscillation which marks the relation of man to his female. He loves her to the extent that she is his, he fears her insofar as she remains the other; but it is as the fearsome other that he seeks to make her more profoundly his...”

Simone de Beauvoir,  
*The Second Sex*

The notion of the feminine body as a reproductive vessel is not new. In *The Republic*, Plato discusses legislating “more abundant permission to sleep with women, [in order] to have as many children as possible” (Grube 121). In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir laments that woman is the vessel for the image of her male counterpart; “she is the mirror in which the male, Narcissus-like, contemplates himself: he bends over her in good or bad faith” (185). Rousseau writes that “the husband should have the right to oversee the conduct of his wife, because it is important for him to make certain that the children he is forced to acknowledge and raise belong to no one but himself” (Ritter 59-60). For Rousseau, a successful public economy is dependant on a private economy that dictates success through the birth of many children, “excluding [woman] from... primacy”; she loses power because of the hindering “indispositions peculiar to the woman” (59). Her role as the carrier of children debars her as a legitimate subject and authority, and she becomes simply a vessel for the production of family success, and the progression of the community. Mary Wollstonecraft points out that the “puritan reformers, good religious fundamentalists, encouraged submissiveness in women,

passivity, dependence on men, limited education, a general containment and restriction of the 'weaker vessel'" (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* xxxi). Freud suggests, among other offences, that women's bodies are endowed with characteristics that make "them tolerable as sexual objects" (954). In each of these diachronically diverse examples, the feminine body is reduced to a hollow vessel that holds no value save that which is garnered by its ability to produce children, or one that validates the existence or image of a related male; woman's body is a cultural carrying case for social meaning and identity construction as opposed to an element of humanity linked to an individual person. Her identity is gendered beyond her sex, and the female body becomes a possession not of the individual, but of the culture and family within which it exists. All of her roles within the community and the family revolve around the fact that she is female.

With the feminine body so wound up in the politics of the family—childbirth is a major factor in the success and continuation of the family—and with the family representing the moral state of the larger community, women's corporeal autonomy is sacrificed. In Ireland, a country both deeply committed to its Catholic roots and motivated by its on-going struggle against colonization, feminine bodies suffer the consequences. Irish abortion history and legislation fortify the metaphorical regard of women's bodies as hollow and commodified. Even though there was no explicit constitutional prohibition against abortion—that is, the unborn foetus possessed no rights as an individual under the constitution—it has been a criminal offence prosecuted under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act (Mullally 89).

Northern Ireland possesses its own abortion issues. According to the Northern Ireland Abortion Law Reform Association, the Offences Against the Person Act only

offered exception in cases where a pregnant woman's life would be endangered by maintaining pregnancy, and this—initially provided for under England's 1929 Infant Life Preservation Act—only after the foetus reaches twenty-eight weeks of development. Under the amended 1861 Act, abortion during the first twenty-seven weeks of pregnancy is not provided for legally (Northern 41). In 1945, Britain extended the Infant Life Preservation Act to Northern Ireland creating a gap from conception to twenty-eight weeks where there is no legal provision on abortion. In 1967, England passed abortion laws for England, Scotland and Wales allowing abortions for both “social and medical reasons” yet excluded the colony of Northern Ireland (Northern 40). Ambiguities in the legal systems affecting both Éire (the Republic of Ireland) and Northern Ireland translate to abortion issues not only between the two states, but also the island as a whole.

In 1983, however, amendments to the Irish Constitution's Article 40.3.3 granted the unborn foetus new rights to life (Mullally 89), resulting in an unconditional ban on abortion. In 1981, the development of the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign (PLAC) mainly by Catholic Right groups, had pushed for the amendment and continued their work to maintain the 1983 decision in order to protect the idea of Irish children from what they saw as the violent instruments of the British colonialists (90). According to Mullally, colonial activity pressured members of Irish communities to try to preserve the integrity of a sort of archetype of Irishness by resisting anything affiliated with or representational of the colonial English (90). Further augmenting the division of the already-split Irish population was the Protestant Church's opposition to the PLAC, arguing that upholding any law based upon the Catholic Right would be exclusionary and infringe upon the rights of Irish citizens of other faiths. Despite this internal civil conflict,



the success of the PLAC ultimately reached great heights for the protection of the unborn, and all at the expense of limitations upon “the scope of women’s reproductive autonomy” (90). Anti-abortion groups overtook student groups and clinics, even demanding the prevention of the distribution of brochures and information on abortion outside of Ireland (90). The intensity of this activity led to High Court injunctions and the famous Protocol No. 17, designed to block any interference with constitutional abortion issues by the proposed Maastricht Treaty and Ireland’s ensuing membership into the European Union (91-2). The Irish government drafted and passed Protocol No. 17 without parliamentary consultation, in order to protect Ireland’s constitutional prohibition on abortion regardless of any laws governing the European Union (92).

Edna O’Brien’s *Down by the River* outlines Ireland’s debates between pro-choice and anti-abortion activists, and is based on the 1992 case *Attorney General v. X*, in which the Supreme Court addressed the rights of a fourteen-year-old girl who was raped, became pregnant, and travelled to England for an abortion (Mullally 92). X’s highly publicized case re-ignited the foetal rights debates of the early ‘80s, and similarly renewed dialogue surrounding maternal rights in terms of travel and control over female reproductive processes (O’Reilly 129-32). The Attorney General secured injunctions demanding X return to Ireland without her abortion, and additionally, limiting her ability to travel for a period of nine months (O’Reilly 126). According to Mullally, national and international debate raged over the conflicting rights of the mother and the rights of the unborn child (92). O’Reilly notes that Irish courts are responsible for protecting constitutional rights, but also that there are no laws in place to direct or guide the practice of rights guardianship particularly when two parties’ rights are conflicting (131). The

objectification of the feminine body through the imposition of limitations on the women's rights contributes to the hollowing because the community dictates not only the use of the body for procreation, but also women's ability to partake in the decisions regarding that use. X is not autonomous because her culture forces her to remain in the space where her body is not under her own control. Ireland is X's prison.

In O'Brien's novel, the tragedy of a young Irish girl whose father repeatedly rapes and consequently impregnates her encapsulates the hollow feminine. Social and religious regulating of bodies results in the individual body's loss of power. Removal of power or autonomy situates bodies in positions of vulnerability and exposure to manipulation by the other. O'Brien's hollowing is literal; in a rage, upon hearing of her pregnancy, James attacks Mary and attempts to empty her of the child with the broken end of a broomstick. The violence against her both during her rapes and with the broomstick represents the most intense moments when Mary MacNamara's hollow feminine body is used as a carrying case not for her own individual identity, but for that of family and country. The sovereign feminine entity—an individual who encompasses both her internal identity and her body—cannot exist because the political and religious economies do not permit feminine corporeal independence. Even though James's attack on Mary initially fails to destroy her baby, he is still attempting to claim the foetus as his own property. Through a lack of power and autonomy within the Irish religious and political situation, the hollow feminine remains a vessel to define meaning for the other, and as such exists in a gendered and ambiguous position that not only demands, but also creates, individual anonymity. Even amidst extensive media attention, Mary is anonymous, functional only to the degree that she symbolizes the homogeneous female body and the extreme

expectations upon her. Mary's name is not even her own because upon publicity of her case, the media refer to her only as Magdalene (O'Brien 186), who is also a contradictory feminine symbol of "lust, loyalty, belief, prostitution, repentance, beauty, madness, [and] sainthood" (Schaberg 81). With both public attention and anonymity, Mary transforms, in the eyes of her community, into a random feminine body, devoid of definitive humanity, and open to be both possession and disgrace to her father and to her country.

Highly political and religious debate over a woman's right to choose abortion, and as such maintain her own reproductive autonomy, reflects the interference of church and state upon women's rights. In order to perpetrate the control of reproduction—significant in a society with long-standing national insecurity and ambiguous identity ensuing from the remnants of colonial status—women, reduced by church and state to the symbols of femininity, emerge as identity-lacking bodies. Relating the body politic and the body religious back to these corporeal symbols of femininity establishes an economy of woman's sacrifice for the greater good of the community. National myth building and inconsistencies subsequent to the transition from pagan to Christian belief further the reification of the feminine body for cultural purposes. In *Down by the River*, the corporeal feminine exists empty of individual identity. As such, their possessive masculine counterparts discount both metaphorical and literal violence towards women as a safeguard for the moral systems of the culture.

According to Dana Hearne, the equation of women's issues with national issues in Ireland "is a deeply entrenched gender ideology" (110) that dates back to pre-Independence. She argues that pre-Independence Irish thought placed feminism as "anti-nationalist and a foreign import" (110) that unnecessarily progressed the colonial project.

Hearne notes that “radical feminist thinkers” embraced the problematic separation between the domestic and the public spheres, and disregarded the very Irish-national ideal that the “home was not a sphere apart but was inextricably bound up with the larger community” (100). Further stifling for women, there is the culturally ingrained belief that the greater needs of the ailing nation, under the confines of colonialism, are forever privileged over gender oppression and the actual needs or ambition of women (86). Compounding this oppression is the Irish dependence on a misogynistic Catholic Church as a marker separating Irish national identity from an imperial British identity. However, aligning women with the feminine nation may have the potential of addressing long-violated women’s rights concerns. Yet, perhaps this potential has seldom, if ever been realized to correct these violations. Patrick Keane suggests that this sort of long-standing equation between woman and country effectively situates the country as a feminine body and creates a sense of ambiguity over an individual’s motivation or intention:

When one’s nation is personified as beloved, mother, and muse—Dana, Éire, Erin, Fórla, Banba, Dark Rosaleen, the Shan Van Vocht, Cathleen ni Houlihan—she is a necessarily ambiguous figure: a triple goddess at once creative and destructive, benevolent and malign, nurturing and devouring. (7)

Because of this constructed ambiguity, the individual—or the nation—loses her own agency, and becomes open to every form of interpretation, judgment and control. Just as Ireland has been colonized and controlled, so is Mary as she awaits the judges’ decisions regarding her body and her fate.

According to Jeanette Shumaker, O’Brien often illustrates the notion of the sacrificial woman or the emulated martyrdom of “the suffering virgin” (185). She suggests that Irish women in particular strive to emulate the Madonna myth in which one

is either “a nun... a wife, mother, or ‘fallen woman’” (185). Shumaker attributes this desire to emulate the Virgin Mary to a common Irish feminine “loathing for her body” as an “inherently evil possession for which [she] must compensate” (186). The myth perpetuates culture’s perception and use of woman as a sexual commodity (186) and epitomizes the contradictory notion of the untouched body of the mother. O’Brien positions Mary simultaneously as active in her quest *not to be a mother* and as less active than those engaging in the act of virgin emulation. Her father denies her the role of virgin and she resists the socially expected role of mother for non-virgins. Regardless of her attempts for abortion and her hesitation to repent, Mary is perhaps more Madonna than the disesteemed Magdalene—both O’Brien’s Mary and Magdalene lost their social status in their communities—because the constructs act upon her body, just like the Virgin Mary, who is not afforded consent for the conception of her child by *the ultimate* religious authority. The masculine power uses her body as a vessel to the point of becoming fully the object, and as such, diminishing her agency. O’Brien never allows Mary to give in and speak the truth; she is never provided—by O’Brien—the opportunity to give her father up to the authorities, even at their own urging. Her only real moment of testimony is her letter to Luke that is not fully truthful, and never reaches him in time to allow him to help her (O’Brien 98). Her letter is a confession and an appeal for help.

Mary’s confession in the letter and the consequences for Luke are hazy. Upon his arrest, Luke provides the guards with the letter, but after his release he cries and O’Brien tells us: “He cannot yet bring himself to say that he is crying not for what they had done to him, but for what he did by letting them read the girl’s letter, and in the doing sullied himself” (177). He perceives that Mary “had done him wrong” (177), but the letter

functions to exonerate him of the baby's paternity. Her request for a place to hide from the authorities, or her inference that she will visit a doctor—perhaps for termination of the pregnancy—may implicate him, but he never actually takes on the role of accomplice to provide her sanctuary. His placement of blame as sullyng him is confusing; O'Brien is unclear if Luke's subconscious regret over exposing the letter is a result of his letting Mary down, or alternatively, of his feelings that she did so to him. O'Brien's use of ambiguity perhaps functions to assist the transformations of power, and in the transferences of power between individuals. Power may play out in the covert spaces improperly defined by the 'other', and as such, perceptions of the 'other' from either side are ultimately ambiguous.

Additionally, through extensive media attention, Mary transforms further into myth. She is, for the country, at once a symbol for "the suffering Irish female condition in general" (Shumaker 188) and for the notion that "woman as a sexual being is a monster... [with] inborn flaws" (192), as defined by the anti-abortion activists. O'Brien's use of ambiguous pronouns forces a state of confusion regarding the female character involved in any given situation. This lack of clarity of character creates a sense of anonymity for O'Brien's female characters. Women and their bodies are homogenized to the degree that all women are preserved or professed within a certain aura of the random female or hollow body. As a possession, female individuality, or internal identity does not really matter because of this placed inhumanity. When Mary's mother Bridget dies, O'Brien provides barely enough information to place her at her own death. The dead woman is anonymous at the moment of her death and ultimately could have been any of the women in the hospital ward (51). Bridget's death hollows her body, and results in the

loss of her feminine cultural potential rather than the loss of her individual existence.

The parallel between childbirth and death is prominent in the text. O'Brien often remarks on the mother / child relationships of beasts of burden: a "cow... demented because her calf had been taken away that morning" (28), the near death of a horse during birth, and the subsequent calling of the newborn foal, villain, by Mary's father (62-3) articulate not only the obvious link between mother and child, but also the close parallel between birth and death. There is a process of connection at separation, or at this moment of hollowing. Even Mary, during her extreme violation, is "cut off from every place else, and her body too, the knowing part of her body getting separated from what was happening down there" (4) because she experiences simultaneous connection and separation. The feminine entity splits into its parts and the internal identity disconnects from the body. Aligning the relationship of birth and death, and human mother and child with animals not only furthers the project of de-humanizing and de-individualizing women and their bodies, but also represents the death of the potential of cultural transference from mother to child. The biological role of the mother has played out, yet her role as cultural conveyor can be filled by any homogenized maternal figure.

Bridget's death forces Mary to become an object that contributes to both Irish patriarchal family structure and to the conflict over the right to abortion. Mary epitomizes family and state desire for the "control of women's sexuality, specifically in relation to reproductive issues and rights through the abortion debate" (Hearne 85-6). Mary's identity is consumed. Her body, as a sort of contradiction to pregnancy, is hollowed of subjectivity, replacing her individuality with the superstitious disgrace attributed to the feminine body by church and state. O'Brien illustrates disgrace upon traditionally

innocent female characters; a newborn infant, Mary, and Betty, a woman who has suffered numerous miscarriages, are all objects of an implied or attributed disgrace. Mary speculates that her baby sister “who only survived a few days... was buried in a grave a long ways off, as if there were some disgrace attached to her” (60). Similarly, after James attacks Mary with the broomstick, he “pulled the thing out and holding it at arm’s length like some poisonous totem he went off to bury it” (106). Disgrace functions to shed light upon superstitions of femininity as impure within the patriarchal culture. O’Brien connects the baby and the broomstick when they are both buried in order to weaken the poison they carry. Burying these so-called products of disgrace suggests the colonizing process creates disgrace to further dis-empower feminine potential and to progress the patriarchal control over women’s sexual and reproductive activity. The literal burying of identifying elements of femininity reflects a symbolic burying or hiding, by the patriarchal system, of feminine identity and taboo. Through the creation of superstitions, feminine bodies become vessels for disgrace, and women bear the weight of the subsequent punishment decreed by family or community. Betty Crowe’s inability to conceive or to carry a viable baby to term also places her within the sphere of superstition and disgrace. If a feminine body’s only purpose is to bear children in order to strengthen the family, and ultimately, the community, then a barren woman falls not only outside the reproductive system, but also outside of the culture’s productive system. She has no place within a family and as such no cultural place either. In this childless situation, Betty reverts back to the virginal role. Betty’s husband dies in order for Betty to be once again sexless; his continued existence would imply that Betty participates in sexual activity not resulting in the conception of children. She is, perhaps, punished with the death of her



husband because of being unable to provide children that would contribute to the perpetuation of the social order.

The body plays a significant role in the application of discipline. Discipline functions not only to punish individuals for stepping outside of boundaries, but also to create the very boundaries in which to contain the individuals. In *Down by the River*, penal boundaries govern, but imprinted upon the legal system are the cultural and religious boundaries that shape and influence that governance. The feminine body is a boundary in itself. Bodies must be—according to Foucault—either restricted, in terms of imprisonment, and subjected to other forms of physical constraint, or bodily alteration in terms of torture or even death. “The body... is caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions” (Foucault, *Discipline* 11). The body becomes the only site of punishment, regardless of the penal sentence, and because of the structure of the system, the restrained body itself—or the human within that body—loses its agency over the implications of punishment. The body is locked up—restrained as imprisoned, or constrained by social demand—to avoid being used as a tool for crime, suggesting an immense separation between physical body and internal identity. Foucault represents this lack of agency with a lack of liberty in which elements such as “rationing of food, sexual deprivation, corporal punishment, [and] solitary confinement” are a part (16). The courts sanction Mary to remain in Ireland for the duration of her pregnancy. The rulings against her are limits on her physical body and her right to freedom of movement. Foucault suggests that even in contemporary societies where bodily torture itself is condemned as inhumane, “there remains... a trace of ‘torture’” inherent in all punishment (16), in which the body suffers the punishment through “an economy of suspended rights” (11).

Foucault's concept of a trace of torture leads him to the notion of the tortured soul over the tortured body, and that imprisonment is more so a torture of the mind than necessarily pain infliction upon the body. "The expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations" to the point of "converting a soul" (16). O'Brien's women all exist on a daily basis within this Foucauldian notion of a trace of torture because they are the targets of a patriarchal economy of suspended rights. Woman's femininity is her prison and her punishment. In order for the Irish state to enforce its political and religious imperatives upon the population, woman herself must be placed into a state of ongoing restriction and punishment. Her crime, indeed, is solely her feminine body.

When Foucault writes of the body of the condemned, he suggests the body plays such a role because "the body... [is] the only property accessible" (25) on which to assert any power:

This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force for production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as a labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated and used); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. (*Discipline* 25-6)

Of course, this dual function privileges societal obligations over any sense of individual accord. The goal is this political investment, and, according to Foucault, there must be a level of secrecy: "the preliminary investigation was carried out 'as diligently and secretively as may be'" (35) only to be later made visible. In this case the system functions to create tensions that at once restrict all access to the feminine body, but still demand that the same body be targeted as a primary source for social, religious, and

penal construction of meaning. The elements of the paradigm exist as ingrained within the culture and govern the relationships between masculine and feminine bodies to the degree that they appear not to exist at all. Mary's own attempt at any form of physical agency deteriorates to the point that she "was trying to have no body, to elude it" (O'Brien 34).

The negation of the feminine entity—the sort of primordial unity between the integrity of the feminine body and the internal self's identity—represents an inherent flaw in the ways in which political and religious systems are able to appropriate the unique physical capabilities of the feminine body. Irish systems are particularly oppressive as evidenced not only by the nation's long history of debate over abortion and women's reproductive rights, but also by the degree of intensity of that debate. Subsequently, a society that unconditionally prohibits abortion, enacts legislation that restricts travel for pregnant women seeking abortions, and sacrifices the mother for the possible good of the unborn is one that treats the feminine body as a vessel for cultural preservation and vitality. Entrenched ideologies resist change and, as such, feminine bodies become the fundamental element for valuing woman and contribute to the homogenizing and dehumanizing processes that oppress her.

# 1

## **Hollowing the Feminine Body: The Madonna Myth and the Feminine Trinity**

To see the feminine body as hollow is at the least objectifying, but the act of aggressively hollowing the body for the purpose of social, cultural, and political *attaché* is fundamentally violent. Religiously concocted myth normalizes and actualizes the reification of woman to facilitate the use and control of her reproductive elements for social benefit. Removing or taking possession of the feminine insides detaches the individual from her body and consequently limits her control and agency over the physical processes her body naturally allows her. Cultural and social regulation concern female reproductive rights, yet are created by this imaginary dissection between a woman's internal self and her body. In *Down by the River*, feminine characters suffer great loss of self-government and sovereignty because of patriarchal and religious acts of hollowing. Attacks on the female body are physically violent. Removing entrenched ideologies from the collective mindset is difficult, and as such, social belief systems become psychologically and emotionally acculturating. In Ireland, the social expectation for women to meet impossible standards of a religiously constructed Madonna Myth or Feminine Trinity compounds feminine identity conflicts.

The frenzied and brutal attack on Mary's pregnant body at the hands of her father foregrounds the lack of patriarchal regard for the feminine body. He begins with a physical assault and kicks her "recklessly" (O'Brien 105). Mary remembers a similar beating on her mother, in the same spot, as if upon her mother's death Mary's own body

replaces Bridget's body. For James, Mary's body contains the impurity of the other man, "the tinker," on whom he knowingly misplaces blame for Mary's pregnancy (105). He demands her obedience and orders her upstairs where "he will de-fuck that bastard out of her" (105). James's belief he can remove the sexual act and its possible products from her body illustrates his subconscious subscription to the patriarchal ideal of the feminine body as a carrying case from which social elements may be simply packed or un-packed. His violence with the broken broomstick plays out on her body as if she were a non-human object. Even Mary "believes the implement was going right through her and out the crown of her head, like the chimney sweeper's brush but bloodied instead of sooted" (106). He thrusts the broomstick and makes certain "to push it inside and wind and re-wind" till Mary "could hear her insides slushing, like an over-full bucket" (106). She relates the pain to her entire being as "all wound, only wound" to the point where "[she] lay there, half gone, her mind a semi-nothingness" after the violence subsided (106). She feels "the madness [pass] from him then and into her" (106) through the broomstick, as if he somehow violently bestows upon her body his patriarchal beliefs and by doing so, condemns her internal belief paradigm to conflict with social expectation.

Attempting to exist within a system based on the needs and experiences of the 'other' generates for women, an incompatible gulf between self and society. In "A Sadistic Farce," Ailbhe Smyth suggests that Irish women have been reduced, by patriarchal legal language and structure, "to a half-life, or have disappeared out of life altogether" (9) and that "[w]omen's bodies, women's right to bodily integrity, [and] women's freedom to control... [their own] reproductive processes are caught in an impenetrable, materially meaningless web of male-generated words" (7-8). Mary feels

after her first rape that she “half-died” (O’Brien 4). The violence against her physical body alters her existence and becomes the moment of her awareness of social and cultural dissection between her body and her self. The sanctioned and systemic patriarchal control over a woman’s body and her reproductive elements—in terms of both personal violence, and legal and religious infliction—removes all sense of her body as her own. She becomes essentially an object whose body belongs not to herself, but to the state, or a religious or filial community. The transference of her insides leaves her hollow; she is nothing more than a vessel to implement the reproductive needs and desires of the patriarchal community within which she exists. Her autonomy is thus sacrificed for the perpetuation of the community’s existing system, culture, and structure.

O’Brien introduces the notion of the hollow body with an episode in which Sister Aquinas, a female symbol for Ireland’s repressive and possessive religion, takes hold of a found ladybird and declares: “It’s lucky... It’s ours” (48). O’Brien suggests that Aquinas believes that she has actually saved the ladybird from being “prey to every kind of disease, [and from] predators searching for a weak spot in her armour, finding it, tapping a hole, and later... getting in there and eating [her] from within” (47). She subscribes to the notion of a natural or God-directed hierarchy of power. Just as “women lose their independent lives and are deprived of their civil status” (Smyth 9), the ladybird is similarly, and justly displaced when Aquinas “[with] a rubber spatula... gently eases [the ladybird] off [of her skirt] and puts it on Mary’s lap...”; the ladybird then becomes “taut, prehensive, probably alarmed at being shifted from one body to another” (O’Brien 47). The possession and placement of the body of the ladybird mirrors the dangers inherent for feminine bodies in this text. Mary’s body, too, is in danger of being hollowed as

Aquinas dictates social placement and responsibility. She even warns Mary that should the ladybird die from lack of “the juices of leaves or flowers,” which Mary may or may not be able to provide, she will be punished: “I’ll make a hole in your armour and then I’ll eat you from inside” (48). Mary becomes the vessel responsible for the life of the ladybird, and Aquinas grants Mary no freedom from the demands of nourishing mother because the role has been pronounced from above. The patriarchal ‘other’ prescribes feminine roles and diverts the feminine entity from her internal identifying project.

It is perhaps not coincidental that O’Brien chose the name Aquinas for Mary’s muse because of the influential theological teachings of Thomas Aquinas. The Dominican friar used philosophy, and the work of other philosophers, to provide “an exhilarating cosmological, metaphysical and epistemological framework on which to build a coherent and all-encompassing Christian worldview” (Cahn 407). According to Cahn, critics charge Thomas Aquinas with insisting upon the idea of natural knowledge, and either rejecting or disregarding any “philosophy that conflicted with Christian revelation” (407). Aquinas also suggests that God made women solely for reproduction because other men provide men with spiritual growth (Isherwood 75). According to Judith Ann Johnson, Augustine and, later Aquinas, believed that “woman’s only ordained purpose was to give birth” (Johnson 206). O’Brien also includes Augustine as a professor to whom Mary is innocently attracted, yet who has his own sexual secrets. The professor refuses board at the MacNamara home to maintain his apartment above a shop where every night an unknown “succubus... [ministers] to him while he [sleeps]” (7-8). His unwavering commitment to an unknown woman symbolizes his own disregard for individuality and his preference for an ambiguous feminine body. Alternatively, Mary’s

head master, and the teacher that Tara's mother confronts regarding Mary's pregnancy is surprisingly sensitive and sympathetic to Mary's condition. His behaviour and concern for her are contradictory to the patristic idea that women are automatically guilty of fleshly conflicts. He is determined that Mary is innocent and places blame first on a cousin or an uncle (150), and then on himself for not being able to protect her properly. The head teacher takes responsibility for Mary's fall; his perception that he possesses a right to protect her places him as the paternal authority, and Mary as the powerless feminine child in need of governance. He emerges as the masculine power expected to preserve Mary's innocence and encourage her potential to emulate the Virgin Mary.

The glorification of goddess figures by religious powers and the subsequent social demand for women to emulate these goddesses alters gender power structures and negates to some degree both corporeal and interior identity. In "Why Do Men Need the Goddess? Male Creation of Female Religious Symbols," Rosemary Radford Ruether demonstrates how "[female] images and symbols for the divine that have been constructed by men actually empower themselves, often at the expense of women" (234). She suggests these powerful female symbols become a sort of replacement or proxy for actual women and function for men—particularly for celibate priests—to "exclude the carnal temptations of fleshly women" (235). Ruether writes:

Catholic Christianity elaborated a rich imagery of Mary as immaculately conceived, *fit pure vessel* of the sinless Christ, Mother of Christians in whom we are reborn from our sinful birth from our sexual mothers, incorrupt in death, ascending into heaven to be crowned Queen of Heaven by Christ and God the Father. But this Marian symbolism is problematic for Christian women. 'Our tainted nature's solitary boast' sets Mary as virgin mother against all real women who may be one or the other, but never both at the same time. All women are tempted by their fleshly natures in ways that Mary was not. (my emphasis 235)



Religious authority's setting up the symbol to which all Christian women should aspire as a pure vessel, while simultaneously constructing real women as impure, contributes to not only the oppositional dyad between genders, but also for women, an impossible identity to which to conform. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that the patriarchal system has created of woman a myth in which she is required to exist on one side of a constructed binary (255). Within the gender construction proper there is a privileged masculine side and a marginalized feminine side. Elements on each side of the binary are developed according to the paternal needs of the culture, which ultimately "even authorizes [the] abuse" of feminine identities (255). De Beauvoir states this binary is static (253). Yet, also on the feminine side are tributaries or perhaps more accurately, distributaries flowing in and out inflicting pressures and contributing to the main construction of gender identity. Contrary to this inert state of social identity, women's internal identities are fluid, acted upon by their life experiences and situations, and as such, women cannot perform their identities adequately within the binds of the binary.

Irreconcilable differences in the gap between internal identities and social expectations signal the resulting conflict of the feminine myth. De Beauvoir asserts that "a fundamental ambiguity marks the feminine being" and that "her body does not seem to her to be a clear expression of herself" (257). The dynamic of the binary opposition attributes to woman the notion of the Eternal Feminine (253), but the duplicity of the eternal feminine creates an unavoidable ambiguity regarding the myth of woman, or the mystery of woman (256). De Beauvoir argues woman is potentially monster or mother, and in this way, women are created, not born, and "everything happens to women through the agency of others" (606). This tension between the myth of the mother and the

myth of the monster thus constructs woman, as not only discordant to her internal identity, but also delimited to be either maternal or destructive. In the case of Irish women, whose identities paradigmatically connect with myths of national identity, colonial and patriotic expectations further advance the feminine myth. So, according to de Beauvoir, woman is disguised “as a symbol” (261), and although she can “in sexuality and maternity...claim autonomy... to be a ‘true woman’ she must ultimately accept herself as the Other” (262).

The division from the ‘other’ and the hollowing process result in a denial of not only agency, but also of the opportunity for self-governance and even self-awareness. When the paradigm of possession is so deeply entrenched, and often propagated through generations, any form of retaliation or revolution becomes not only so much less feasible, but even so much less conceivable. Even women marginalized by their hollow bodies buy into the patriarchal entrenchment and may fail to see their own oppression as it exists around them. On the afternoon of her death, Bridget remembers: “as a girl [being]... sent to buy a loaf, and so warm and so tempting did it smell that she made a hole in it and began to pick out the bits of warm dough, bit after bit, until there was nothing left, only an empty well-baked shell” (O’Brien 50). In this case, Bridget privileges the inside over the shell when she says there is nothing left; there remains, however, the shell, but she devalues it as inconsequential.

Bridget’s own death experience links her back to the cycle of life and death: “the water begins to issue from her, a great cataractic gush, as if the placenta has broken and a child is coming out... [and] the body heaving, sinking down down onto the floor” (51). Bridget’s body is emptied, and lowered closer to the Earth, and O’Brien restricts that

which is coming out to water, blood, or a child. The water gushes out, and her body is lifeless; the case is once again empty and inconsequential. So while the physical hollowing of the body must occur to render the body as culturally productive, the dead and hollow body has effectively lost its ability for production or procreation and is thus culturally useless. For cultural use, however, the feminine body must be hollowed and repacked by masculine representatives of the patriarchal system. Bridget's death hollows her, but leaves her devalued because the hollowing is independent from cultural interference and her dead body is useless for cultural application.

O'Brien's use of water symbolism is extensive, but requisite. Water is the symbol of "eternal renewal" and is the "original element" ("Water") that connects the cycles of all life and death, and the earth and heavens. By linking water and woman so closely, particularly at moments of birth, death, trauma, or redemption, O'Brien reconnects the divorced relationship between woman and her social, cultural, spiritual, or terrestrial environment. The connection overturns the common patriarchal equation between woman and impurity. The fluidity of water suggests a certain level of cleansing, purity, or regeneration free from stagnation and capable of participating in nature's most important cycles. Affiliating woman and water re-places woman into a space that is not necessarily impure and, as such, releases her from the essentialist ideals that disallow her personal identity construction. Furthermore, a feminine inside may represent the possibility of emancipation from social constructs if the water is actually coming directly from the body. Water inside the feminine body suggests a fluid interior, rather than the fixed identity placed by church and state. H.R. Ellis Davidson suggests early pagan religions often linked sacred places involving water with the notion of creation. She outlines how

these places, near rivers, wells, or lakes, provided ready access to “communication with the gods,” which “extended both upwards and downwards” (25). The “depths of earth” (25) and the purity of this water bring “inspiration and knowledge” (26). Davidson also equates early pagan fertility gods and goddesses as “linked with earth and sea” (105). Similar Irish traditions mix water and blood imagery to represent a messaging system from the gods outlining specific destinies for individuals within the legends: “Again she waded into the sea and brought down the axe, and this time there was a loud crash and the water seemed stained with blood” (152). The image of moving water or waves transmits the divine message, and when mixed with blood represents a new-found knowledge of pre-destined events. Davidson also suggests communication with the gods is heightened when the devotee prays near water and that the practice “seems to have continued in Christian tradition” (152). According to Davidson, giving gifts to the water results in knowledge and inspiration (26), but applying the water to an individual—such as during baptismal rites—functions to purify from either Original or earthly sin (Dresen 147).

Masculine and feminine figures alike are subject to cultural stereotypes regarding corporeal value. However, in order continually to privilege the masculine, the feminine body and its products experience extreme devaluation and shame. In “The Body as a Lived Metaphor,” Tom Greenwood describes a “‘horrifying misogyny’ in which the dualistic framework—that associates the woman with the body, the body with suffering, and suffering with salvation—is used as a criterion for women’s salvation” (64). In “Shedding Blood,” Judith Ann Johnson writes, “in Western religious traditions, the release of blood (or body fluids) from a woman has too often been identified with

impurity and shame, [and] with a type of contaminated or desecrated nature” (190). Johnson continues by arguing that equivalent fluid release from men “is aligned with redemption and honor [sic]” (190) that translates into the maintenance of “a ‘pure’ descent line” (191). James’s contradictory behaviour—his relentless concern for the sanctity of his bloodline held up against his common practice of raping his daughter—alludes to the notion of male privilege “as an expression of a divinely sanctioned male sovereignty over life and death” (193), and the idea of using “male fluid to create life and female blood to contaminate it” (192). Even Mary subscribes to the notion of male fluid for creation or redemption; while staying with Luke,

She thought that if he were to kiss her it would be like an enchantment or that even if he were to bend down and she were to feel the condensation from his lips falling onto hers that it would be a transport from the old and awful life, like the moment in a fairy tale when a person is released from damnation. (O’Brien 94-5)

Luke’s body, and subsequently, the fluids his body produces, are sites of redemption and re-purification. Conversely, Mary’s body is an inherent carrier of sin and impurity. Tara’s mother “exclaims at the thought of that harlot sleeping in Tara’s room, sharing Tara’s bed, infecting her with sin and vileness” (O’Brien 146). Mary’s body carries the cultural and social elements representative of religious constructions of evil, as if sin and vileness are physically transmitted.

Because the natural cycle of life includes death, the process of birth in *Down by the River* is inextricably linked to death. When Mary attempts suicide, she ruminates that the “way to do it was not to jump but to sit on the steepest bit of bank and slide down, to think of it as being plunged into a big bath of water, or a font, a baptism font with no floor to it” (108-9). O’Brien not only places the moment of death within a cultural rite of

birth, a Catholic baptism, but also alludes loosely to an image of birth. The process of sliding down conjures images of a child moving through and leaving the birth canal; the baby leaves the feminine inside, and is immediately plunged into the suffocating and bottomless cultural constructs of society and religion. Religious expectations of the maternal feminine simultaneously bind a child to woman, and extract any notion of an internal feminine self. Just as violently as the demented cow whose calf is taken from her, Mary is forced to keep her child with her. Regardless of the direction of the child—away from the mother, or towards her in forced possession—an influence other than the individual woman is acting on the mother / child relationship.

O'Brien often illustrates the empty body or shell as insignificant. Yet, the hollow feminine body is far from such disqualification. However, in this case, the body is only worthwhile if it is emptied and re-filled with the demanded characteristics of the patriarchal status quo by the privileged authority. Who hollows and who re-packs the body with meaning is of consequence; Mary is not authorized to determine or create her autonomous identity because the political or religious patriarchy controls feminine social placement. O'Brien represents Mary's lack of control over her 'self' when she suffers an intense nosebleed. Mary has been "emptied of all that blood" (O'Brien 36). And later O'Brien describes Mary's mind as "cold. Like a little skull. And like a skull, empty of everything" (85). Mary asserts: "'I will not put myself together again. It is broken now. That which was is gone'" (85). The removing of her feminine inside leaves only an empty casing that is devoid of power. The loss of Mary's blood seems to represent what Davidson calls "a sign of impending slaughter" (152). Here, the metaphorical slaughter or dissection of the feminine body without resulting death leads

instead to arrested agency. At this point, there is *only* the insignificant body remaining; so by eliminating the inside, the 'other' possesses and controls the outside to the degree that the individual has a drastically altered view of herself. O'Brien's women lose agency because their insides are inherently dismantled, expunged or modified by the 'other'. The loss is permanent and irreversible; just as the virgin's hymen can never be regained once altered by the masculine 'other', the hollowed body is perpetually broken apart and irretrievable.

Yet, regardless of her illustrations of permanent and irreversible modifications on feminine identity, O'Brien does provide hope for regeneration and for the restoration of the denigrated feminine. She applies Gaelic tradition by drawing on tales of pagan myth describing the Washer at the Ford as representative of not only impending slaughter or battle defeat, but also of fecundity, fertility, and sovereignty (Green, *Goddesses* 41). The washer, often in possession of the male war hero's weapons, symbolizes one part of a goddess triad combining "destruction, sexuality and prophecy" (42). Similarly, the triple goddess also links to the Fates, who spin, measure and cut the life-thread ("Thread"), giving a feminine entity authority over death, which is the power completely denied women under Christianity. While the Washer at the Ford is a figure of strength, her power leads male warriors to "insane savagery born of fear [and] panic" (42-3). Feminine power functions against the so-called good of the community and leads to death and destruction rather as opposed to male power, which creates instead of destroying life. The washer thus is an emblem not only of a hero's passing from Earthly life to the Otherworld (42), but also of a general sense of being "poised between two worlds" (77). Green argues one washer, Macha, was represented as a human queen, but linked with

supernatural powers and “sovereignty in all its aspects” (77). Macha’s downfall—a result of dying in childbirth after her husband’s *hubris* forces her to race the king’s horses regardless of her being pregnant—is viewed by some scholars as the event of the “overthrowing by men of female domination” (77); according to the tale, she won the race but her exertions induced labour and “she died giving birth to twins” (77). Davidson also writes of Irish folkloric tales describing “a woman by a river washing the spoils of battle, the limbs of the slain, or garments taken from the dead” (99) and that such images represent prophecy (152), or sexuality and fertility (*Green Goddesses* 77). Green’s Morrigán has “intercourse with the Daghdha while straddling a stream” (77). The image of Mary after the first encounter with her abusive father mirrors the image of the Washer at the Ford; O’Brien writes:

Everything is drying, coagulating. It is a plasma. She will wash in the river, wash and rewash and pleat herself back together. She will throw the knickers far away down in the fairy fort... An image floated up then to startle her, something she had once seen and thought of as being quite harmless; it was a cake at a party which seemed to be uncut but when she brought her face up close to it, every piece had been severed, every severed piece, side by side, a wicked decoy. (5)

Mary’s prophecy is the cake, which represents her body, with its intact appearance, but divided reality. The self is divided and conflicted with the body. Mary’s activity at the river both physically cleanses her and attempts to re-purify symbolically, but also harkens to the rituals of early pagan offerings of valuables into the water to appease the gods. Mary’s offerings, perhaps normally associated with little value or even shame—her feminine bodily fluids or undergarments—are re-valued outside of the usual patriarchal hierarchy of value. Mary’s power or ability to increase the value of these things portrays her disregard of the accepted structures and systems that de-value anything feminine.



Water itself contains properties that contribute to a sort of re-valuation or restoration through purification. In *Celtic Myths*, Green writes, water was “perceived as both a creator and a destroyer of life” and agrees that the “sanctity and symbolism of water continued into the Christian tradition” (51). The “[springs] and wells were associated with divinities and especially with cults of healing,” and the goddess Brigit was closely associated with wells, water, and the depths of the earth (53). The fact that the pagan goddess, Brigit, transfers into Christianity as a Saint suggests the value of her sacred character and divine power. Green argues, “[bogs] were the centre of important cult activity, not only because of their watery nature but also perhaps because of the element of danger and treachery associated with them” (52-3). O’Brien places James and Mary in the bog during Mary’s violation. However, he is, just before his indiscretion, actually in the process of taking from the water, rather than partaking in the traditional practice of sacrificing to, or giving to the water as a rite of respect and servitude to the gods:

He struck out with it then waved and dandled it to verify both his powers and the riches which had lain so long, prone and concealed, waiting for the thrust of the slane. He fished in one bog hole, then the next, hooking on green scum and a frail cress with tiny white fibres, which he placed at her feet. (O’Brien 2)

The crime takes place in the bog, a place of cult activity as opposed to religious rites, but as noted earlier, the re-purification takes place at the river. The contradictory nature of water being both good and evil is a common theme in terms of the Irish appropriation of the Madonna Myth and the feminine trinity of virgin, mother, or whore.

Green suggests that because most Celtic societies were primarily rural, they naturally placed their preoccupations “with the seasons and with the fertility and well-

being of their crops and livestock” (*Myths* 54). As such, most of the related divinities “function as providers of fertility” (54). The mother goddesses, being so close to the earth, “most clearly display the concept of the personification of fertility” and more often than not appear as a triad: “This triplism seems to occur most frequently in the imagery of divine beings associated with prosperity and well-being” (54). According to Green, the triplism may represent various stages of womanhood (54), and possibly illustrates the progression from a young virgin, to motherhood, to old age. In *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*, Green postulates that virginity and the associated “sexual intensity of the virgin” equate to representations of “a goddess of sovereignty,” which links “sexuality, fertility, territory and war which is evident in the personae of the Irish goddesses” (63). Green argues that violations of virgins and the loss of innocence may “represent a catastrophic upheaval, whereby humankind had to cultivate the land in order to survive, and to endure hardship, war and death” (64). Both the feminine body and the land are violated and raped to ensure the survival of the community. The loss of virginity thus results in human mortality and the loss of divine sanctity. Green summarizes the symbolism of the goddesses as “explicable in terms of an association between the darkness of death with that of the earth and the womb” (*Goddesses* 41).

Similar debate over the pious status of the Virgin Mary exists in certain theological fields. In her book *Mary—The Feminine Face of the Church*, Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests some studies of Mariology insist that Mary’s privileged religious rank depends upon her remaining a virgin throughout her entire life (54-5). Her virginity is determined by the existence of an intact hymen. As such, the Virgin Mary’s physical body is the determining factor for the judgement of her spirituality, her divinity,

and her closeness to God. The hymen is also relevant to consider as a sort of egress to the hollow feminine body; it functions not only to speak for the chastity and virtue of its owner, but also represents an obstruction of the portal to the feminine inside, perhaps functioning as a barrier to maintain what is inside. It is at once inside and outside the body. But, in "Transforming Feminine Categories: Genealogies of Virginity and Sainthood," Stiritz and Schiller point out that the hymen itself is shrouded in myth: "The membrane that is associated with defloration evokes in the imagination a cover, but is anatomically not a seal but a crescent-shaped fold of mucous membrane" and cannot be physically "lost" or "destroyed" (1140). The presence or absence of this mythical hymen defines the ability of the body to be symbolically or imaginatively used, manipulated, and filled-up for social purposes. The patriarchal creation of the hymen allows for social and cultural dominance based upon an imaginary symbol of purity, innocence, and chastity needed to secure patriarchal control. Even if the hymen is imaginary, patriarchy has used it to create a physical phenomenon that falsely represents certain values of the individual.

Just as society permits patriarchal myth to create the feminine body imaginatively, so too does it allow the Church to define roles demanded of women. Ruether describes how the Virgin Mary is "historically mother of Christ, but like the church, also the daughter and bride of Christ" (53). Here, the ambiguity and confusion of woman's roles are historical and quite primary concerns. Problematic to feminine creation of 'self' is Catholicism's disregard for an actual feminine selfhood outside the Church's definition. According to Ruether, church officials easily ignored this conflict and demanded that woman maintain her belief and faith in Christ and the Church in spite of this "confusion of symbolic sexual relations" (53). Of course, a constructed conflict or confusion

disallows for solid identity markers that define one's place or position in society. If the very basis for women's identifying roles is ambiguous, and particularly because these roles are founded in myth, women live simultaneously with guilt—for the essential crimes of womanhood—and in what Angela West calls “the distorted images” that exclude women from social and spiritual reality (208).

Many of these ambiguous and contradictory roles have translated into Christianity from pagan traditions. In *Celtic Goddesses*, Green addresses the stories of the Mabinogi and how some of the tales relate to Irish myth, or how some characters are “cognates” of Irish gods and goddesses (58). She describes how women were somewhat empowered in that they possessed various capital rights and could choose between a domestic life—however still dependant on a husband, father, or brother—or a holy calling, but if choosing the latter, they would still be subordinate to a male god figure (26). She suggests unless a woman was “specifically divine” (26), she would be generally dominated by men. According to Green, virginity was “obligatory for girls embarking on their first marriage” (26), but that the word for “virginity, *morwyn*, has more than one meaning” (58). Notions of rape and incest are common in pre-Christian Irish lore, and Green even suggests a “birth as a result of incest could be a sign of divinity” (58). Green refers to the story of Arianrhod who immaculately conceives twin boys as she steps over Math's magical staff. An important element in the story addresses the possibility that the father of Arianrhod's sons is actually her own brother, Gwydion. Gwydion takes on one son to raise as his own; the other son is lost as he slips into the sea (57). The tale sets Arianrhod in inconsistent and contradictory feminine roles. She is both virgin and mother because her sons are conceived without sexual activity, and in one *Mabinogi* translation

she is considered the original *virgin* footholder of Math (58); she is both sister and wife to her brother because he is the father of her children; she is earthly—with human embodiment—and divine in that the children born to her of an incestuous relationship are divine. Arianrhod may also have been considered an ancestor-goddess, or, with Branwen and Rhiannon, formed a goddess triad as a sky-deity (59).

Often social and religious myth creation defining women's roles produces limited options and interchangeability between female individuals. Jeanette Shumaker suggests not only that there "is no place in the conceptual architecture of Christian society for a single woman who is neither a virgin nor a whore" (194-5), but also that the "Madonna myth takes different forms, from becoming a nun to becoming a wife, mother, or 'fallen woman'" (185). Any identity construction outside of these options is unavailable and unattainable. Patrick Keane agrees, and suggests that the function of this feminine myth reaches beyond even the female citizenry of Ireland, but also to "mother Ireland" herself (1). The stringent link between religious and state *praxis* creates "the *conditions* that often *made* women domineering" (Keane xv). In *Terrible Beauty*, Keane argues that he has "tried to communicate a consciousness of the 'less attractive implications' of both 'Woman-as-Muse' and Woman-as-Mother Ireland, the old woman who, transformed into the young girl with the walk of a queen, lures men to their graves" (xvi). Not unlike the mutable pagan goddesses, O'Brien's Mary takes the place of her mother, Bridget, by taking on her sexual and domestic role as wife to James. She also consequently becomes mother to his unborn child. In this case, Bridget is the old woman transformed into the young girl. Yet, it is Betty, barren and widowed, to whom O'Brien's Dr Tom says: "You still hold yourself up with the walk of a queen" (117). Additionally, the mystery

surrounding the death of Betty's husband—perhaps a suicide inspired by the couple's inability to produce children—may also represent the fatal female characteristic of luring a man to his death.

Many Irish authors portray notions of supernatural female transformations, which perhaps contribute to the mythical ideals of women in contradictory roles. Moreover, because women generally bear the weight of reproductive and child-rearing responsibilities, their identities from individual to parent transform more than men's roles. According to Keane, writers such as W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, and Padraig Pearse represent woman "at the height of her beauty, [transformed] into a half-mad old Irish crone" symbolizing "the dark, destructive side of the Great Mother" (15). Keane outlines the progression of the stories as the transformation from "the Old Woman" luring the young men to battle with promises of ever-lasting remembrance as "martyr-heroes" to "a young girl with the walk of a queen" (16). The goddesses' insatiable need for blood links these ideas of Cathleen ni Houlihan, the Morrighu, Morrigan (Green, *Goddesses* 41-5), Kali as the death-goddess Kalika, and Caillech or old Woman (Keane 17) as coexistent signs of "fertility and destruction" (Green, *Goddesses* 41). Green writes:

The character of these goddesses is complex and apparently ambiguous. What is clear is that fertility and destruction are equally important and are interdependent. The symbolism may be explicable in terms of an association between the darkness of death with that of the earth and the womb. Thus the apparent absence of life when the seed lies germinating in the dark soil may have been perceived as analogous to the death of warriors on the battlefield and their rebirth in the happy Otherworld. (*Goddesses* 41)

As such, even wartime deaths are attributed to the feminine physical body. The devouring female—both goddess and mother Ireland—carries responsibility for the lost and honourable blood of the masculine population. Her body is the catalyst for the state of

sovereignty and for the impossible regeneration of a pure national identity. Even de Beauvoir suggests woman is “depicted as the Praying Mantis, the Mandrake, the Demon... [or else] the Muse, [or] Goddess Mother” (254). Woman is a monster because based on the system of privilege determined by the patriarchy she is unnatural, and allocated status only as a mythical creature.

To base actual existences in myth creates some obvious tensions in terms of both individual and national identity building. In *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy*, Richard Kearney explains how “[foundational] myths disclose the original meaning of tradition... [and] defy the normal logic of *either/or* by conflating not only opposite time-scales, but also such opposed orders as living and dead, divine and human, redeemed and damned” (109). According to Kearney, the foundational myth offers alternatives to conflicted socio-political issues of the society, but “since the remedy is lacking in reality, the community finds itself unable to fulfil its desires of sovereignty and so begins to ... ‘project them into the imaginary’” (109). The era in which the myth is created as foundational, and the era in which the myth is applied practically to the community are incompatible. Thus, the myth operates “as a scapegoating mechanism... [that sacrifices] the victim, on whom the evils of society are projected... as a means of purging and restoring the community to unity” (109). Kearney argues that Irish sacrifice is a product of “a ‘sacred’ memory of death and renewal which provided legitimation for present acts of suffering by grafting them onto paradigms of a recurring past” (110). For Ireland, as a nation, sacrifice becomes the main element of identity.

So, when Keane aligns Irish women with national Irish identity, he ultimately parallels the historical and mythical sacrifice of the nation with the necessary sacrifice of

modern women. Giving in to patriarchal and religious oppression, as O'Brien's women do, is justified, expected and unquestioned; they are martyrs because they not only allow themselves to be sacrificed, but also need to be sacrificed, in order to submit to and fulfil their historical national identity. As does Keane, Kearney recognizes the link between modern Irish women and the Virgin Mary. He writes: "Is it possible that such idealized *imagos* of womanhood might be related to the social stereotypes of the Irish woman as pure virgin or son-obsessed mother?" (118-9). So, just as Ireland calls forth the blood of her sons to resurrect the national identity of Ireland from "centuries of historical persecution," women must accept their role as providing sons to Ireland for that very political purpose (118). O'Brien's women, however, have not given birth to sons, but daughters, or have been unsuccessful at maintaining pregnancy altogether, thus diminishing any political purpose of woman. Kearney suggests this form of diminishment is an attempt to "repossess an identity in the imaginary" because of colonization:

In the historical evolution of Irish religious ideology, we witness a shift away from the early Irish church which was quite liberal in sexual matters and assigned an important role to women, to a more puritanical religion which idealized women as other-worldly creatures of sublime innocence. And it is perhaps no accident that this shift coincided in some measure with the colonization of Ireland. (119)

Kearney continues that the colonization process shifted the national ideology of "Ireland from a fatherland... into idioms connoting a motherland" (119). Equating woman with a newly-demoted national identity functions primarily to justify both her oppression and maintain her repression. O'Brien's Mary becomes what Kearney might suggest of all Irish women:

the passive daughter seems to assume the more militant guise of a mother goddess summoning her faithful sons to rise up against the infidel invader so that, through the shedding of their blood, she might be redeemed from



colonial violation and become pure once again – restored to her pristine sovereignty of land, language and liturgy. (120)

Any widespread internalized notions that redemption and restoration on both national and personal levels are necessary for women act as a sort of reminder that women are, because of their fertile bodies, impure or contaminated. In “The Old Rite of the Churching of Women after Childbirth,” Susan K. Roll suggests certain historical and religious practices were “intended precisely as a ritual purification, as if something contaminating and ungodly had occurred in pregnancy and childbirth” (117). She argues many ancient customs would exclude both the new mother and the midwife from participating in worship services for a certain amount of time—longer if the child was born female—“which implies that [they had] been contaminated by contact with the blood and the placenta” (120). Women who suffered abortion or miscarriage partake in similar, yet slightly altered purification rituals. Roll also suggests that the bodies of women who died during childbirth risked “desanctifying the church building due to the flow of blood” (128) and in such cases “another woman underwent the churching as a substitute or proxy for the deceased woman” (128-9). This “underlying motif of renunciation of evil conduct and of purification” equates with the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary, which, according to Roll, is the “model for what pious Catholic women were expected, if not legally compelled to do” (132). She cites one specifically Irish explanation for the ritual as though “its roots are still to be found in the need to purify the woman... [and that the] initiative for this rite is ascribed, or perhaps projected onto, women themselves: ‘A desire of imitating this humility of the Blessed Virgin’” (134).

The feminine body is once again a tool for the masculine maintenance of religious and political power. Moreover, feminine acceptance of and participation in this purification ritual act, as Greitje Dresen suggests, “as a sign of fidelity to priestly rule” (146). She argues purification rituals and baptismal customs are representative rebirths that symbolically appropriate women’s labour (148). The work of the feminine body must be not only re-worked, but also reversed. The products of the body’s labour and the body itself must be cleansed. The reified feminine body is a machine refurbished by the church and only after rehabilitation is reintroduced to the community as less impure and less godless than directly following labour and delivery. The feminine population maintains no power, no agency, no autonomy, and no individuality. The feminine body itself is symbolically all women. There is no differentiation between women; the feminine body is archetypal.

Further complicating this interchangeability of feminine characters is male suicide, or alleged suicide. James’ suicide is obvious (O’Brien 249); even though Betty asserts that her husband’s death was accidental, there are still rumours he intentionally drowned himself (110-11). At this point, which specific woman, who carries the “fatal power of the Female” (Keane xii) luring men to their graves, is inconsequential because all women are encapsulated within this female trinity of virgin / mother / whore, and no one individual woman is granted emancipation from it. The demands upon the archetypal female dictate both women’s roles in the family and the function of their biological bodies as maternal. Male suicides are responses to the shame brought on by inadequate female members of the families. Moreover, all social implication of deviation falls on the family because the only status held by women derives from the domestic sphere. In

*Shattering Silence*, Begoña Aretxaga argues that “the imposition of Catholic social policies [was] fundamentally restrictive in matters of gender and sexuality” (149) and led to enormous consequences for women “who were erased from the professional and intellectual life of the country” (150). This process allows “a domestic structure that emphasize[s] male control and female domesticity” as constituting “civilized life” (T. Hunt 50), but which consumes all feminine identity within marriage (Shumaker 190) or religious service. Compromising a woman’s reproductive role within the family, as with both O’Brien’s Betty and Mary, disrupts roles throughout the family and ultimately reflects upon the masculine family head. A husband’s or father’s inability to control the production capabilities of his family usurps his power.

Shumaker argues, “the alternatives to marriage for women in Ireland rarely go beyond the brothel or the convent” because women “act masochistically to pay for the evil they perceive as inherent to their female bodies” (196). According to Shumaker, “the nun emulates the Madonna” (187). O’Brien’s Mary, in her somewhat awkward role at the convent, is also placed as the soon-to-be carrier of the ‘Father’s’ child. Shumaker suggests, “the demand for virginity enforces the punishment of the rebellious ‘fallen woman,’ whereas it restricts the life experience of the well-disciplined nun” (196). Mary MacNamara attempts to use the convention to her benefit as she strives to distance herself from her own body. She views her body and parts of her body as “an enemy” (O’Brien 29), or even “substanceless” (83), further separating her body from her self. Because the general feminine body is the site for all female cultural implication, the body itself also represents the “inescapability of patriarchal power, whether in the home or the convent” (Shumaker 188). The placement of the body into a political institution—the home or the

convent—is of little consequence; the body itself is the institution upon which all other institutional power structures are played out because “both sides of the Madonna ideal—Virgin and mother—are identically submissive” (187).

After examining Mary, Dr Tom says to Betty: “Rosaries and ovaries, I don’t know which does the most damage to this country. And to me” (O’Brien 116). Dr Tom’s lament acknowledges how both woman and religion infringe upon his own existence. He gives no primacy to the feminine body; he treats the feminine body as if it were, like religion, a cultural rather than physical entity, created or invented after the fact of male physical creation. The feminine state is marginalized to the degree that it cannot exist without breaching the male privilege. His concern for damage to the country, and to himself, represents not only a masculine disregard for Mary’s situation, but his statement implies that ovaries are generally more of a social or cultural ill than physical elements of a living person. Ovaries are the metonymy replacing the entire woman—body and soul—with one basic physical and identifying component. But, if taken at face value, Dr Tom’s comment further commodifies and separates woman’s body from the individual within. Her body is the possession of her family, her father, and even the community. When Mary screams for Dr Tom not to examine her, he concedes only because he “can’t examine [her] without [her] father’s permission” (116). It is not Mary’s preference that dictates the doctor’s actions, but rather an existing patriarchal agreement that removes power and possession from the “weak, helpless woman” (T. Hunt 55) who is “unfit to rule” her own body (57).

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes, “at the juncture of the ‘body’ and the ‘population,’ sex [is] a crucial target of a power organized around the management of life

rather than the menace of death” (147). He suggests that the “blood relation long remained an important element in the mechanisms of power, its manifestations and its rituals” because sex addresses power “to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used” (147). So for Foucault, like Rousseau before him, “the vitality of the social body” (Foucault, *History* 147) is in part dependent upon the exclusion of woman from primacy in order to maintain large families (Ritter 59). Women are sacrificed for the perpetuation of the bloodline and the continued success of their male counterparts through their ability to bear them strong children. The continued marginalization and objectification of woman is necessary because sexuality for the purposes of reproduction inherently possesses two physical sides—male and female—and because “power [speaks] of sexuality and to sexuality” (Foucault, *History* 147). A feminine body is representative only of its reproductive capability; one of Tara’s brochures reads: “The hymen which partly blocks the vagina is the gift wrapping proving that the product is untouched” (O’Brien 147), confirming the importance of maintaining the purity of the commodity.

But does a *quality* such as virginity even truly exist? Hanne Blank, in the very first line of *Virgin: The Untouched History*, suggests it does not. She argues there is no “material reckoning” that virginity exists, and that culture invented and developed the idea “as an integral part of how we experience our own bodies and selves” (3). Virginity in all its possible forms is nothing more than another myth designed to aid in the control of feminine production in a masculine dominated society. Blank suggests even the hymen—the sole physical element for determining a woman’s virginity—is historically

shrouded in conjecture and assumption as if the little bit of flesh does not really exist in its known form after all (Blank 52). Stiritz and Schiller argue:

Notions of virginity as an unblemished state, the first penetration by a penis as an irrevocable transformation into womanhood, and defloration as a developmental milestone in female sexuality derive from male fantasies of female purity that translate into justifications for social structures of control and ownership. (1133)

In this manner, images of woman have been split between “idealizations and demonizations” and have been organized around “fantasies of purity and perfection” (1134). They say that the only way for a girl to develop into a woman is to be imposed upon sexually by a man; thus patriarchy invented virginity and its associated virtuous and pious elements to serve its cultural and power needs (1136). The scholars suggest “a woman values her virginity because it belongs to someone else—to God or, unconsciously, her father” (1135). Mary’s devastation over her violation may represent not only the physical imposition of her rape and incest, but also the cultural weight resulting from the fact that her virginity, and by extension, her body, really have become possessions of her father. The problem is, though, that if either male—God or her father—actually claims her body, the social implications are immense. This contradiction progresses cultural use of the feminine trinity by disallowing a legitimate and practical female corporeal existence. Even considering the complex relationships of the Virgin Mary, in which she is “often characterized as an icon of the patriarchy, [and]... as a figure of feminine transcendence” (1149), the Virgin exists as a by-product of male interference.

The notion of transcendence, either intentionally or accidentally, indicates a state of non-corporeality or physicality; both ideas and representations of the body and the

actual body cannot exist within the available environment. For O'Brien's Mary, the body becomes something both perceived, and acted upon, by her male society. Mary is incapable of *not* transcending her body because her body never really belonged to her, and the manner in which her body is defined does not correspond with its physical reality. It is in this way that Mary is completely subjugated, all the while transcending her corporeal binds. Women must transcend corporeality simply to exist in a male-defined body. According to Sallie McFague, the "proper function of trinitarianism in the Christian tradition is... to preserve for agential theism both radical immanence and radical transcendence" (192). O'Brien's Mary is the daughter, the mother, the violated virgin; she is invisible—her body is substanceless—but because embodied by the media, she encompasses all of Ireland's knowledge.

The very thing that a patriarchal family head would avoid is for his bloodline to be weakened. The family is the commodity or possession that provides its male head with power. Yet, ironically in O'Brien's text, it is James, the male head of the family, who risks the bloodline. As mentioned earlier, James's violent imposition upon Mary opens up the possibility for hereditary deviation, yet the very mention of it sends him into a fury:

'What freak?' he said, foaming now, gesticulating, pointing to have his jacket and his hairbrush handed to him, protesting before God that there would be no freaks in his family, in his bloodline, and those who spoke such calumnies would swing for it. (O'Brien 192)

James's lack of awareness of his responsibility for his role in the creation of a possibly mutated child implies his complete subscription to a patriarchal right of possession of Mary. O'Brien emphasizes James's belief in his right to possess Mary by aligning the notion of the baby with his demand for the mundane possessions of his jacket and his hairbrush. Further, his transference of responsibility to Mary also suggests his belief of

masculine privilege and feminine guilt, even though, he is the one who ultimately swings for it.

However, in a small chapter called "Bridget," O'Brien raises questions regarding Mary's paternity. Bridget's contemplative mood leaves her conflicted and resigned to her fate. O'Brien hints that Bridget may know about James's violent indiscretions, but also that James may not be Mary's father after all:

With approaching death there comes questions and recollection. The little pod called her life. Girlhood. School. Her wedding. Speeches. Her wedding night. Giving birth. And those visits, those lawless visits that she lived for. Knew his stuff he did, with his stethoscope and his ample hatching hand. She lived for those visits, monthly they were. He knew when to come, knew when a woman was ripe, must have gleaned it from his medical lore. (O'Brien 37)

Of course, this revelation creates a number of implications. If James is not Mary's father, then privileging the violence of rape over the taboo of incest returns agency and self-possession to a woman and her body. Her body is now something that possesses rights for its own sovereignty and protection rather than a cultural object to violate. If the violence against the body is more important than a cultural taboo, then individual women experience possession of their own bodies rather than relinquishing power to the normally generalizing culture. The feminine body is, in this case, privileged over masculine possession of the body. Another implication is that it is now unlikely for a freak baby to be born because the bloodline broke before James and Mary's union. However, as a result of this sexual relationship, questions regarding possession versus the *appearance* of possession must still be addressed from a colonial standpoint in which the possessors' rights are at stake. The implication is such that possession is not an essential



element of masculinity, but that possession of the feminine body emerges from the ability to exert power.

Blending elements of power between the sexes and possible lingering colonial relationships creates a system of hierarchies that elevates the masculine and negates the feminine. According to Tamara Hunt, “the colonial allegory” dictates that “the feminine Irish [need] to be controlled by the masculine English” in order to encourage and maintain a satisfactory level of civilization (52). O’Brien places James in contradiction because the family depends on Bridget’s selling of eggs at the market to “[combat] their poverty” (O’Brien 60). Yet, James still attempts to embrace his privileged masculinity even though he is emasculated by Bridget’s financial contributions. The family’s economic success revolves around women’s labour and the products of that work rather than masculine success in the public sphere. Bridget’s contribution of eggs metaphorically reflects the economic and cultural products of the feminine body, which once outside of the domestic sphere become valuable contributions to the public economy.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to expected roles, however, at the auction mart, James “does not have anything to sell but he goes anyhow [because] he likes to be among the men” (O’Brien 86). He reinforces his rightful place in the “man’s world” (86), but fails to live up to his responsibilities as provider. The notion of right—general or individual—is gendered because James, though not contributing to this masculine economy, excludes Mary as having “no right” to enter the mart (86). Thus, the physical male body carries rights over individual merit and contributes to a disregard of a meritorious feminine self

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Kristen Guest for pointing out the metaphorical link between the economic and cultural value of a woman’s reproductive egg and the eggs Bridget sells at the market.

in the colonial or patriarchal hierarchy. Regardless of individual worthiness, social rights are granted primarily to masculine bodies. However, even the notion of emasculation automatically generates concerns. Assuming masculine properties inherent to all men that can somehow be culturally removed from them creates exactly the same problematic gender dynamic as the hollow feminine.

If Ireland is aligned with the idea of woman, then she too becomes inherently hollow, and capable only as carrier for the masculine other. When Smyth suggests, “the state is convulsed, with us inside it” (11), she conjures the image of the political country wracked with the pains of labour, but lacking agency because of *her* post-colonial state. She is overpowered, and controlled and used by a metaphorical father. Romanets uncovers contemporary definitions “of Ireland as essentially feminine, in which femininity is linked with subordination to the ‘masculine’ colonizer” (140-41) suggesting current gender representations between Ireland and England remain. Aretxaga says that this “feminine affinity made Ireland—like women—simply incapable of government, a task for which the rational English with their masculine nature were perfectly suited” (148). This hard-core colonial ideal led to “English interests [taking] precedence over Irish interests whenever those interests were in conflict” (Hearne 87) because the masculine then and perhaps still does, takes precedence over the feminine. Ireland, and the feminine body in general, are simultaneously divided in order to control their ability to govern themselves. So, much like Mary, who no one believes capable of governing her own body, Ireland too is stripped of organizational power and decision-making rights as a result of the colonial project. According to Maud Gonne, a pre-Independence Irish activist, the “primary aim of this movement was ‘the re-establishment of the complete

independence of Ireland” as well as the development of “a sense of national pride in Irish children and ‘[the combating of]... English influence’” (Hearne 93). The nationalistic dependence on the potential of future children increases the value of the maternal role, but simultaneously restricts women to the domestic sphere. Yet, similar initiatives, in terms of symbolic self-government, applied to the feminist movement in Ireland that “called for ‘the complete removal of all disabilities to [the female] sex’” (Hearne 93). Each specific group aimed for emancipation, but more importantly the ultimate goal was a paradigmatic shift in colonial mindset to validate a non-gendered existence for women, who have for so long been defined as only carriers of culture, and of children.

Just as society allocates gendered bodies power based upon the category in which they fall, so does the colonial project assign value. At this level, however, the divide falls between the colonizer and the colonized. As Kearney argues, the colonial process transformed Ireland from a Fatherland to a Motherland (119). Perhaps this lingering colonial process distorts masculine Irish identities to the degree that they must increase their own abilities to oppress the ‘other’ and becomes a case of the pendulum swinging too far. James’s unnecessary presence at the mart suggests he exists in a feminine space because he does not contribute to the masculine economy. Similarly, his confinement to the home after his injury places him as trapped within the domestic sphere. Reflected in the feminine sphere, the value of his masculine existence diminishes and results in social re-definition of the dyad. As such, the extreme feminization of women’s bodies represents an Irish masculine desire to reclaim lost masculinity; a sort of over-correction bumps each group equally down the ladder of hierarchical power. These lingering

colonial effects alter the characteristics of masculinity and femininity and re-create the gendered traits of the binary.

According to Dresen, the importance of the symbolic child in a patrilineal community is of utmost concern. She suggests that because fatherhood is never as apparent as motherhood, the child—whether biological or not—must symbolically belong to the father in order to “build a firm social order” (155). He must take possession of the child to maintain his power. It is “blood sacrifice... that plays this crucial role in symbolically confirming patrilineal descent” (155), and killing, or bloodshed, is the only “action that is as serious as giving birth” (Nancy Jay in Dresen 156). What is interesting about the suicide deaths of James and of Betty Crowe’s husband is that both men are fathers of children who do not survive. Their babies have miscarried, or have died very young. Mary’s baby sister died in infancy, and if Mary is not James’s biological daughter, he has no living children. Just as Betty and her husband produce no offspring, James is also a father with no children. The fathers have been unsuccessful at any form of carrying on a bloodline and thus at maintaining social order. Their subsequent suicide deaths exclude them from society and the resulting backlash, representing the fate of Irish subjugated masculinity. The feminine body is once more open, empty, and available for further cultural exposure because the so-called protective and validating male is inaccessible.

Again, O’Brien’s use of feminine bodies being emptied of blood, water, or even children parallels Ireland’s history of spilled or emptied blood, and the loss of the symbolic child because of a violent division between body and self:

It was during the rosary it happened. A nose bleed so violent and untoward that it gushed as water might from a town pump. She tried to stop the

flow, first with her own hanky and then with the loan of a hanky, but she couldn't. As well as streaking down her face and chin it was also flowing backwards and she thought she would choke.... She believed it was a sign. The entire quota of her woman's blood was coming out now, and ever after there would be no more blood, she would have shed it all, she would be clean and porous as a wafer. (O'Brien 35)

When O'Brien marks Mary's nosebleed with the reciting of the rosary, she highlights religion as a possible stimulus in the history of spilled Irish blood. Further, because Mary is unable to control or stop the flow from her body O'Brien indicates the far reaches of religious power. The very notion that her blood spills both outside her body—streaking down her face and chin—and inside—flowing backwards down her throat—suggests an intrinsic bond between her body and her self that religion may not acknowledge. Mary ironically seeks refuge in the very institution that threatens her identity. And although the blood is flowing from her nose, she equates her blood to menstruation (woman's blood), rather than the violently-shed blood of Irish religious and political strife. Her feminine body becomes, resulting from her ingrained beliefs, the same uncontrollable and unclean entity of which her Church so adamantly warns, and which it demands be subject to purification.

The need to purify menstruating women for both religious and social reason has a long history. In "Doctors, Philosophers, and Christian Fathers on Menstrual Blood," Jennifer Schultz suggests menstrual blood contains a message of impurity perpetuated in an essential androcentrism incapable of perceiving somatic experiences outside its own (97). Schultz analyses early Christian male-authored texts and discovers "they exemplify the acceptance of a distinct Christian menstrual taboo" (97), which excludes menstruating women "not only from the Eucharist celebration but from the church edifice itself" (98). However, she argues that certain cultural assumptions about feminine biology, such as

menstrual blood as diseased or inherently impure, primed the conditions for early patristic writers to create “a taboo [against menstrual blood] in their move to deny women the opportunity to commune with the Divine” (99). Kathleen O’Grady charts many “biblical commentaries, even up to the present day” that continue to view menstruation as “symbolical of sin” (6). She argues that various sources across different time-periods illustrate menstrual blood as part of God’s divine punishment for Eve’s indiscretion and, as such, menstruation became “the divine ‘curse’ of women” (5). Because of this link to Original Sin, menstruation represents “the sinful nature of woman” effecting “the fall of humankind” (5). Contrary to the association with Original Sin, however, O’Grady also recognizes that some exegetics discount the practice of excluding women based on menstrual taboos because there is nothing inherently “punitive” about menstruation (7); these taboos are thus based in a popular conception of impurity and sin rather than in specific religious or doctrinal precepts. Exclusion from cultural rites or practices reflects society’s judgement of an individual as inferior or inadequate to participate alongside non-deviant members of a community. Female exclusion from religious or divine communication only propagates the low status of women in the hierarchy. Schultz cites Aelian, a Greek Sophist who asserts, “woman is definitely polluted” (101) and collapses “the boundaries between certain women and animals” (101-2). Because the feminine body is not the norm—“the hot, dry, unleaking and, therefore, superior male” (110) body—women, because of their lack of bodily integrity, are unable to rely on morality and reason and are thus symbols of sin (113). Lack of corporeal integrity, based on the differences between male and female bodies, reflects a lack of consciousness, and because sin is irrational, women are too.

The religious creation of women as inherently sinful progresses the validation of the so-called superior male and allows her treatment by this patristic group to reflect her submission. In *Deadly Innocence: Feminist Theology and the Mythology of Sin*, West argues that traditional feminist theologians place woman as “a submissive virgin who knows her place,” taught by the oppressive patriarchy to bear the weight of “guilt for human weakness and evil that [men] could not cope with in themselves” (xiii).<sup>2</sup> Woman is the scapegoat that the masculine power de-humanizes in order to identify the privileged centre. Maintaining the gender dyad created by Catholicism with Adam and Eve requires identifying the ‘other’, limiting her to ambiguity and highlighting her subordination and marginalization. Yet, in O’Brien’s text, Jacko says to James: “‘Let down by that fandango between your legs... And they call women the weaker sex’” (245). O’Brien points out how James too is unable to govern his own body and as such, she questions the universal construction against women’s character. Contradictions between gender expectations—men falling to the feminine and women to the masculine side of the dyad—in *Down by the River* points out the idea that masculine and feminine bodies each function in similar ways, in that the body does not always behave in the manner intended by its possessor. O’Brien affirms the notion that a woman’s body identity is falsely constructed, and that James, as an Irish man, is also affected by gendered post-colonial power relations invoked during British rule. Even though he embraces wildly masculine traits—violence, rape, oppression of women, murder, and other improprieties—his “hypervirility” (77), as Romanets points out, is related to “the restitution and reinvention

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that the cover page of West’s text states the title of book to be *Deadly Innocence: Feminism and the Mythology of Sin*, whereas the title page states the title as *Deadly Innocence: Feminist Theology and the Mythology of Sin*.

of Irish 'manliness'... in order to counterpose a widely spread colonial strategy of representing colonized males as effeminized" (76-7). Nonetheless, on some levels, James maintains his place on the feminine side of the dyad because of his lust and his feminine inability to control his body. Of course, the activity that James's fandango partakes in is negative to his situation, and he suffers because he is lacking the possession of a licit sexual partner. Inglis acknowledges the constructed dynamic that, "[within] marriage the woman was seen as the moral savior [sic] of her baser mate" (14). The statement radiates essentialism on both sides of the dyad.

While church and state construct gender roles as complementary to each other, they still cannot function practically for individuals. Woman as an individual cannot provide moral redemption on her own; the Church is sure to provide her with all the self-sacrificing constructs on which to base her behaviour, as well as to remove her individuality resulting from their concern of feminine resistance to these constructs. Through these covert cultural generalizations, woman becomes a symbiotic representation of what society demands of her. Regulations surrounding abortion suffer from the same habit. In "Procreative Choice: A Feminist Theological Comment," Linda Hogan suggests one of the most profound mistakes made by anti-abortion camps is their "failure to reconstruct the concrete, lived-world context in which the abortion discussion belongs" (179). The homogenization of women by such social practices as Madonna emulation, feminine trinity preservation, corporeal hollowing, and de-humanization disallow for any real feminine existence; basing any pro-life argument on homogenized images

serves to obscure the complexity of the ethical dilemma, and indeed it also harkens back to the days (which we are assured have long passed) in



which women were primarily empty receptacles, mobile wombs, valuable for our reproductive capacities. (179)

The hollow feminine is a result. It is the sum of additions and subtractions, and is the convergent point for all of the tributaries flowing in and out. Yet, the boundary of the body is not as evident as it first appears.

## 2

### **The Body Politic and the Body Religious: The Other Woman, Rape, and Abortion in Ireland**

“... I want yet again and for indefinable reasons to trace that same route, that trenchant childhood route, in the hope of finding some clue that will, or would, or could, make possible the leap that would restore one to one’s original place and state of consciousness, to the radical innocence of the moment just before birth”

Edna O’Brien,  
*Mother Ireland*

“... islands were perceived as liminal places, belonging both to the human and the supernatural worlds, and islands were sometimes sites for the Happy Otherworld”

Miranda Green,  
*Celtic Goddesses*

Perpetual interference and authority by both political and religious patriarchies in the arenas of violence, rape, and abortion have created not only an atmosphere of oppression, but also a collective mentality that the feminine entity—body and self—is a possession at the disposal of the “androcentric systems that make our societies” (Isherwood 79). Political use of women’s bodies for procreation and delimitations on the body in terms of alternative or sovereign existences help to maintain a strong patriarchal and religious structure. In Ireland, the practice has been perfected. According to Siobhán Mullally, Ireland possesses a long history of debates, referenda, human rights committees, conventions and legal reform groups regarding the complexities of Irish abortion legislation and practice (79-80). She points out how most pro-women’s rights—

pro-choice—groups suggest that until the heavy-handed influence of official state policy by the Catholic Church is slowed, if not halted entirely, women's rights will continue to be compromised (79). However, in "a struggling nation state, scarred by the trauma of partition and civil war" women's rights and "gender trouble could not be tolerated" (82). Women's issues take back seat to the greater needs of the nation. Even if activists could inspire policy or legislative reform, a greater challenge is shifting the Irish paradigm of social and cultural gender roles. Demanding reproductive rights for women is simply culturally inappropriate.

Defining the feminine body is not as superficial as designating apparent boundaries of corporeal identity. In terms of both actual meaning for the individual and for the social structures within which the individual lives, markers of feminine bodies merge and flow between reality and the imaginary. In "Possible and Questionable: Opening Nietzsche's Genealogy to Feminine Body," Kristen Brown suggests that the "value of any item emerges, transforms, or dissolves according to its context and the evaluator's perspective" (41). She continues by suggesting that a feminine body consists of not only the female physical, but also the female "images and tropes... which have traditionally shaped... women's values and status" (41). Cultural perception and social need also define the feminine body; bodies manifest into the labels and symbols placed upon them. These labels and symbols place specifically feminine bodies into positions from which they cannot avoid dissection by the 'other'. Under the guise of, or intent for morality and community conservation, feminine bodies then must accede to an increased level of submission. Brown argues that the "chaste, 'moral' adult has become so because of a personal history of discipline and punishment" (45) through a "penal custom that has

become [internalized]” as guilt (48). O’Brien exposes Mary’s submission to this religious penal culture, and like many of her female characters, it violently removes, from her psychological make-up, any possibility for increased agency, or even any awareness of personal and individual agency.

The images and tropes Brown discusses function much the same as the Madonna Myth. Feminine bodies become subject to re-creation because of the way that others’ perceptions—real or imaginary—work upon them, for whatever reason; oppressive political or religious power relies on the re-creation and re-definition of the feminine body. Abdul Janmohamed and David Lloyd argue that minority discourse and collective agency “‘is not a question of essence... but a question of subject position’” (qtd in Bhabha 229). Pierre Bourdieu argues the power of language and discourse “is nothing other than the *delegated power* of the spokesperson” (107). In this way, authority—state or religious—creates identity for a subject or object rather than expressing *essential* components of that individual. Yet, Bourdieu also emphasizes that the spokesperson, as “an imposter,” only possesses the power from the institution—religion or education, for example—and reflects the necessary elements of “routinization, stereotyping and neutralization” of the authorized and authorizing institution (109). The subject position is neither the speaker nor the spoken-of, but the institution in which they both exist. An individual’s *essence* is replaced by *subject position*, and subject position by *institution*. In light of this identity re-appointment, an individual’s apparent power is actually not personal at all, but is representative of the institution (111).

In Ireland, state politics, pressured by religion, shape the cultural space in which women exist. Bourdieu calls this sort of existence *habitus* (12). In his introduction to

Bourdieu's text, John B. Thompson argues that *habitus* "is a set of *dispositions* which incline agents to act and react in certain ways" (12). The "practices, perceptions, and attitudes" are normalized to the degree of complete acculturation (12). Possessing an internal sense of self, unaffected by societal roles, is difficult in this context, but often, only at the moment of blatant domination by the institution does this becomes apparent. The cultural intervention of politics and religion "introduces creative invention into existence" (Bhabha 9). Culture and society expect individual women to be little more than a cultural *poesis* built from the fluid perceptions between myth, patriarchal dominance, and the national desire for a unified past and future. Resulting from this social creation of the common or archetypal woman is the loss of the individual. In *Down by the River*, Mary transcends her *habitus* because she attempts to step outside of the roles demanded of her. Her aspirations reflect an *internal* desire or ambition, which disproves the legitimacy of a complete *habitus* construction. Had she been *completely* acculturated, she never would attempt such civil disobedience as abortion.

Yet, a history full of social unrest and disruption in Ireland perhaps elevates a common will for some sort of defining national identity or culture because these common elements create a sense of belonging and value. Therefore, a cycle is created: institutional acculturation leads to personal divergence from such acculturation, personal divergence inspires a collective embrace of the social comfort of belonging emerging from institutional acculturation, and so on. However, Homi Bhabha "challenges [the] sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People" (37). Concepts of pure culture are imaginary, so basing legal, moral, and ethical codes upon a notion of a Golden

Age is erroneous. The conflict in *Down by the River* is evident because perceptions of Mary's behaviour and the resulting situation become not just individual and family business, but "the whole country's business" (O'Brien 134). As Bhabha suggests, there is no actual Golden Age. A culture's persistence to hold fast to mythical national, ethical, or moral standards as defining and projecting their collective national identity, results in an identity built from past ideologies rather than current realities. In "The Politics of Spirituality," Geraldine Finn argues that there is a "*space between* experience and expression, reality and representation, existence and essence: the concrete, fertile pre-thematic and an-archic space *where we actually live*" (Finn 336).

Finn argues that any real idea of individual identity is quite different from the social categorization of "man, woman, Christian, Jew" or as in O'Brien's novel, Irish and Irish woman. The myths surrounding all these categorizations create a political sphere that both oppresses and perpetuates social conventions. Finn suggests, "this space between representation and reality... is the ground of the critical intentions and originating experiences that enable us to call the political status quo into question and challenge the already known universe and its organization" (336). But why has the Irish woman been unable to transcend the mythical status quo and exist "as being-otherwise-than-being?" (335). Finn discloses that confines in herself she regarded as *intellectual* were actually *political* (335-6) and when she was able to resolve this conflict, she could more easily see the "controlling interests of prevailing political powers" (337). Finn writes:

We are always both more and less than the categories which name and divide us. More and less, that is, than a woman, a man, a Christian, a Jew, a lesbian, a mother, a wife. More and less than what we stand for in the

polis and what stands for us. More and less than anything that can be said about us. (337)

To disregard the fluidity of these categories—to disregard the more and the less of these categories—highlights cultural disabilities surrounding the control and agency of Irish women. Their bodies are hollow, and the specific boundaries of the body contain each individual's meanings of selfhood and interrupt the fluidity of categories; feminine homogenization occurs by patriarchal imposition of the constructed boundary and its concurrent lack of recognition of fluid identity variations.

Shortly after the first evidence of Mary's pregnancy and subsequent trip to England come to light, some local mothers and anti-abortionists collaborate to influence Mary's future: "We're glad to have got you home... Your father is glad and every right-minded person in the country is glad" (O'Brien 151). The women arrange for her a medical exam in which Mary is provided no privacy or agency: "Noni felt furious at not being allowed in with them, because after all she had been the instigator, she was the one to have found out and gone to the guards and got Mary's father to sign a letter for the solicitor, saying that on no account must she be allowed to leave the country again" (O'Brien 153). Mary is, for Noni and for Roisin as well—who eventually does break in on Mary's examination—a sort of conquest, and a possession representing an element of society in need of saving. The intrusion on Mary's medical examination also represents a sort of colonial intrusion or acquisition of the feminine body. Noni's adamant and increased sense of national service—by her metaphorical arresting of both Mary and the abortion—reflects her sense of national belonging. Advancing her involvement in a nationally-heated debate increases her personal and individual worth. Just as Irish men overcompensate for their own colonial oppression, so do women apprehend the presumed

moral power to act as defenders of the so-called national identity. Noni's sense of self relies on her inclusion in this collective ethos. By giving up Mary to the authorities, she solidifies, in her mind at least, this sense of inclusion and aligns herself with the colonizing power. Perhaps the behaviour of the militant anti-abortionists and the disapproving mothers stems from their own inherent hollowing and the "jealousy of a thwarted woman seething over her own lost, never-ever-tasted delight of being thirteen and fourteen and fifteen" (O'Brien 150).

In *Down by the River*, a conversation between James and Noni, on the arrival of the journalists to his home, illustrates a certain history of people interfering with others for the so-called good of the state. James laments the leaking of Mary's story to the journalists by a court clerk: "Oh, I'm not surprised...A nation of informers... Always were, Robert Emmett [sic] met his doom that way" (191). James aligns himself with the famed, yet unsuccessful leader of a rebellion for Ireland's republican revolution (Kearney 36), and blames his failure on the betrayal by another person rather than his own mistakes. Noni herself falls into the category of 'informer' and is akin to the "all sorts of busybodies... muscling in on [Mary's] case" she herself rails about (O'Brien 191). She even pressures James, under the guise of doing what is best for him and Mary, to give in and tell his story to the reporters. Her behaviour and intense display of a need to inform or be informed points to an insecurity regarding her own place and no less her lack of power. The divide between the "Fors and Againsts" (191) is so distinct that each side cannot consider the other as being even slightly legitimate.

When individuals gather *en masse* in protest or demonstration, the collective voice of the people often rails against a contemporary practice that has strayed from the



nationally-identifying notions of the past; the goal is driven by “a longing to return to a pristine unity, [or] a time of purity when things were different” (Condren 33). Memories of an older culture often collide with these newfound modern *praxes*. The mass protests and debates led by the anti-abortionists over Mary’s permission to travel abroad for her abortion allude to the notion of what Finn might call an “*ethical* encounter with others” (335). In Mary’s case, the social action against her as a fallen woman or whore and the physical action to limit her bodily mobility represent the collective desire to return to a less-divided Ireland; the social judgements against her represent her exclusion from the myth. Regardless, the problem with this sort of idealistic activism—as noted earlier—is that the social construction cannot lead back, however well-mythologized, to a pure culture. Yet the collective seeks to maintain the myth for the sake of a national identity rather than to see Mary’s situation for its actual and current realities.

Oppression against a specific demographic should likely create a common thread to bind members of the oppressed group together. Colonial action then, creates a stronger sense of self, based on the authoritative ‘other’. A minority group, “having been ‘coerced into a negative, generic subject position... transforms [oppression] into a positive collective one’” (Bhabha 229). O’Brien’s Irish women work so hard to implicate Mary as impure, yet their transformation does not lead to a collective female or feminine positive subject position, but rather, because of the feminine body / mother Ireland equation, to a collective national mythical position. Bhabha suggests that “[these] fragmented, partially occluded values of minority discourse” fall short of the “third space” and impede or disturb “self-identification ... and sovereignty of the self” (230). In O’Brien’s text, the women may no longer view themselves as individual women, but simply as extensions of

the national and inveterate myth of Irish woman, which is why they fight so hard to implicate Mary as guilty.

The act of social communities placing guilt and blame upon victims of sexual crimes is common; the violated body speaks of both the indiscretion and the stigma. In *Carnal Knowledge: Rape on Trial*, Sue Lees argues that the “scapegoating and blaming of the victim are marked trends” (75) in rape trials, particularly when the media are ardently involved. She says the victims’ “past and behaviour at the time of the attack are scrutinized, thereby subtly shifting the responsibility onto them” (75). Lees discusses the power imbalances between men and women involved in random acts of rape, whereas O’Brien’s Mary is raped at home by what Lees calls “an intimate” (74). The power structures are amplified because they are multiplicitous and ongoing, which is more representative of the larger societal oppression at work. According to Lees, once a woman “ventures into the public sphere—the male sphere—whether it is the street, a public house or a male-dominated workplace... [she] is in danger of being seen as ‘fair game’” (75). However, Mary’s violations all occur within the domestic sphere, either within the home or, as with the initial rape, on the bog on her father’s property. Contrary to Lees’ point, Mary remains within the domestic female space and, still, her guilt endures. Whether or not Mary’s community should perceive her as guilty is practically inconsequential; existing as a woman in Éire she is guilty anyway.

Perhaps because James’s injuries confine him to the home, particularly after Bridget’s death, he begins to perceive the domestic sphere as a re-claimed masculine space. Even though the private space is a place of domesticity, generally aligned with the feminine, colonial emasculation denies Irish men legitimate space for masculine power

assertions. For James, his home becomes a guaranteed territory in which his publicly suspended masculine assertions of power can be acted out. As such, when Mary avoids the domestic space and moves away, the father and daughter experience a sort of re-appointment of roles within the home and the community. James even reports to Francie, a guard who visits him after his debilitating accident, that Mary was always “[out] late...She was off with Tara day and night” (O’Brien 138). At the same meeting, James laments with specific urgency, “If I could just get away” (137), suggesting a reversal of social place. Mary is always off “gallivanting” (136) and James is limited to the home with “[memories], too many memories” (137). Lees purports that “[to] be masculine... involves independence from relationships, lack of sentimentality, sexual success, ...physical toughness and worldly success” (43), and each of these things, Lees suggests, exploits women. James’s haunting by memories implies a certain elevated sense of empathy normally falling into the female or domestic sphere.

The reversal of the oppositional dyad removes blame and responsibility from James and places it solely on Mary. Media interference also creates unfounded accounts of Mary’s guilt, and perpetuates both the Madonna Myth, and the myth of woman as inherently evil and as “responsible for tempting men” (Lees xix). O’Brien’s illustrations of the radio talk show depict the divided debate over ‘Magdalene’ and the “topic for discussion ... that was rocking the nation” (O’Brien 186). The first caller names Mary “a slut” and suggests so many others are far worse off, as if she should accept her fate without any subsequent personal action (186-7). Most of the callers discuss Mary as if she were not a real person, which implies both a lack of individual agency and a notion of a right to possess women in general. The callers and the host alike dictate phrases such as

“corrupting our maidens... [and] destroying the country” (187) in between demands for Mary’s freedom.

The debate over Mary’s purity or lack thereof is interesting because arguments on both sides are extremely heated and passionate. Yet, at the same time, each participant is decidedly indifferent to Mary as an actual person. The majority of the discussions relate to the reputation and preservation of the country; Mary represents the country, so while there is a general concern for her circumstances, it is the way in which her situation reflects *upon* the nation that is the source of her objectification. Lees writes:

Rape is the ultimate objectification, in which the woman’s consent is overruled and her humanity denied. The offence poses a threat to physical integrity and this is compounded by humiliation and deprivation of privacy... Rape is the ultimate denial of female subjectivity in a culture where a whole range of sexual practices operates in male interests. (xiii)

The visible nature of a rape trial shifts blame to the raped woman. In so doing, the prosecutor exacerbates female objectification and denies the woman her privacy. In *Down by the River*, national involvement magnifies Mary’s case. The *courtroom* is neither confined nor controlled because citizens are passing judgement in every institution from the penal system to the pub. James complains about how Mary’s story leaked from a private hearing meant to be “*in camera*” (191). The boundaries of the courtroom are porous and lacking official structure. So, perhaps this passionate debate stems from an intense need to define Irish nationalisms, but because national identities are so unstructured, the debate itself, and thus the placement of guilt, follows suit and creates further the sense of exclusion from a national identity. Lacking national identity, Catholicism is the most significant identity mark upon the Irish citizenry. Catholicism is Irish national identity.

Like any concept of nationhood, Irish nationalisms result from imaginary mythologies. Yet, because of its long colonial history, Irish nationalist practices and identity politics rely heavily on the notion of the Irish Catholic Golden Age, and fiercely resist British Protestantism. Dependence on conservative ideals of orthodox Catholicism functions like a foundational myth and as such, dictates current and ongoing nationalist identity. Important to this conservative ideology is the need to embrace practices that encourage the strength of the family—in terms of maintaining a domestic hierarchy—and resisting revolutionary activity. According to Richard Kearney, Irish “history is complex” (7) because Irish nationalism takes on so many forms. In the “Introduction” to *Postnationalist Ireland*, Kearney argues different variations on the notion of nationalism. Each of these definitions contains numerous and contradictory elements to aid and abet confusion over Irish selfhood, sovereignty and culture. He suggests Irish nationalism is a “mirror-image [of] British nationalism” (9), but that “one of the most ingenious ploys of British (or more particularly English) nationalism... [is] to pretend that [Irish nationalism] *doesn't exist*” (9). The perception of what exists (the corruption of the colonizer) and what does not exist (the notion of a pure Ireland) is juxtaposed. And Kearney further points to the link between British and Irish nationalisms as “Siamese twins” (9) of which one part, Britain, is both “obsessed by [the other,] Ireland, and oblivious of it” (10). The dual personality thus creates what Kearney calls a “*separation of identities*” (9). Linking the feminine entity to the subordinate nation creates the same dynamic: obsessed yet oblivious. Consider the process of labelling individuals in a collective in order to determine differences and similarities to evaluate and then place into a hierarchy. Successful classification—from the authoritarian power’s perspective—

allows for the perpetuation of the power and creates a procedure that ensures the ability of the oppressor to continue to exercise power. Kearney suggests this procedure relies on “unpacking wholes in favour of parts; of differentiating in order to better apprehend” (1). Foucault, however, apprehends difference and applies it to exclusion (*Discipline* 199). Nation and gender, when colonized, function based primarily on difference from the colonialist and homogenization of the colonized. Kearney argues these nationalisms depend on the legally inclusive nature of categories (2) and apply status within and without the territorial boundaries.

Yet Mullally argues that Irish nationalism functions as inherently exclusionary and, in order to exclude, church and state must regulate particular social practices. Regulating citizenry is the goal; therefore, regulating reproduction—and those who carry the reproductive weight—is the method. She suggests that running parallel to the anti-abortion and pro-choice debates were debates concerning the admissibility of immigrants and their right to declare citizenship by virtue of birth for their children (101). In 2004, the electorate voted to restrict birthright citizenship to children whose parents had lived legally in Ireland for a minimum of three years (102). A child unwittingly born in Ireland whose parents had lived there for less than three years is denied citizenship. Further, government officials debated but eventually discarded on grounds of impracticality forcing “non-national women of child-bearing age to make declarations of pregnancy when arriving in the state” (103). Even proposing the recommendation not only reflects an immense paranoia over the invasion and desecration of the nationalistic body, but also presents a great lack of concern for human rights in terms of privacy and bodily integrity (103). Kearney outlines how anyone outside of the exclusive patriarchal group functions

as a “potential irritant in the body politic” (4). Such exclusionism and restriction toward women resulting from a biological or physical capacity affirm the Irish ideal of using feminine bodies and reproductive rights as a way for a masculine dominated Church and state to fit the feminine ‘other’ into the delicate patriarchal system. Moreover, problematic to the *body* of Ireland are questions of legitimate boundaries. For a country such as Ireland, the territorial boundaries should be clear considering “Ireland is an integral island ‘surrounded by water’” (Kearney 3). However, long-lasting colonial activity interferes with what should be concrete borders.

In *Explaining Northern Ireland*, John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary suggest Ireland’s identity division rests on the belief of the people of Northern Ireland that “they differ decisively from the other people in the rest of the island” and this is in part a result of its imperial father, Britain (101). The patriarchal figure constructs all selfhood, sovereignty and autonomy, so what happens to identity when all of these things are defined as necessarily collective or homogenized within a group? McGarry and O’Leary outline, in a specifically Northern Irish context, a departure from the homogenized ideal of the colonized because of further division to the “exact nature of their nation” (101). Conflicts between the population of the Republic and the population of Northern Ireland result from varied identities and individual differences within the concise island boundary. However, they also argue that a sort of geno-centric violence or aggression is a result of the minor differences between groups, which loom large in the imagination (253). McGarry and O’Leary point out that *potent* nationalism rests on the idea of the nation as both “collectively and freely expressed and ruled” (13), but this is perhaps not the case for the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The homogenization of a

collective nationalism is problematic because the collective is not, in reality, homogeneous. Just as the patriarchy or the religious power erroneously homogenizes woman, they also distort the idea of Irish nationalism. Yet, because the political, cultural, social or even gender *differences* are minimal, the conflicts they spur have the potential for intense expansion.

Dana Hearne discusses how in pre-Independence Ireland a Catholic Church-focused conservative nationalism eclipsed community-focused nation building projects (85). Disregarding grassroots sovereignty in order to privilege a national identity based upon the strict confines of organized religion not only elevates the status of the religion as integral for identity, but also marginalizes and controls specific groups in very specific ways. As such, the maintenance of the Catholic identity paradigm in which women's reproductive rights are highly regulated sacrifices their freedom. Communal desires to protect Catholicism from Protestant influence in the early colonial period reinforce the needs of the Church over the needs of the people. As such, women's subordination resulting from Catholicism becomes a positive national symbol of collective emancipation rather than one of long-lasting oppression (86). And as determined earlier, if the Catholic Church and the nation are feminine, they force real women as socially-necessary feminine entities into [a] third place. The body politic and the body religious replace real feminine bodies and relocate them to an imaginary space where identities are likewise imaginary. Privileging a fictional nationalism and religion as legitimate feminine bodies diverts meaning and value from actual productive feminine subjects. The abundance of imaginary boundaries, spaces, and individual identities further complicates efforts to create nationalist identity.



For Ireland, the island's borders enforce an unusual nationalist dynamic. In *The Fall and Rise of the Irish Nation*, Thomas Bartlett writes that a long colonial history forces the Irish population into "requesting readmission into the body politic" (Bartlett 30). O'Brien's community of informers may represent this desire to be readmitted, but the body politic defines "the People before persons" (Kearney 4). The collective is imaginary and mythologized. Contingent on this construction, colonial activity and its contradictory mis-definition of the collective disallow the deviant individual admission into the body politic. The Irish body religious has an equally grand history, and subsequently, social and cultural norms reflect what Tom Inglis calls "the multifaceted role of the Catholic church" (9), which "created and maintained" a regime of social control (10). In "Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland," Inglis outlines how the church's changing family demands—particularly for women's roles as wife, mother, or nun—created an aura of control of desire and pleasure:

...it is a mistake to concentrate on the state, the laws that were passed, or the way in which laws were enforced through policing. It is better to examine how ordinary individuals were supervised and controlled in families, schools, and communities. One of the primary mechanisms of everyday policing was the control of desire and pleasure. (11)

Inglis suggests the nineteenth-century Catholic Church first demanded that marriage and children be the ultimate and ideal goal for women aspiring for "social status and moral nature" (14). But, following the population explosion between 1754 and 1841 and the Great Famine, extreme restrictions upon marriage to reduce fertility were imposed, and thus denied women the possibility to fulfil "the ideal role for women of becoming mothers" (16). Inglis writes: "This led to an enormous cultural contradiction: the home

and motherhood were promoted as the natural vocation for women, and yet most women were denied access to this role” (16-7). As such, this contradiction of existence necessarily forced women into states of self-denial and self-sacrifice. The Church at once defines how women should self-actualize and then denies them that possibility. Yet women who did become mothers were still expected to “[inculcate] in their daughters the same notions of self-denial and self-sacrifice into which they had been acculturated” (18).

In this moment of inability to self-actualize, and because of their confinement to the domestic sphere and the ongoing cultural promulgation of the rhetoric and ideology of self-sacrifice, “Irish women confused their own self-interest with the national interest” (Inglis 20). The body religious affects the body politic, and strengthens the forces of oppression of women. He argues that there was little evidence of feminine revolution or desire for emancipation. Those women who did break out of the domestic sphere did so by entering the religious sphere, but even so, “nuns were exemplars rather than challengers of the culture of self-denial” (20). As such, when O’Brien’s Mary retreats to the convent for protection, she actually re-possesses her position in a culture of self-denial. Mary’s domestic sphere or “family home” is not what Inglis would call “the basis of civilized society” (14), but of course, the very opposite. By turning to the church and the life of a nun when she cannot fit into the role of domestic angel, Mary essentially “[renounces her] sinfulness... to ascend to a purer way of life” (Inglis 14).

Religious imposition in the political arena via the family home is the basis of maintaining religious primacy. According to Lene Sjørup, not only does religion impinge upon state politics, but also “the Vatican, through its negotiations as well as through the construction of a hegemonic discourse on abortion and contraception, has situated itself

as a political actor” (81). She argues, the “political legitimacy of the Holy See... does not rest upon a constituency, but upon the hegemonic power of hierarchical, political Catholicism” (82). The Vatican’s self-positioning as a political force at United Nations Conferences (81) suggests the issues which it rallies for or against are not religious issues, but political ones. This complete self-imposition of religion into state, or even world politics illustrates the Church’s belief that government legislators must form law primarily upon God’s law, of which of course, the hierarchical church is the chief interpreter (85). The Church’s insistence upon remaining involved with regulative and legislative elements of society stretches its control into the legal sphere in which it can justifiably enforce its moral and ethical codes. Once religious elements are legislated, the church no longer is a power that *suggests* or *condones* a certain pious way of life or living, but is a power that *demand*s and *enforce*s that way of life.

In *Down by the River*, O’Brien portrays this danger through Dr Tom when he warns Betty that the medical fraternity is “under the thumbs of the bishops” (142). His fear is that not only could the religious powers-that-be debilitate his medical practice, but also, they could convict him and send him “to Gaol” (142). Religious interference is of course extreme in O’Brien’s text; it outlines the depths to which religion is entrenched in the belief systems of the population and as such, how that indelibility bleeds into the governmental and penal systems. The Church defines and relates all identity of the feminine entity to the feminine body; any power working upon the entity directs towards the body. This sort of religious colonization is very dangerous. Sjørup explains how the Catholic Church fully condemned “abortion, even if for therapeutic reasons,” which the

church defines as abortion “performed when the life of the mother is endangered by the pregnancy” (84). The feminine body is legislated to die.

The depths of this Catholic belief system are profound and lasting. In 2004, Cardinal Prefect Joseph Ratzinger, only one year before his papal inauguration, presented a paper at the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary called “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” in which he attempts to place women into the social schema. Ratzinger turns to the Bible to substantiate his claims that God created woman for Adam as “a *helpmate*” because animals were not enough to combat his loneliness (par. 6). He argues that the term *helpmate* “does not refer to an inferior, but to a vital helper... so that Adam’s life does not sink into a sterile and, in the end, baneful encounter with himself” (par. 6). That Ratzinger argues the term helper is not inferior, but vital, is problematic. The word itself carries an assumption that the task in need of help is primary to the existence of the helper, and is a term for a labourer who is subservient to a leader or master; Ratzinger suggests that the task of avoiding a baneful encounter with the male’s own self is primary to the existence of woman and she exists only to *aid* or *distract* her male counterpart. Ratzinger’s assertion that “Only the woman, created from the same ‘flesh’ and cloaked in the same mystery, can give a future to the life of the man” (par. 6) homogenizes all women as capable of providing a future for a man. However, he equally homogenizes men, and reinforces the Church’s view that social roles and hierarchies are necessary under God.

If the Church maintains this perspective that God created woman as both a helper to men and an aid to “fulfil the meaning of his being and his existence” (par. 6), then by

God's divine will, the ongoing oppression of women is just and valid. She would not have existed if not to attend to the needs of men, thus diminishing her value as an individual and sovereign entity. Ratzinger attempts to privilege his notion that "woman, in her deepest and original being, exists 'for the other'" (par. 6), as if existing only for others is a positive identifier rather than one that is negating and commodifying. He homogenizes woman to the role of wife or mother. Later in the paper, Ratzinger validates the existence of the patriarchal structure by suggesting that upon creation, man and woman were equal, and their relationships functioned on a base of "equal dignity" (par. 8). After the moment of the original sin, God altered the relationships between men and women to be destined for strife and conflict (par.7). God's original plan for men and women included only peace, equality, and concord (par.7). According to Ratzinger, patriarchy and the oppression of woman are punishment for original sin.

Similarly, as noted above, Ratzinger displays varying levels of the categorization of women into specific groups or roles. He writes: "In the scene of the wedding feast at Cana, for example, Jesus is asked by his mother, who is called 'woman', to offer, as a sign, the new wine of the future wedding with humanity" (par. 10). Being called woman to represent mother universalizes varying roles of woman and ultimately encourages the reification of the feminine body. Ratzinger is also well-versed in the idea of God as masculine bridegroom, and certain places—Israel, or Jerusalem in particular—the church, or humanity in general, as the bride. If "[he] who has the bride is the bridegroom" (par. 10), then the possession of the feminine bride is the solitary prerequisite for defining the masculine groom. The only prerequisite for the bride is being female and to be in the role

to participate in a cultural rite. She at once defines a masculine entity, yet she carries the cultural meaning necessary to maintain the system of the religious patriarchy.

Ratzinger writes at length on Catholicism's demands and expectations of women. He acknowledges that "motherhood is a key element of women's identity" and as such, society may enclose women within this "biological destiny," creating "a dangerous disrespect for women" (par. 13). His solution, which he ironically paints as radically feminist, is for these women to remain virgins and *act* like mothers for other people (par.13). Virginity re-places women from the physical realm of procreation providing stronger insight into the "spiritual dimension" (par. 13) and subsequently removes her from society's judgment of her as solely corporeal. This Catholic insistence, in a contemporary paper no less, that a woman must be either a virgin or a mother is astounding. Ratzinger confines women's roles to dealing with elements of family and social life in which relationships and support of others are her only necessity (par. 13). Religious authorities proceed to place women—through myth, as noted earlier—into specific and limited roles within first, the body religious and subsequently, the body politic. He eliminates for women any access to individual development and personal sovereignty because of what he considers a God-given nature preserving "the deep intuition of the goodness in their lives of those actions which elicit life, and contribute to the growth and protection of the other" (par. 13). Abortion, for example, has no place when women commit themselves to this type of ideology.

Mullally is concerned that these types of Catholic influences on women's rights policy compromise human rights (79); "forcing a woman to carry out a pregnancy is cruel, inhumane and degrading" (80). In Catholic Ireland, dependence on gender roles to

distinguish sovereign marks of Irish identity as separate from English identity infringes primarily on women rather than men (82). Women bear this weight because national identity is primarily dependant on citizenry, citizenry on reproduction, and reproduction on woman. In this way, Irish nationalism and its subsequent definitions weigh heavily on women's human rights. Yet, the process of de-humanizing woman through the hollowing of their bodies, the Madonna Myth, and the Feminine Trinity questions any inclusion of women as even having access to *human* rights. Post-colonial projects take precedence over any one woman's reproductive autonomy; her sexual and reproductive functions out-identify even moral agency (83). In the name of embracing anything not-English, the Catholic Church advocates the subordination of women. Self-sacrifice is necessary to protect Ireland and Irish ways from the "polluting forces of English law" (84). English Protestant society had much more relaxed opinions regarding women and reproductive health (84), so Irish practices for similar issues tightened in order to contradict the English ways. The Irish system's commitment to maintaining separate spheres through legislated gender roles illustrates the depths of sexual difference (85). Mullally suggests that although the nation was defined as primarily feminine, "the political activity came to be defined as peculiarly masculine" (83), and strived to keep woman in the home and devoted to her domestic duties (85).

Increased pressure on women to devote themselves to their homes and families is a result of a common dissolution of religious intimacy and perhaps even degeneration of belief in religious affiliations. Sjørup contends that because organized religion in general has experienced a substantial waning in popularity, it has developed "special concern... for the private sphere, and particularly women's bodies" (82). In Ireland, between 1930

and 1960, great economic and cultural expansion corroded previously strong Catholic and Marian devotions (Donnelly 183-4). Even so, Ratzinger does not veil his belief in the patriarchal and religious right to women's bodies. Reinforcing Catholic ideals—such as complete prohibition on abortion—oppressing the feminine body, and disregarding the feminine entity may not cause concern for the Church because, according to Anne O'Connor, the “Irish folk heritage with regard to abortion is a complex one” (65) with long histories reaching back to the “seventh century Irish Penitential of St Finnian” (59). The Church is unsympathetic and unapologetic about its antiquated treatment of women even amidst its current shrinking membership. O'Connor suggests that these ancient cultures blamed miscarriage and natural abortion on “woman's magic” (59), contributing to the perpetuation of feminine myth, and subsequently affecting “Christian morals and teachings” (64). In most lore women would take responsibility for “doing away with an unwanted child,” and in “nearly all cases of the folk legend, infanticide, and not abortion, is the method for achieving this end” (64). In terms of specifically pre-birth death, “however, inducing ‘natural’ abortion, by means of violence to the feminine body or chemical ingestion seems to have been the preferred method” (63) rather than straight out abortion to deal with unwanted pregnancy. Measures taken to ensure miscarriage seem to proffer less guilt to the active parties. James's violence against Mary, however, is an internal attack on Mary and the baby, which he justifies as his right over her as his possession. Because in Mary's case, the person taking responsibility for the elimination of the pregnancy is not female, but male, taboos regarding the murder of the unborn are perhaps dissipated. James physically enacts his desires upon the feminine body; Mary calls on divine intervention as she asks the baby's soul to fly away (237).



Possession of the feminine body and reproductive processes, by validation through the hierarchy of right according to the body politic, allows masculine domination. According to Jo Murphy-Lawless, the setting up of the Rotunda Lying-in Hospital in 1745 Dublin (69) allowed the male-dominated medical system to claim “authority over the lives of women... [and] control... the female body” (73). The medicalization and institutionalization of childbirth effectively removed all feminine involvement—in terms of midwifery—from the labour and delivery of babies, and transferred that occupation to the male, scientific field (73). Before this institutionalization of childbirth in lying-in hospitals, women would normally give birth at home or in “small cottage hospitals in Ireland” (75). With the development of maternity hospitals, a patriarchal and religious government—driven by both economic inclinations and so-called moral preservation—could monitor and dictate the movement of pregnant and labouring women, restricting not only their physical movement, but also the processes of childbirth and female labour itself (71). Murphy-Lawless writes: “The power of men midwives to control women in childbirth lay in their ability to postulate a connection between the individual body and the needs of the social body” (69).

The power of the body politic creates for individual women an inability to control their own freedom of movement. This gendered “power of state to confine [Irish] women within its jurisdiction and to deprive them of the right to freedom of movement” relates to a complete arresting of the feminine entity (Smyth 11); her identity is at once confined within her gendered body, and her body confined within the nation. The parallels of X’s 1992 legal ordeal in O’Brien’s text are explicit. The court ruling in X’s case sacrificed the rights of X in favour of the rights of the foetus; the viable and culturally profitable inside

is privileged over the existing individual. Irish judges sanction X's body not only to stay in Ireland for at least ten months, but also to continue to exist as a host, or a literal carrying case for a foetus that she did not choose to conceive. In this way X's sacrifice, as does Mary MacNamara's, mirrors the Virgin Mary's situation as opposed to the fallen and possibly repentant Magdalene for whom she is named, because they both were impregnated without their consent, and their bodies thus become carriers for community-defining meaning. X's case breaches and exceeds the authority of religion into penal legislation and disrupts the already obscure and strained boundaries between the two powers.

In Éire, indistinct boundaries between politics and religion, and which debate belongs where, compound the intensity of the abortion controversy. There may be no actual *political* abortion philosophy over which to debate; if abortion is only morally or ethically dictated, then there is no *right* for legislation on abortion in any case. In *Abortion Rights as Religious Freedom*, Peter S. Wenz argues that the debate over the rights of the foetus as a human being is so problematic because "no secular concepts can settle this issue... [and] 'the only bodies of thought that have purported in this century to locate the crucial line between potential and actual life have been those of organized religious doctrine'" (80). Abortion debates do not belong in the political sphere. Because religious organizations are often so strongly opposed to the practice of abortion, and governing bodies can provide no legal solution other than affording full decision-making power to women over individual abortions, the power transfers to religious groups who assert their power over not only women in need of, or desiring an abortion, but also over political and legislating bodies. A woman's religious affiliation is of no consequence

even though the prohibition on abortion is a clearly religious decree. According to Wenz, the primary conflict revolves around the indefinite nature of the foetus. Wenz quotes an American judge as ruling, “‘unless the religious view that a fetus [sic] is a ‘person’ is adopted... there is a fundamental and well-recognized difference between a fetus [sic] and a human being’” (81). Wenz continues:

So legislation designed to restrict access to abortions in order to protect the fetus [sic] is unconstitutional. The fetus [sic] merits such protection only if it has human rights. But the fetus [sic] has such rights only on a religious view of the matter. Thus, legislation designed to protect the fetus [sic] is unconstitutional because it amounts to the establishment of religion. (Wenz 81)

The Establishment of Religion Clause (78) in the American constitution prohibits the creation laws involving “‘excessive entanglement’ with religion” (80). In 1937 Ireland, however, the Prime Minister, a few advisors, “and the leading figures within Ireland’s Catholic Church and the Vatican” drafted the constitution (Mullally 85). Religious influence is forefront, explicit, and expected. Thus, Ireland’s constitution protects complete prohibition of abortion except in the case that the mother’s life or health is in critical danger (Smyth 25-6).

The development of legislation pertaining to abortion and human versus foetal rights is questionable and perhaps biased toward religious aspirations and ambitions. Article 40.3.3 specifically addresses the state’s acknowledgment of “the right to life of the unborn” (26), which is due to the profound influence of the Catholic Church. In *The Second Partitioning of Ireland?: The Abortion Referendum of 1983*, Tom Hesketh cites Marilyn Field’s research as concluding “the size of the Catholic population within each country [has] a greater determining impact on the permissiveness of the nation’s abortion laws than any other single factor” (39). According to Hesketh, when “dealing with such

[ethical] problems the Catholic Church adopts an 'absolutist' stance... which posits that an action may be right or wrong depending on whether it conforms with or is contrary to the Law of God" (42). But because the Church is so entrenched in the Irish way of life, the government, its polity and policies become unavoidably and irrevocably entangled with religious values.

O'Brien's Ireland is certainly no exception. Francie candidly asserts to James: "The law of the land, James... The Law of God" (O'Brien 139). This conversation between James and Francie, a police guard, represents the essence of patriarchal thought and power. When Francie first informs James of Mary's trip to England for an abortion James declares, "I'll kill her" (O'Brien 138). Francie responds, "Well, before you kill her we better get her back..." (138). The Garda's apparent disregard for James's threat on his daughter's life suggests his acceptance of both violence and gendered possession. Of course, Francie is, at this point, unaware of James's involvement in Mary's pregnancy and likely disregards the threat as idle. But even so, his assertion of "Stress... Mega stress" (139) points to his own internalization of masculine responsibility for the 'weaker sex' and his duty to stop the abortion. Francie maintains: "Now we can't allow that... We have to put a stop to that..." (138). The perceived responsibility and the right of the privileged patriarchy place them in a position to attempt control and exert power over anyone outside of the privileged group.

Masculine administration as conjunctive with religious authority provides no rights for women regarding power over the bodies and their children. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault states that "one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death," as it was the right of the father to inflict death

upon “his children and slaves [because] just as he had given them life, so he could take it away” (135). In this way, a woman’s right to choose an abortion over bearing a child is an infringement upon the rights of the father or the rights of the religious or political state. Even any state or religious interference with attempted suicide is a infringement upon an individual’s ability to make decisions for the existence of her—or his—own body. Yet, Foucault argues that suicide is illegal because “it was a way to usurp the power of death which the sovereign alone, whether the one here or the Lord above, had the right to exercise” (138).

The chapter “Broomstick” illustrates the practical application of the brutal notion of Foucault’s right of death (Foucault *History* 135). James’s attempt to issue an abortion with a broomstick (O’Brien 104-6) portrays an extreme disregard of Mary as an individual, and by extension, of her baby. It violently reiterates the idea of the hollow body, not only insofar as Mary-as-an-entity is not synonymous or indistinguishable from her body, but also that the infant inside her body is likewise hollow; James’s violence metaphorically and literally hollows out her body. The baby itself is *just* a body with no potential for individual identity. The violence against the body represents the epitome of the female body as simply material object. Now empty of subjectivity, Mary’s body is free to become fully possessed by those who oppress her. James exercises his power against her, as a father with a right to death, because she is nothing but a vessel to him. He forces Mary into both the crime and the punishment for that crime, further constructing her as a vessel for disgrace by placing all blame upon her physical body.

Foucault only briefly addresses rape and fails to acknowledge the imposition of sexuality—and power for that matter—on the body of the raped; his discourse instead

lists rape alongside “adultery... spiritual or carnal incest... sodomy, or the mutual ‘caress’... homosexuality... marriage without parental consent, or bestiality” (*History* 38). His list outlines deviations against the body politic, but fails to differentiate between victims and offenders. In this instance, Foucault privileges the damage to the community from sexual deviation over the damage to the individual. His neglect to address the violation of women as exercising power affirms that his primary interest is the offence directed at the community. The same dynamic seems to be at work in *Down by the River*, as James disregards both Mary’s body and the body of the unborn baby for his own patriarchal ends.

In *Women and Rape*, Cathy Roberts argues that constructed feminine passivity “provides an idea of woman as existing to be used” and creates a “background to victimization [and] the denial of self control” (8). Roberts suggests culture based on male-female relationships within the home both reflects and perpetuates the power structures and belief systems of the patriarchal society. Gender relationships in and out of the home—and illustrated explicitly in O’Brien’s text—mirror “how intimacy is reduced to a form of ownership” (Roberts 15). The archetype of the child, particularly a female child, doubly binds the child as possession. Mary’s subordination is twofold; as a child she is the automatic property of her father, and as female she does not even carry the capacity or potential—as a male child does—to grow into an independent role. Roberts writes: “Because an intimate relationship is the last place abuse would be expected, when it does appear women are less prepared and therefore less able to oppose or avoid it” (15). Mary, in Ireland and in her home, as the object of James’s violence and sexuality becomes at once victim, criminal and sacrilege.

Revolutionary—or rebellious—acts, such as Betty Crowe’s chaperoning Mary to England for her abortion, may operate on an individual level to expand a person’s experience and existence, but rarely shed enough light on the power system to affect paradigmatic change. Geraldine Finn writes:

Our lives exceed the categories that organize our relationship to power and to each other. Claiming that excess against the category that names and contains us broadens the political scope of the category and thus the political scope of our lives. But it leaves the category and the ‘class’ system it articulates intact and available for recuperation and control by and for the ruling apparatus if this is all it does. (343)

The ongoing and heated debate over Mary’s character and circumstances only broadens the political scope of *her type*, yet does nothing to address the conflict within the system as a whole. Her actions do not necessarily or generally create sympathetic perceptions of her, or others like her, and actually may increase the negating stereotypes against her. In *Down by the River*, the politics of oppression by church and state remain, just like Finn might suggest, intact. However intense the violence for recreating spaces for feminine bodies, the political and religious bodies experience little of the dissection suffered by these feminine bodies. In *Masterminds of the Right*, Emily O’Reilly points out that a major downfall of Article 40.3.3—the constitutional amendment outlining a foetus’s human rights—is that the legislation fails to “regulate how the conflicting rights of woman and unborn reconcile” (131). And although O’Reilly suggests the major players within the legal system were profoundly concerned and aware of the consequences of even coming to some sort of resolution for X’s case, she also reports a certain sense of anxiety on the government’s part as being unable to deal with the conflicting rights of mother and unborn (133).

According to O'Reilly, both church and state exhibited contradictory stances over X's travel status, and at once maintained absolute prohibition on abortion, yet continued to rally for her freedom to travel (133). Although these contradictions ultimately led to the lifting of restrictions on her movement and thus her ability to procure an abortion, they also represent a desire to avoid illuminating the objectives of the entrenched systems of power. These irreconcilable ideologies symbolize not only a political and religious desire to maintain control over women's bodies, but also to keep that control silent and unquestioned. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues the regulating power must be invisible and silent in order to preserve and sustain a necessary repression (201). For Foucault, this silencing begins with a procedural hysterization of women, involving a thorough medicalization of their bodies and their sex (*History* 147); as mentioned earlier, a perfect setting for controlling and medicalizing feminine bodies is the Rotunda Lying-in Hospital in Dublin. Foucault argues women's subordination and acceptance of the procedure are necessary as part of the "responsibility they owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution and the safeguarding of society" (147).

Foucault writes:

Nothing that was not ordered in terms of generation or transfigured by it could expect sanction or protection... It would be driven out, denied, and reduced to silence. Not only did it not exist, it had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon its least manifestation—whether in acts or in words. (*History* 4)

In terms of sexuality—of which women were inherently and physically bound by an absolute gender identity prescript—and internal identity (of the non-sexual nature) there was no need for social address; women's rights were denied and, in the national sense, did not really even exist. It is no wonder that Irish government and the Catholic Church



were both so uncomfortable with X's situation and its progression into not only the penal system, but also, through the media, into the crucial scrutiny of public debate. The public nature of X's case unfolds the hidden agendas of the patriarchal and religious power structures. Similarly, Mary MacNamara's personal situation is marginalized by the greater needs of the power systems to protect their own oppressive projects and maintain the entrenched repression.

In a rare episode where James is not behaving violently towards Mary, the father and daughter work together to help birth a foal. The "mare [is] so pitiful it is as if she is being carved within" (61) and she acts as if she is "determined to escape the violence within her" (60). Mary's hand in the hollowing of the mare points to her forced submission and consequent willingness to conform to the status quo, and to the regulations and expectations set out for women by the state and the Catholic Church. Moreover, Mary not only reluctantly assists with feminine hollowing, she also cooperates with the masculine appropriation of female labour because of James's interference and control over the birth. At the onset of the labour, Mary attempts to leave to call for help, but James forces her to stay. In this case, the hollowing of the mother is brutal, and after a long fight to right the position of the foal, James announces, "[she'll] fly out, she'll fly out now" (62). Of course, the tension created from the inside—or what is inside—fighting the outside aligns with the notion of privilege; the mother "stops breathing as if it is all too much, as if she will die... [and] the foal is the stronger, her energy and her thrusting prodigal now" (61). The birthing process transforms the mare into a site from which the foal needs to escape. The threat to the existence of the mother is inconsequential and that which is inside possess every advantage because of its value as a

commodity. The physical and biological reality of childbirth equates to and validates for the patriarchy a prescribed idea of the feminine body as a vessel. Corporeal binds fetter the feminine body into the social construct because reproduction depends upon the biological feminine body to *carry* a foetus physically and the metaphorical feminine to *carry on* culture. Because of biological roles, the placement of the feminine body into the gender dyad—as it is—is practically unavoidable.

The foal is born after the “obduracy of almost an hour” and in true O’Brien style, comes as a “tender swathe of wet flesh, fluid, dimensionless, with the beauty of a stream or a river...” (62). At almost the very moment of birth, however, James calls the foal “villain” (62). Once the inside is out, the marginalization is instantaneous. The mother is docile because all that happens to her is imposed upon her rather than being her own active choice; she emerges from the labour automatically submissive and domestic, cleaning her offspring once the violence has subsided. James’s treatment of the foal immediately following its birth is important to maintain the idea of the homogenized feminine body. He pats the foal as he calls her villain, and then “pats [Mary] as a moment before he had patted the animal” (63). James’s equal treatment of both woman and animal suggests his inclination to group them as one, at once denying them agency, individuality, and most particularly, humanity.

The mare’s inability to manage on her own during childbirth represents the idea that feminine bodies exist out of feminine individual control. If a feminine body is incapable even of independently playing out an activity inherent to it—childbirth—then perceptions surrounding the feminine body as in need of assistance or intervention is expected. Masculine interference in childbirth may actually create this construed notion

of possession over the body and the subsequent *use* of it for cultural purposes. Betty Crowe's feminine body is also inactive and docile; her barren and empty body prevents her from acting out her desires to be a mother (O'Brien 111). She is haunted by her numerous miscarriages and the possible suicide of her husband, whom she could not legitimize by providing him children. *Her* body failed *him* socially and culturally by its physical inability; her body could not function for its intended purpose of production and maintenance of culture. Mr Crowe—as a masculine entity—could not *fill her up* and *use* her body to increase his own power. Foucault's attention to docile bodies focuses on the idea of a “political anatomy” (*Discipline* 138). The political body operates by limiting power of the individual body: “...on the one hand, it turns it into an ‘aptitude’, a ‘capacity’ which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection” (138). The body politic needs to apply meaning to the body in order to detach power from the individual. The pushing and pulling of energy further disable personal agency and force the idea of the body into a space where the only value or purpose is relational to social use and meaning. This sense of communal access to the individual body not only results in a sense of colonial entitlement to the body, but also to its availability as a site for the articulation of social penal practice, and for a culturally-defined notion of natural characteristics of the feminine body.

### 3

#### **Ambiguity and Anonymity: The Feminine Entity as Object and Anti-Human**

“It does not hurt if you say it does not hurt.  
It does not hurt if you are not you.”

Edna O’Brien,  
*Down by the River*

The paradigm of gender oppression for cultural or social advantage includes the generalizing efforts of patriarchal control to reduce women’s individuality to the point of ambiguous de-humanization. If all women are equal, but only to each other, all feminine individuality is thus void and all agency arrested. Women become, through ambiguity—in reality and in the text—anonymous, interchangeable, and their individual power nullified. In *Down by the River*, Edna O’Brien feminizes her female characters—regardless of their human or animal status—to the point of anonymity. The feminine entity exists only for being feminine and her worth depends only upon her ability to perpetuate the success of the community as a vessel for reproduction. The female body is the site for both ambiguity and anonymity, which effectively limits and inhibits individual freedom and expression. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault suggests, “project the subtle segmentations of discipline onto the confused space of internment, combine it with the methods of analytical distribution proper to power, individualize the excluded, but use its procedures of individualization to mark exclusion” (199). The levels of individualization occur only to mark exclusion from the privileged side of the “binary division” (199) where masculine entities reside and preside.

If family structures both reflect and create national ones, and family politics are based upon gender dynamics within the family, the politics of nation building are thus inextricably linked to notions of gender. In "The Family as Cave, Platoon and Prison," Eileen M. Hunt tracks the transformations of the patriarchal family structure noting how families function to create close communities and subsequently strong nations. She looks primarily at Mary Wollstonecraft's work, but also addresses the alternatives offered by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Edmund Burke. Although the three differ regarding notions of requisite familial expectations, they do agree that family structure and character work to support the constitution and development of communal or national success (E.M. Hunt 81-2). Hunt outlines the hierarchies within the family as reflections of the larger community. Endowing all power upon the patriarchal head of the family ultimately places his feminine counterpart in a subordinate position and as such diminishes any of her possible authority. Just as the father has power granted him for being masculine, a state of femininity naturally usurps the mother's power.

Deducing the base of feminine oppression as the family, and then as reaching up the social structure to the nation, creates some interesting tensions. Consider the feminine body as a solid boundary—as with Ireland as an island—whose physical limits are apparent and unmistakable. Contained within this concise body are constructed identities that are blurred because of outside and authoritarian influences. So while feminine identities should perhaps be fluid and changing as they are acted upon by an individual's life experiences, containment within the body boundary shuts off individual identity. As such, limited variation for individual identity creates a feminine ambiguity rigidly defined within these boundaries and stripped of its potential for actual identity

development. The feminine body as a vessel contains only information from outside sources; political and religious bodies use the feminine body to convey only the information they desire and leave the individual fundamentally trapped in her own body. Because the family structure confiscates her power, she maintains no ability to construct her own identity as a sovereign individual.

The inability to define oneself, specifically because of cultural categorizations within the family and society, begets feminine anonymity. According to Green, resulting from the transitions to Christianity, “many pagan deities were downgraded to the status of demons” (*Goddesses* 196). Such is not the case for Brigit, who managed—like a few occasional others—to maintain her status and take on the role of a Christian saint. Green suggests that Brigit—both the goddess and the saint—represents power and authority, fertility, healing, motherhood, and “the future well-being of Ireland” (198). Yet, Green argues that while many god-names often symbolized a “title rather than a true name” (196), the practice seems specifically significant in Brigit’s case. Her name comes to symbolize, as a categorical title, a feminine entity that possesses a certain amount of power. However, with the conversion into Christianity, she lost her status as “a historical figure” and therefore “gives rise to the suspicion that she may be a mythic figure who underwent a humanization-process and was thus endowed with a false historicity” (198). Green’s portrayal of many pagan goddesses as adequately empowered juxtaposed with Christian representations of women suggests that women lost significant power at the onset of Christianity. Patriarchal dominance in the form of new religion usurps Brigit’s pagan power and mythologizes her actual existence. So, much like Brigit, O’Brien’s Bridget is an anonymous feminine, empowered to the degree she can contribute as a

mother to the future of the nation, and defined to the point only of myth. Early Christianity encases Brigit's power and her identity, and alters her potential for future personal identity construction.

O'Brien represents the feminine identity trapped within a *case* in the episode in which Mary goes to the mortician's house to visit her deceased mother. She notices a fly "[slip] underneath the lid and [vanish]" into the coffin just before the undertaker "slammed the lid down, tight as a drum" (O'Brien 57). Mary's intuition that the two creatures within the coffin, her mother and the fly, would each "go mad" (57) highlights her awareness of the patriarchal confines of the concise boundary. The coffin sealed up tight as a drum by a member of the masculine group confines the feminine entity within an imaginary identity to the point at which she goes mad. Sealed within the inescapable vessel of her body is her self and it is never able to be fully determined because, according to the religious patriarchate, it does not exist. Understandably, the notion of the feminine self, sealed within a very concise boundary to the point of insanity, seems severe and even universalist. However, given the dynamic of the Irish social and religious systems in which women were very much accessory to their own feminine myth, this insanity or madness is perhaps more so a loss of the *potential* for feminine self-actualization and an impossibility for emancipation. The religious patriarchy erases the possibility of a future realizing feminine aptitude and potential.

Imperative to ideals of a nation's past and future is the process of national identity. As noted above, representations of the past may not be actual, but imaginary so for society to base gender roles upon these imaginings creates current and future inventions of the nation and its citizens. In "Gendered Representations of the Nation's

Past and Future,” Silke Wenk suggests national movements were “frequently structured from their very beginnings according to modern conceptions of gender polarity” and resulted in a sort of natural unity signifying belonging (63-4). However, because “collective memory functions... as a reservoir for images that explain and support each other” (64), the “feminine is relegated...as an image or a sign” (65). So, much like the Madonna Myth, and de Beauvoir’s myth of woman, collective memory and foundational myths act to exclude women—based on past practices—from current and future involvement of political and cultural negotiation, and all the while demand personal sacrifice for that very nation. Challenging feminine future potential for autonomy is the obstruction of a collective memory of the past; her potential to exist outside her political symbolism is aborted.

Additionally, the living fly in the coffin of the dead woman evokes the image of a living creature, alive, but bound to die contained and trapped inside; the potential for life—or self—is ultimately aborted. The fly is like Mary’s baby, a conundrum of life and death; the only place that will now provide its life—or progress its existence—is the very place that will initiate its death. It is almost as if the baby is already dead; it just needs to die. Its potential for existence is both denied and unwanted. Mary’s body is at once the giver of life and the coffin; Ireland too exists to carry its citizens, but simultaneously impedes actual identities or existences for that citizenry. Mary herself is aware of the conflict. Just as Wollstonecraft’s Maria “[mourns] for the babe of which she was the tomb” (*Maria* 152), Mary MacNamara deplores her child:

...if only you were my sister or my brother but not my child. If you could be spirited out of me that would be all right, more than all right. It is just I cannot bear you. I am asking your soul to fly off now and wait for the right mother... (O’Brien 237)



Mary mourns for her child too because of the choice forced upon her. Ironically, at this point in the story, her baby is *also* her sister or her brother, and not only her child. The way in which she says, 'if only you were my sister or my brother' and 'wait for the right mother,' suggests she accepts the baby as having the right father. O'Brien overturns a number of conventions at this point. The fact that Mary's baby possibly has the right father is a departure from other parts of the text, in terms of the colonial and patriarchal symbolic child. Similarly, that this child could have the wrong *mother* imparts the logic that mothers cannot be ambiguously inter-changed; any mother is not just any mother. Having the wrong mother reinforces actual feminine individuality because it approves inherent variation even within the feminine maternal. Mary feels no rights of possession for the baby and is consequently conflicted. Perhaps this rejection of possessing the baby represents her denial of parental right to possess, as well as the role imposed upon her as mother. She says, "I don't want to have it and I don't want to kill it" (235); thus, she acknowledges she binds to her decision and her inherent predisposition to sacrifice.

As a woman—and also as a child—O'Brien's Mary is in unfamiliar decision-making territory and rejects having to make an active choice regarding the life and death of her baby. She is aware that her family, and perhaps Ireland as well, are full of children with wrong parents because just as Mary instructs her baby to wait for the right mother, she also recognizes that for her, James "was the wrong father" (235). Responding to Mary's judgement of James, Mrs Fitz says: "And yet, you're you because of him" (235). She suggests that James, regardless of his crimes or inappropriate behaviour, has somehow influenced positive attributes in Mary. The female entity is created and defined by the male authority, and Mrs Fitz's attribution of Mary's selfhood to James reaffirms

the masculine power and feminine subordination in terms of both identity development and individual sovereignty. After the rape in the bog, James says to Mary, “What would your mother say... Dirty little thing” (5). He at once affects her by *his* actions, and then labels her as he sees fit. She *is* herself because of him.

The social or cultural habit of labelling for the good of the community functions not only to define value or meaning, but also to create the system within which each group falls. After Mary escapes from the care of her cousin Veronica, she seeks refuge with a group of lawyers. The activists outside Hennessy’s house hold placards and banners “draped with rosaries [and] carry pictures, mostly of the Virgin with ‘Save the Baby’, except for one with the simulation of running blood and which reads ‘Thy Sister’s Blood?’” (O’Brien 197). At this point, James’s paternity has not yet been determined, so O’Brien’s word choice for the placard recognizes the extent to which feminine bodies are homogenized. All women are sisters because they are all equal to each other under the religious patriarchy; the Father, God, possesses all women. Equating all women as sisters, including the unborn, provides the foetus with rights equal to those of women already born and furthers the practice of feminine homogenization.

The moral argument over abortion is extensive on both sides of the divide. The religious argument fears for the souls of unborn children and aims to maintain God’s omnipotence, yet fails to consider the moral implications upon the body of the mother. Thus, consideration of the mother’s body as public rather than private establishes and promotes the use of the feminine body as symbol. As such, this use of the body sets up a political system within the private domain allowing the application of the body for nationalistic purposes. Privileging imaginary nationalist and religious constructs, based

on previous colonization, forces the country itself into its own womb-tomb—or symbolic body boundary—because the magistrates and members of the community define the constructs and implications on the entire community. The *body* they exist within—the country—alters the internal identities of its individual inhabitants, yet simultaneously negates the individual. The country is the case and all within are one. Judge Mahoney calls the day of Mary’s hearing “a day of general judgement upon us all” (O’Brien 247), and Noni asserts that Mary’s pregnancy is “the whole country’s business” (134). Both Noni and Judge Mahoney recognize the fact that the feminine body, and by extension the individual *encased* in it, is not the *matter* of herself, but is in fact a possession of the state and other authorities. In a separate debate over the value or existence of souls in certain communities, Donal, who takes personally an “insult to bishops” (166), declares that uncivilized “savages” (165) have no souls. Aligned with the religious colonizer and the privileged centre, Donal condemns the savages. Yet, Hugo responds: “On the contrary, they revere the soul... they put hooks and cages around a body to keep the soul from flying away” (166). This reversal of ideology actually suggests that those who “revere the soul” or the insides, over the physical body are at least in part uncivilized. If Hugo is right, then his argument, held up alongside Irish abortion law, suggests the magistrates and religious authorities are themselves uncivilized. The feminine body is a victim of these savage constructs designed to hook and cage women into submission by forces acting upon their bodies.

The body politic and the body religious cage feminine bodies by default into positions of impurity and sin in order to privilege the masculine power. In an attempt to purify themselves, Lizzie and Mary visit a sacred shrine and believe they “were to touch

the private part of their bodies with the water to banish all stain of past or future sin” (68). This act suggests a desire to return to the state of innocence, but because the notion of the feminine body as impure is so deeply entrenched in them, they can no longer see themselves as innocent. They have already bought into the patriarchal view that they are evil; their impurity is as inherent as their bodies are feminine and all their attempts at purification are in vain. Shumaker suggests women often “reveal their sense that the female body is an inherently evil possession for which they must compensate” (186) but that “revulsion against their bodies comes from the self-hatred engendered by a religion that regards female sexuality as evil” (189). This constructed bind further hinders Mary in terms of her own rights or internal will because she lives within an inaccurately constructed identity, or within a patriarchal coded identity. Her social functions are likely affected and she extends the practice of codifying her actions. Her need to write her request “to the statue of the Virgin” in “code” (O’Brien 69) illustrates how she is aware of these binds—of what is allowed or accepted of her as a feminine entity—and perhaps that she is in part always aware of the depths of her own acculturation.

Notions of communicating in code translate also to other forms of dialogue.

O’Brien relies heavily on the notion of gossip. In so doing, she illustrates how a community communicating by means of assumption and rumour represents a general disregard for the truth and impart a deliberate and common uncertainty. The events surrounding Mary’s pregnancy are left to assumption (69) and are subjected to gossip and rumour, even though O’Brien suggests “all is always known, nothing is secret, all is known and scriven upon the tablet of time” (6). Mary never speaks specifically of the paternity of her baby and O’Brien never provides official verification. The system that

oppresses the articulation of feminine sexuality proves again to be an “inescapable patriarchal and religious power” (Shumaker 188) that contributes to the ambiguity of truth. Moments of hope, for truth or emancipation, suggest that feminine articulation of an individually-dictated reality is possible, but still enigmatic. Lizzie assures Mary that if an eel attends their visit to the shrine, “everything would turn out right” (68). If an eel is symbolic of “secrecy, mystery and dissimulation, but also something that ‘slips through your fingers,’ that you can’t hold on to or understand” (“Eel”), then the assumptions regarding Mary’s circumstances may never be fully known or understood; but, if Lizzie suggests everything will be all right, perhaps the facts do not need to be discovered.

Viewing the feminine body as strictly biological denies and restricts feminine individuality. In “Contract Motherhood: Social Practice in Social Context,” Mary Gibson debates whether legislating any form of pregnancy—either surrogacy or contract pregnancy—“reflects and reinforces a view of women as primarily suited for reproduction and of... that of a vessel carrying a man’s child” (63). She suggests that women are “doubly demeaned by this view” because femininity as such is reduced to the reproductive role and the “uniqueness and importance of that role is denied” (63). The commodification of the process and labour of childbirth projects the feminine entity into a productive and industrial sphere based on biology. Both elements open up the homogenous reproductive vessel that is woman to “direct interference... and violation of the bodily integrity” (63). Without doubt, then, in a culture where religion and politics ultimately deny women self-determination and even self-individualization, the same forces contractually protect the product of this labour at the expense of the so-called machine. Thus, the child—born or not—is privileged over the mother machine.

O'Brien's text illustrates the depths of the homogenization of the feminine body through her use of ambiguous pronouns that do not always allow the reader to determine which individual woman is actually present in any given episode. Even during the most extreme moments of violation, Mary's name is rarely used. Immersed in his crime, James "allows himself... to advance into a charade that she is not she, she is a stranger in a black dress" (O'Brien 83). He imagines she is another woman, or, progressing further into his delusion, that "her body [is] no more than a pillar or a bit of galvanise to thresh against" (84). His objectification of her is two-fold; he at once replaces her personal identity as his daughter with an ambiguous and homogenized image of any woman, and then he replaces the notion of the homogeneous woman with that of inanimate object.

James's long-term treatment of Mary as a physical entity—lacking in subjective traits—truncates, even within her own identity, elements of humanity. In *Dehumanizing Women: Treating Persons as Sex Objects*, Linda LeMoncheck writes:

...for a person to cause another person to be an animal, body, or object involves manipulating the circumstances in which that person lives in such a way that the person is either prevented from developing some or all of her or his distinctive human capacities or is caused to lose some such capacity already developed. (32)

She argues that the repression involved in the de-humanizing process is complete and long-lasting. As with any form of social or personal conditioning, consistency is the pre-eminent factor functioning against the oppressed feminine individual to the point of complete acculturation. LeMoncheck points out the "person is effectively reduced to realizing only those capacities that things, bodies, or animals have" (32) because she has been treated as such for so long by the patriarchal power whose "intent [is] creating an army of obedient automatons" (33).

The Irish feminine meets the same homogenizing end. Social and religious use of the Madonna Myth as the exemplar emulate, and the agreement by the female population to this ideal create ambiguity-building stereotypes that allow for the perpetuation of myth, oppression, and the patriarchy. According to LeMoncheck, the feminine “stereotype is restrictive if it fosters certain intimidating kinds of sexual role expectations that make it difficult for [women] to live self-determined lives” and “[tends] to lump [them] in categories that would blur their uniqueness as individuals” (105). For Irish women to be essentially lumped into a corporeal existence impedes recognition as “a moral equal with a right against bodily harm” (LeMoncheck 33). O’Brien’s feminine characters suffer the same fate.

In an episode where Betty and Mary visit the abortion clinic in London, they wait

in a little green enclave in front of a statue which had six heads, the colour of anthracite, supported on the one body, the faces all different, different manifestations of courage. Under the statue she read – ‘This figure is erected to replace another figure destroyed by vandals to whom the truth was intolerable.’ (128)

This one small passage is pregnant with gendered and corporeal implications. O’Brien does not specifically profess the statue as feminine, but given that it stands at an abortion clinic, it carries the feminine elements of corporeal homogeneity, and because she writes of the feminine effigy earlier in the text, assumptions regarding the statue as feminine are both possible and likely. The statue possesses only one body for multiple heads, which illustrates the conflict between the individual and the ambiguous Irish feminine body. It at once speaks the truth of the patriarchal notion of woman with one common body, yet concurrently offers a possible reality of women with different and individual heads and faces. The sharing of one body by many heads, or selves, reflects the concept of the

homogeneous feminine body, yet because idea O'Brien gives each manifestation of courage a different face she shows how the body functionally separates from feminine individuality. According to Green, Celtic statues or triple goddess figures are often depicted as wearing different hairstyles to support "the view that the goddesses were perceived as three separate entities" (*Goddesses* 111). The acknowledged courage is what Mary sees as Irish woman's intended lot for self-sacrifice. Additionally, the plaque explains that a previous body / statue was destroyed by vandals. This new effigy would not exist except for the destruction of the previous statue. The new body simply replaces the former, which experienced a violent destruction; the body is replaceable and essentially disposable. That the current plaque explains the violent end of the statue's predecessor begs the question of whether or not the previous figure had a plaque, and what it might have confessed regarding the statue's meaning or purpose. However, to address simultaneously the problem of the vandals' intolerance to a possibly existing but repressed truth heeds the contemporary issue of certain groups existing outside their actual physical reality or truth. The statement regards the closedness of the fractive and destructive patriarchal mindset and its inability to release any of its existing power to the marginalized faction.

Shortly after her medical examination, Mary visits Mona, another Irish girl awaiting an abortion. Mona admits herself to be "a terrible woman" (O'Brien 129) who has no body apart from what is known by a masculine entity. She says of her boyfriend, "Gabriel can do anything he likes with me... He knows every bit of my body" (129). She equates his knowledge of her body with his ability and his right to act upon her body and thus allows his freedom to act as justifiable. LeMoncheck suggests a woman's sexuality



is often the “vehicle for her dehumanization” even if the masculine entity manipulating the vehicle is her intimate partner (104-5). She argues that there is no place safe from dehumanization and homogenization for the purpose of women’s oppression:

Women are systematically dehumanized in the domestic sphere, the economic and the political spheres as well. And women are dehumanized psychologically so that they believe that their position as the social subordinates of men is either necessary, inevitable, deserved, or if the psychologizing is complete, right and best. (LeMoncheck 105)

The notion of altering feminine insides leads to what Begoña Aretxaga calls the “colonization of the female body” (131) and what Rosemary Radford Ruether calls the “colonization of women’s wombs by the patriarchy” (Isherwood 75). Removing identifiers of individuality from women furthers the process of their homogenization with each other, which Aretxaga argues allows for the perpetuation of Irish women as “sluts” (133). Sexual devaluation of women by members of the power-wielding authority enables their ongoing verbal and sexual abuse because of their demoted status (133). In *Down by the River*, Donal complains about Mary and says, “Some little slut about to pour piss on the nation’s breast” (O’Brien 167). According to Aretxaga, the continual sexual gaze and harassment issued by men, often who hold the advantage of military or religious authority, force women to learn to be “very skillful at ignoring both the words and their source” (131). These “concomitant feelings of embarrassment, degradation, and guilt” (132) inculcate woman functioning not as a subject defending her individuality, but as one existing within an automatic defence mechanism. She eventually both accepts the situation, and believes fully in the masculine authority. She is effectively the homogenized woman because she is consciously aware that the degradation and violation are not directed at her personally, but to her as a feminized object.

Aretxaga presents three documented cases of Irish male authority infringing upon a de-individualized woman's body. The level of violation and imposition, as well as the very lack of regard for feminine personal dignity, are apparent:

The practice most feared by women is the strip search... A much publicized case concerned a thirteen-year-old girl, arrested during the night in 1978, who was obliged to stand with her menstrual blood running down her legs because she was denied a sanitary napkin. A case filed in 1979 details the ordeal of a pregnant woman who was submitted, while under arrest, to three internal medical examinations without her consent and without substantiated reason. She was verbally abused about her sexuality and that of her family. In 1977 an eighteen-year-old woman was forcefully strip-searched while under arrest, tied to a table, and internally searched twice by a male soldier. These three women were released after a few days without charges. (132)

Aretxaga's account not only represents blatant disregard for the person and criminalizes the medical exam, but also suggests, on the part of the interrogators, a *right to explore* within the woman's body. The chronicle calls forth images of men frantically trying to *get inside* the feminine body, or to get a look inside in order to control those insides. The patriarchy assumes a right to access the feminine body to explore and conquer.

At this point, women are "only treated in ways similar to those things that lack human capacities" (Le Moncheck 33). Aretxaga soundly illustrates the de-humanization of Irish women as she depicts the "dirty protest" (135). In February 1980, prisoners at the Armagh Women's Prison joined the already ongoing dirty protest in which prisoners refused to leave their cells for fear of violence and personal rights violations; the women lived "surrounded by piss, menstrual blood and excrement" (135). Essentially, the prisoners were fighting with the very symbolic matter that created the patriarchal misogyny against them in the first place. According to Aretxaga, "[notions] of dirt and purity [were] crucial... in organizing ideas of savagery and civilization, establishing

social boundaries, and formulating cultural classifications” (135). It is through these types of distinctions that the “bodies of the working class and urban industrial spaces they inhabit became the epitome of dangerous and dirty animality” (135-6). The savage and impure women broke through the authoritative and institutional power boundaries and infected the patriarchy with filth. Aretxaga suggests that at this moment in Irish history, the feminine body became a weapon against the oppressive politics acting on women (136).

However, feminine animalization and objectification—the body as a possible weapon—may actually serve to further the process of de-humanization. The women, covered in their own blood and feces, must have appeared overwhelmingly and exaggeratedly ambiguous; all their individual identifying features hidden beneath the disguising veil of filth preserve the doctrine of the authoritarian power labelling women as homogenous and impure, and as representative of both filth and flesh. Aretxaga suggests the protests represent “the crystallization of a conflict between prisoners’ desire of mimetic violence against the guards and the need for restraint to preserve some physical and psychological integrity” (136). Yet, the irony remains that the body is the very space on which power functions in an authoritative institution, and it is the same tool used to overturn or alter that power. The dirty protest, which actually began in the male prison Long Kesh two years before the Armagh conflict, concluded with the onset of hunger strikes (Aretxaga 136). Prisoners fight the authority both with matter that comes out of the body and by matter that goes into the body.

Aretxaga discusses the importance of menstrual blood in the dirty protests as highlighting the taboo in Irish Catholic culture that, on the level of perception, kept Irish

women as perpetual girls (139-40). She suggests that women's monthly cycles were the pivotal element that not only articulates the major gender differences between the women's and men's protests, but also excludes women from legitimate political militancy. For protests that were meant to be equal, the focus on menstruation at Armagh "shifted the meaning of the protest" (138) and transformed the "asexual bodies of girls into the sexualized bodies of women" (139), thus overturning established Irish idealization of femininity, motherhood and the image of Mother-Ireland (142). Also important, however, is the alienating property of menstrual blood. If considering all masculine experience as privileged and as definitive of humanity, the notion of feminine blood is the ultimate exclusion, and as such cannot represent humanity. Because menstrual blood does not fit in with male experience and is representative of the mystery of the 'other', it functions to further de-humanize women and their bodies.

Existing so strictly as the 'other', society may not expect any women to behave counter to the feminine construct. O'Brien's Roisin initially seems to exist outside of the homogenized female because of her activity both politically, and outside of domestic Ireland. She travels to Rome, and O'Brien portrays her as a character of movement, and in some circles, authority and privilege. She initially appears to maintain agency as an extreme anti-abortion activist, but is in fact still a hollow feminine entity. Filled so completely with the "gospel she had come to spread" (O'Brien 23), Roisin argues very effectively each possible element of the debate as if memorized from her "leaflets" (23). Yet, she reiterates her own real experiences in only a shallow and "girlish" (22) manner or as it relates back to her own validation as speaking for the Church. She is an automaton reciting her constructed mantra, but is incapable of articulating that which

represents reality for a woman. “His Holiness had given her a sense of being right and on the right path and had implored her to spread the word of his *Evangelicum Vitae*” (22). The papal encyclicals *Humanae Vitae* (1968) and *Evangelicum Vitae* (1995) include complete prohibition of abortion regardless of the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy (Sjørup 83-4). While Roisin believes she instigates “good work” (O’Brien 24), she actually carries the patriarchal religious message that perpetuates the repression of the feminine body. She shows no depth of individual character on her own part; she even learns Italian only to accommodate communication with the Pope (22). Roisin becomes a sacrificial object (vessel) that symbolizes (carries) the abortion debate because her own conviction is unwavering and void of sympathetic humanity where “there can be no exceptions” (23). She unwittingly homogenizes all women into one group where the same answer fits all, and that answer is sacrifice.

By placing Roisin as an extreme anti-abortion activist, O’Brien submits Roisin’s identity to a common stereotype for women who, according to Leona English, work within the “regulating discourse” of Christianity and patriarchal control (97). In “Feminist Identities: Negotiations in the Third Space,” English charts the complex identities of two women working for social development organizations. She asserts their identities are “changing, fluid, non-static, complicated and paradoxical” (98). While Roisin certainly appears paradoxical because she supports and preaches the discourse of the very system that oppresses her, she represents the opposite of English’s identity dynamics and appears acutely static. Her militant focus on the prohibition of abortion overshadows any other possible identity for her. She falls squarely into the stereotype of which English warns. English suggests neither of her two subjects has “a monolithic

identity” (98). In *Down by the River*, however, O’Brien provides Roisin with no other character markers aside from her anti-abortion aggression. Roisin’s one-track identity represents not a failure on O’Brien’s part to develop her character fully, but instead symbolizes the failure of the Religious Right to perceive in women humanity and disambiguity. In an episode where Roisin makes an anti-abortion speech at Noni’s home, her capacity as a religious rhetorician actually frightens the women attending to hear her speak (O’Brien 22). Her adamant and absolute stance reflects an atmosphere of a sort of automatic morality. Examples of exceptions—including rape or incest—are immediately disregarded. Roisin even suggests that women are not biologically capable of suicide because of a “hormone which stops them” (23).

Any universal solution regarding reproductive rights, legislation, or even practice fundamentally manifests feminine debasement. In “The Vatican and Women’s Reproductive Health and Rights: A Clash of Civilizations,” Sjørup argues that the complete condemnation of abortion and certain forms of birth control, with disregard for the life of the mother, equates to a universalist “understanding of women” (87). She concludes, “the hierarchical power of the Catholic church is affirmed, while the women’s needs for their very life, a reasonable burden of work, and bearable social circumstances are seen as sacrificial” (87). In *Down by the River*, Mrs Fitz complains, “[no] one’s life is their own anymore” because “the State” and “the psychologists” hold power over everyone (O’Brien 208). The regularity of the element of possession in O’Brien’s text elicits an atmosphere of not only colonial connection between individuals, but also the right to that connection. When James declares: “They have no right over her... She’s my daughter... Let her come home and I’ll mind her...” (O’Brien 192), he is proclaiming his

right to possess, and his right to treat Mary as he sees fit. The structure of community and of filial power demands a certain level of possession over children in order to perpetuate the strength of the family and ultimately, the community. The question remains if James is not the biological father of Mary, but a sort of surrogate, what happens to his right to possess? His lack of biological status ultimately compromises his masculine colonial position and his patriarchal right to power. Yet, by *acting* as father, he maintains his ability to *exercise* power. From a colonial standpoint, whether or not an individual or a group has a *right* to power—e.g., one country takes colonial possession of another—is of little consequence compared to the individual or group's ability to *act* out power on the 'other'. In this case, successfully exercising power actually creates power.

This notion of colonial possession and the exertion of power over specific groups or individuals mirrors back to the family. The very same colonial effect appears in the nuclear family because family structure is the basis of the hierarchies of communities. Ironically, the very social structure that adamantly demands the strength of the nuclear family, and by extension the banding together of family members as belonging to each other, disallows or discourages the notion of possession of others. Gibson argues that the "exclusive, possessive quality of family relationships involved in this conception of the [traditional] family also contributes to a view of children as the *property* of their parents" (66). The strong family unit receives social approval, but the necessary element of possession still belongs to the church and state that dictates as such. While perhaps socially misguided, when Roisin confronts Mary she is, in part, correct:

'It's not your child,' she said suddenly to Mary. 'The way your tonsils are yours or your mane of hair.' 'It's not yours either,' Mary said, the words a beautiful explosion that seemed to float out of her mouth and blacken the face that was only inches away. (O'Brien 154)

Roisin will not allow Mary to take possession of her unborn baby, but she still attempts to assert some sort of ownership over the foetus, attributing possession to the church and the nation she represents. Yet, Mary's bold denial of national and religious possession represents the flaw in Roisin's despotic belief systems. Gibson addresses the issue of authoritarian possession: "Persons are not property; we are not the sorts of entities that can, morally speaking, be owned, even by ourselves. We *are* ourselves; we don't *own* ourselves" (74). Even in terms of a colonial or sovereign power, possession of the individual is illegitimate. If O'Brien denies James biological paternity, she effectively breaks down any authentic right to possess, whether it is colonial or filial. Yet, as suggested earlier, the ability to claim possession and demonstrate power over another person does not necessarily dictate an authentic right of power. Even though James may not be the biological father of Mary, he exercises his power over her through "conquest, colonization, and rape, and the employment of a traditional Irish poetic trope of the rape of the female land, by the male aggressor" (Romanets 140). Mary's rape mirrors Irish violation by English colonization. And, even though Ireland's independence was fully recognized by 1922, and links to the so-called colonial father were broken, the memory of Ireland as the intruded upon and raped symbolic child may persist. So, while Britain may attempt to represent *himself* as the colonial father, *he* does not fit into any sort of nurturing role, but only into a violating and forceful one. Ireland, like Mary, is the bastard child of a patriarchal authority who takes on the image of father only to validate the paternal right to violate and exploit. Any lingering notions of colonial rights of possession ultimately reflect insecurities of paternity resulting from fatherhood's own natural dubiety and resulting in the importance of the symbolic child.



The symbolic child is important to both its parents, but for different reasons. In “The Gender of Generations,” Rachel Muers writes about the possible ethical responsibility the maternal subject owes to future generations (311). If as Muers argues, the pregnant female body is a process or a system (machine), then the feminine entity and her system functions within “boundaries that are crossed, re-crossed and renegotiated” (317-8). The reification of the maternal situates her outside of any authoritative position. Yet, while Muers suggests she emphasizes the maternal and avoids the terms female and feminine, in order to avert the essentialist practice of equating all womanhood with motherhood (312), addressing the pregnant body as the social body is “often made to speak with the voice of the elite male” (318). Because the non-maternal feminine still generally possesses the potential for maternity, woman is either equally objectified or defeminized altogether. Even though responsibility to future generations rests with the processes and organized systems of the maternal body, the masculine, non-maternal remains authoritarian. This reaffirmation of patriarchal control through the feminine body—maternal or not—further universalizes the notion of the essential maternal feminine, regardless of Muers’s attempts. Until the social feminine subject defines her own identity, the idea of the social maternal will encompass all of femininity.

Just as the ambiguous pious female reaffirms the masculine religious order (Ruether, “Why” 234), the social maternal reaffirms and protects the patriarchal control for a homogenized future generation. According to Lisa Isherwood, identity perpetuation is not only a contemporary concern; it is the same dynamic that used the bodies of Eve and the Virgin Mary to dictate “the way women and their bodies would be treated under the Christian regime” (74). The cycle of possession is long-standing and serves to place

women in subordinate and auxiliary roles within heterosexual communities in order to emphasize the family. She suggests, “women’s bodies are at the disposal of the patriarchal system from the factory floor to the bedroom, the paddy field to the labour ward” (73). She criticizes the patristic belief that the only purpose and just physical action for women is procreation, as well as the Fathers’ rationalization of their control over women’s bodies by a constructed history of feminine impurity and evil (75). Examples of witch trials, virgin cures, female self-mutilation for the purpose of eluding femininity and a general destructive power of the female body reinforce the vigour of the body politic.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues the virgin birth of Jesus is the catalyst for female subordination: “For the first time in human history the mother kneels before her son; she freely accepts her inferiority” (171). De Beauvoir outlines how, using the maternal body, religion has secured the “supreme masculine victory, consummated in the cult of the Virgin” (171). She suggests that the son’s symbolic escape from the confines of the maternal body creates a dynamic which secures his powers and abolishes hers (171). Feminine subjugation functions through the myth of woman and the myth of the Virgin Mary in which the very idolization of a maternal woman places her as ambiguous and homogenous. The specifically gendered and often sinful body of the feminine entity, resulting from her ability to bear children, bears fully the weight of social meaning.

In the introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha quietly addresses the often-used oppositional gender dyad of the public and private spheres. He suggests that confining women to the domestic and “unseen” sphere not only secludes women and

restricts their access into the public domain, but also secludes the domestic sphere itself from visibility (10). According to Bhabha, this invisibility creates ambiguity, which, in turn, through the feminine body—what Bhabha calls the figure of the woman—dramatizes “the ambivalent structure of the civil states as it draws its rather paradoxical boundary between the private and the public spheres” (10). Privatizing the private sphere to such extreme degrees leads to cultural “forgetting” or “uncertainty” (10). In terms of patriarchal control over women, forgetting the very universalist ideals underpinning the patriarchal right to power consequently risks loss of power. As such, constructed gender myths easily replace these forgotten realities. Bhabha follows his critique of the public and private spheres with an observation that replacing the real with the imaginary leads to cultural and social ambiguity, or results in normalizing the domestic with the political (11), which from a colonial standpoint brings previously unrecognizable identity markers to light (12). These elements, seen by the patriarchy as foreign needs or ideas (12), are the feminine *real* overtaking the imaginary. The re-creation of the feminine entity or feminine self emerges by projecting reality, insofar as there is reality, in an imaginary culture.

Immediately following her eviction from Luke’s apartment by Mary-Lou, Mary attempts to hide out in a busy shopping mall. She is searching for anonymity in a crowd and she comes across a fish tank: “little tittlings, gaily coloured, gliding through their universe of water, feathered trees like so many curtains, and rockeries to shelter under” (O’Brien 102). O’Brien’s references to curtains and rockeries exhibit not only Mary’s desire to remain anonymous and hidden, but also represent notions of the domestic and the public respectively; she feels exposed and vulnerable, and is only moments later

apprehended by a Garda. She observes the small fish: “They were of every colour, silver and striped and pale yellow and jet black, the bodies like neon, allowing her to see the intestines within” (102). The wording of this sentence is interesting because the first part refers to the fish as ‘they,’ and the second part refers to the bodies of the fish, which implies a separation between the individuals—or group—and the bodies of those individuals. O’Brien provides an interesting juxtaposition between body articulation and the fish because their insides are visible through their bodies as if the inside is betrayed or confessed by the outside. The inside of any body is generally hidden from the ‘other’, but in this case, the outside of the body does nothing to protect the inside. Likewise, the feminine outer body slanders the feminine entity within by its false cultural articulation, as if their bodies are as transparent as the fish. A feminine body suffers cultural misdefinition because society assumes that what is inside is articulated on the outside; society expects the feminine body is as transparent as the fish. These exposed insides, alongside Mary’s subsequent capture, suggest the impending violence of exposing her own insides by the hand of her father.

O’Brien’s use of the feminine body functions to articulate the de-humanizing and hollowing efforts of the religious patriarchy to control Irish state policy and, consequently, the lives of its citizens. The unavoidable intertwining of religious *praxis* and the governing legislation forces the oppression of women as culturally necessary and compulsory for the on-going success of Ireland as a nationally sovereign body. O’Brien’s practice of creating ambiguity between her feminine characters—human or animal—illustrates not only an intense corporeal homogenization, but also the requisite sacrifice of the feminine entity needed for the good of the family and the nation.

## Conclusion

“An Irish solution for an Irish problem...”

Charles Haughey

Denying the ability to exercise specific elements of social power to an individual makes the violent occupation of the body much less complicated. In *Down by the River*, the hollow feminine body exists only as devoid of power. Woman is necessarily hollow to accommodate the religious, political, and cultural impositions upon her as vessel. Society asks the individual feminine body to exist in the same way as all feminine bodies exist, resulting in consummate objectification. However, Mary MacNamara's resistance to this demand and her attempt at a somewhat revolutionary act—procuring an abortion—reflect the social flaw that mis-defines woman as vessel. Family and country impose a long-standing heritage of the Irish woman that defines her feminine body as not only a cultural carrying case, but also as “the highly idealized allegory of the nation” (Aretxaga 149). Further to the colonial imperative, woman, in this severely repressive state, soon submits and becomes acculturated to the very concepts that marginalize her.

Simone de Beauvoir argues that because of the de-humanizing and de-individualizing of the feminine entity by patriarchal social structures, the feminine body cannot “be a clear expression” of the actual feminine person (257). In *Down by the River*, the masculine ‘other’ violently imposes and forces the hollowing of Mary's body upon her, reminiscent of the procedures of Ireland's colonial history. Mary suffers real physical violence and injury by her father's hand, but an underlying element to the relationship is

an entrenched worldview that the masculine authority possesses a certain right over its related women and children. The masculine authority has emptied the feminine entity of her individuality and, as such, the patriarchy can possess the feminine body to use as it sees fit.

Keane's work regarding the Irish woman in terms of the terrible devouring mother and the goddess of creation and destruction (xiv) outlines how the patriarchy constructs these myths of womanhood that link actual women to the nation and perpetuate the repression of the feminine body. For woman to be continually filled with the meaning of the 'other'—her husband, her child, or her country—distends her body with their cultural identities or social expectations. Because her roles are gendered, her existence is defined by her sexual status or her abstinence from it:

...in every sexual act the Other is implicated; and the Other most often wears the visage of woman. With her, man senses most definitely the passivity of his own flesh. Woman is vampire, she eats and drinks him; her organ feeds gluttonously upon his. (de Beauvoir 168)

Limiting woman's identity roles to a feminine trinity of virgin, mother, or whore is to construct gendered boundaries within which women are contained; these boundaries ultimately de-individualize and consequently de-humanize woman, and limit her existence to being a restricted gendered entity based on her physical body. She sacrifices her internal identity needs and her personal potential for the needs of her family and her country. Her devouring nature, in part, is self-destructive because it devours, through self-sacrifice, her potential for self; no actual feminine self exists. Her *self* is the *other*. Women embody both sacrifice and guilt because they "are made only deficiently in the image of God, and are ultimately a symbol of evil and of dependent, sinful humanity" (Schaberg 81). Ultimately, because the embodiment of God is masculine, women are

inherently deficient. Any action by traditionally inactive or docile female characters—an abortion or a visit to a sacred shrine—are attempts only “to erase the evidence of... [this] ‘guilt’” (Sachdev 171). In *Down by the River*, privacy over matters of moral impurity is the ultimate goal for women in order to maintain the social purity of their families.

O’Brien provides complete protection of the masculine powers by the deaths of specific male characters, placing the burden of guilt squarely on the feminine bodies. Both Mr Crowe’s and James’s suicides by drowning and hanging respectively, remove the male authorities—regardless of their guilt or innocence—from the social spectrum and as such submit their feminine relatives to the stigma and taboo of procreative guilt.

O’Brien’s women are similarly homogenized to the point of anonymity. As a cultural object, the feminine body cannot function as anything but divided from her self because any woman is any other woman. Her feminization, defined and divided by her masculine counterpart, thus forsakes her own identity. She is viewed “as All; once more all under the form of the Other, All except herself” (de Beauvoir 237). She cannot be individual because woman does not inherently possess individuality; she possesses only that element of which is woman, and is consequently “deprived of her human position” (236). Feminine creation is mythical and imaginary. O’Brien connects the conflict of woman to both the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. Symbolic variations between the two religious figures suggest that the dichotomy of woman is not, after all, so black and white. The concept that a woman, such as O’Brien’s Mary and other female characters, may actually possess differing and even contradictory elements illustrates a new option for O’Brien’s women. While they do have to live within this ambiguous dyad, O’Brien suggests that the masculine constructs are at odds with a natural identity tendency for

women. Any defining system to place woman as either virgin or fallen woman does not allow for feminine self-determination or agency. Thus, the feminine body is now separate and divided from the feminine soul or identity.

Like in the much-publicized case of X, Mary's body is restricted within a specific geography. In order to maintain and progress the masculine and religious colonization of the female body, her power and authority over her own body must be diminished. By categorizing woman's body as possession, both state and religion are able to freely indict against individual women's freedoms, and indict for her feminine insides, which ultimately act as carrier for the conservation of existing political and religious systems. The patriarchal paradigm privileges the "right to life of the unborn" (O'Reilly 128) over the existing mother, as for Mary and X, who are themselves still children (131). The marginalization of woman here is an explicit favouring of the 'other' over the woman's own existence. O'Reilly quotes a psychologist in the X case as saying:

...the ruling effectively confirmed that 'the foetus takes absolute precedence over the life of the mother' [and further] ...accused the judge of having simply and unambiguously placed the right to life of the unborn and the right to life of the woman on a legal scales, weighted them, and found in favour of the unborn. (133)

Conflict between the inside and the outside of the feminine body generally leans toward favouring of the inside, insomuch as it does not belong to the individual herself. For society, that carried by the feminine vessel matters so much more than the vessel itself.

The highly political and much-publicized abortion debates in Ireland aligned with O'Brien's hollow feminine illustrate the patriarchal and colonial inclination to marginalize and control women as if they are possessions to both country and to religion. The colonized condition of women parallels the former colonial situation of Ireland



*herself* and as such cannot allow any slippage of that control and authority. For culture to designate women into spaces of oppression and further to decree in them self-revulsion, progresses the gendered power imbalances and creates opportunities to preserve the existing structure and political worldview. So, even though Mary travels to England for an abortion, the very fact that she ultimately does not need to make that final decision suggests a level of resigned conflict; for Mary, O'Brien provides an Irish solution to an Irish problem.

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## Appendix 1

Please find copies of Legislation, Acts, or Constitutional Amendments specific to this thesis at the following addresses:

Article 40.3.3 of the Irish Constitution (Eighth Amendment, 1983)

[http://www.servat.unibe.ch/law/icl/ei00000\\_.html](http://www.servat.unibe.ch/law/icl/ei00000_.html)

No. 20/1979 Health (Family Planning) Act, 1979

<http://acts.oireachtas.ie/print/zza20y1979.1.html>

Abortion Act, 1967 (United Kingdom) Chapter 87

[http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1967/pdf/ukpga\\_19670087\\_en.pdf](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1967/pdf/ukpga_19670087_en.pdf)

Offences Against the Person Act, 1861 (United Kingdom)

Revised Statute from the UK Statute Law Database

See *Attempts to Procure an Abortion* Parts 58 and 59

[http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1861/cukpga\\_18610100\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1861/cukpga_18610100_en_1)

Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929

[http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1929/cukpga\\_19290034\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1929/cukpga_19290034_en_1)

For other related Amendments see:

[http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached\\_files/html%20files/Constitution%20of%20Ireland%20\(Eng\)Nov2004.htm](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached_files/html%20files/Constitution%20of%20Ireland%20(Eng)Nov2004.htm)