

# Female Characters in Irish Women's Writing Across the Decades

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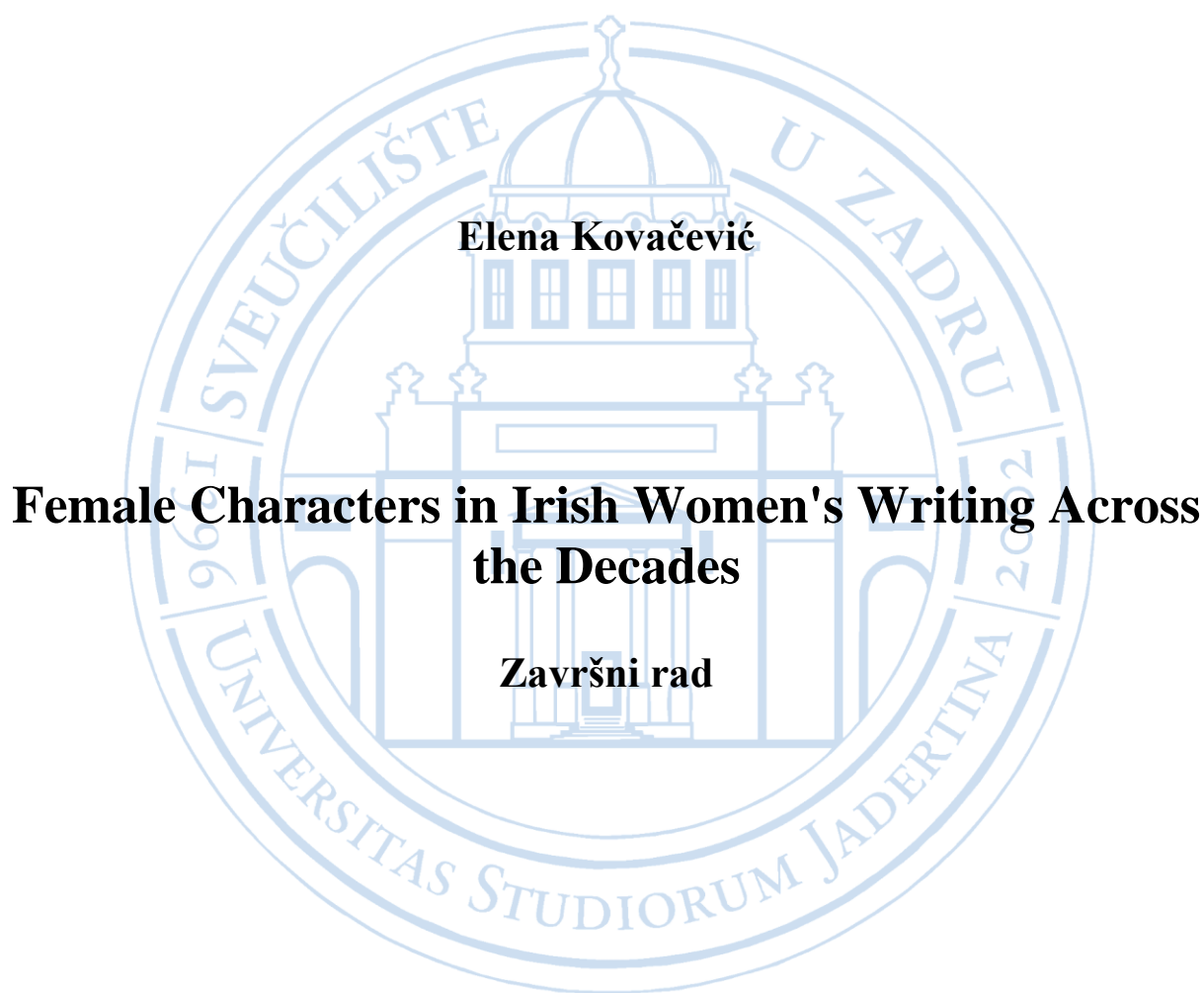


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Anglistika



**Elena Kovačević**

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Female Characters in Irish Women's Writing Across the Decades

Završni rad

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Zadar, 2024.



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Zadar, 2024.

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## 1. Introduction

Ireland during the 20th century experienced an immense impact from the Catholic Church. Catholicism was strongly spread out throughout the country, excreting its power through politics to the top of the entire country. Irish Catholic Church was limiting the freedom of the Irish people by making Catholic norms the behavioural ideals. Divorce, abortion, contraception and many other issues related to sex, sexuality and especially female bodies were considered taboo subjects. In addition, gender inequality dominated every aspect of Irish society throughout much of the last century. On one hand, Irish women were tormented for being childless, for having children out of wedlock or for behaving 'badly'. Many desperate Irish women were often sent away to institutions such as the notorious Magdalene laundries. On the other hand, Irish men were always seen as the head of the family, the providers who earned the respect of society.

Throughout the decades, the position of women in Ireland changed drastically, and so did the female characters in Irish's writing. It could be argued that Irishwomen were last to be freed from the weight of the traditional life within Ireland. Politics were always the talk of the hour, moreover, the political changes were frequent through the decades, desperate to be seen as successful. Irishmen were the ones making all the decisions for the longest time. As Cahalan states, within the family, the man was the head of the house, the money maker, the one who has to always be pleased and who can never be wrong (105). The decades passed and at times it seemed like the men's power was only increasing rather than persisting on equality. Irish women, however, were on a different side of the story. More often than not they were neglected, hidden, used and abused. Women in Ireland had to work at home and not dare make a career.

They had to get married, have as many children as possible and be obedient to their husbands. Any woman who strayed from the 'appropriate' behaviour fostered by the Irish state and the Catholic Church risked being punished as a 'fallen' woman.

In the sixties, however, the position of Irish women started to change rather slowly. The second wave of feminism left its impact, and Irish women raised their voices. However, many authors were banned mostly for alluding to sex or sexuality in their books. For example, Kate O'Brien's novel *The Land of Spices*, as we are going to see later in this paper, was banned because the author subtly alluded to a homosexual relationship in a sentence. The book was blacklisted and O'Brien had to leave the country. And she was not the only one. However, as the influence of the Catholic Church gradually weakened in the second half of the last century, many authors created protagonists with qualities they wished they had. Many of these narratives are written from a woman's perspective and as we will see in this paper, Irish female writers were creating female protagonists and circumstances that demonstrate how Ireland was also changing throughout the decades.

This paper will focus on three selected novels which feature female protagonists, the problems they endured, and the impact Catholicism had on Ireland, especially on Irish women's lives. As already mentioned above, one of them is *The Land of Spices* (1941) written by Kate O'Brien. The book focuses on the relationship between Helen Archer, a reverend mother, and Anna Murphy, her student at a Catholic convent school. After the analysis of *The Land of Spices* and early twentieth-century Ireland, the focus will be put on Ireland in the mid-twentieth century. The analysis that follows is that of *August is a Wicked Month* (1965) by Edna O'Brien and her protagonist Ellen. She struggles with the fear of not being able to live up to the Catholic standard, of being judged and ultimately punished for her sins. Finally, the last and most contemporary book to be analyzed is Emma Donoghue's *Stir-Fry* (1994). Donoghue's novel follows a young girl named Maria who moves to Dublin and starts exploring her sexuality.

Growing up in late twentieth-century Ireland, Maria is facing many dilemmas regarding religion and sexuality and we see her adjusting to the life in a big city.

My paper aims to analyse female characters in three novels written during three separate time periods of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and draw comparisons between them. I will attempt to analyse the differences and similarities between the main female protagonists in the selected novels. Some of the issues I will be discussing in my paper are representations of Irish womanhood, sex, sexuality, relationships, marriage, divorce, and the influence of Catholicism on women in Ireland. Needless to say, this paper will also examine many controversial topics that the novels address, those topics which were not supposed to be part of the public discourse in 20th-century Ireland.

## **2. Irish women throughout the twentieth century**

In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a woman's position in Irish society was bad in many ways. Once a woman got married she was supposed to quit her job (if she had one!) and dedicate herself to raising a big family. Wives were dependent on their husbands, the breadwinners. However, if a woman was earning money, she would still have to give it to her husband as the head of the family. According to Bourke, it is only one of many reasons why, for so long, Irish women felt like being subordinate to a man is how it is supposed to be, and how it will always be, no matter what they do (263).

Sullivan mentions that the sixties was the period of the 180-degree turn when it came to Irish women's rights and Irish women standing up for themselves (165). Women in Ireland started showing more interest in politics, trying to create a change from the inside. On the other hand, they were also voicing their opinions about their reproductive rights, sexuality and gender



equality. As stated by Ukić Košta, the second wave of feminism had a large impact on the way Irish women spent their day-to-day lives. Irish society was opening up to the world and foreign influences traditionally loathed by the state and Church. Ireland was becoming more and more liberal and slowly starting to accept different opinions on various matters (7).

Sheehan et al., argue that the nineties represent the start of contemporary Ireland or the end of traditional Ireland (151). Of course, it is not that easy to draw the line between contemporary and more progressive Ireland and the conservative traditionalist country that existed somewhere on the periphery of the Western world for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, in the nineties, Ireland was changing at an astonishing rate. As stated by O Corrain, in 1990, Ireland elected its first female president, the employment rate of females skyrockets and the economy flourishes. Consequently, Irish women gain confidence to live their lives outside of gender norms (5).

Throughout the century, Irish women were constantly trapped in a maze of directions they had to follow. The Catholic Church was teaching them about the place and role of an Irish woman, and the patriarchal society was stealing their voices and dreams. Irish society and Irish womanhood throughout the last century are largely reflected in various books by Irish female authors. Authors such as Kate O'Brien, Edna O'Brien, Emma Donoghue, and Emer Martin are constantly resisting the restrictions imposed on them by the Church-state alliance. In their novels they challenge the ideal of Irish womanhood embodied in the Virgin Mary, the submissive roles Irish women had to take and the constant belittling of mothers/wives/housewives/daughters in Irish households. Men were chasing their careers in order to be able to call themselves providers so they would be seen as more worthy than any Irish mother or wife. It is rather significant that Ireland has always been portrayed as a female, a weak, fragile female who needs a man to protect her.

## 2.1 The impact of Catholicism on women's writing in Ireland

As I have already mentioned above, Catholicism has always played an important role in Irish people's lives. Whether they simply identified themselves as Catholics or actually practiced Catholicism, strict Catholic norms existed and they had to be followed. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Irish and Catholic identities were heavily intertwined. As Jordan suggests, if one went searching for books and notes about Irish history, times when Ireland was not connected to religion in one form or another were times when Ireland did not prosper (106). Even if they reached back by centuries, it is unknown if those kinds of documents ever existed. Moreover, faith was deeply embedded in Irish people throughout the last century. To explain further, Irish children throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century were brought up in the spirit of Catholicism, learning their catechism, starting and finishing their day by prayer and being taught how that is the human ideal. When children turned into adults, following the Ten Commandments represented not only the ideal standard but also a guide on how to live life without controversy. To some, the Catholic Church was not about religion anymore, but about laying low and being docile in traditional Ireland.

Furthermore, freedom of speech in Ireland was also highly endangered by the Catholic church. Those who noticed the strong influence of the Church and mentioned it ended up being punished for questioning the Church's morality. Similarly, the writers who wanted their books read had to be careful with their wording, as to not offend the Church, or the books would end up being banned. Some of these novels are Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *The Land of Spices* which we will analyse in this paper. Both novels were banned as the critics of the day thought that they offended either the state or the Church. Besides, especially *Mary Lavelle* and the eponymous protagonist could have given young Irish girls 'inappropriate' ideas about how a young Irish virgin could behave. Given that the novel focuses on an illicit love affair between

a young inexperienced woman and a married man, it is no wonder that it remained blacklisted for a long time.

Irish Catholicism was heavily linked to a patriarchal society in 20th-century Ireland. It can be argued that Irish society was much kinder to men than women in Ireland during that period. Irish womanhood was always heavily determined by Catholicism and Irish women and girls had to adhere to the rules of the church and society in general. According to O'Corrain, at one point, Catholic standards did become the epitome of law. Its moral codes, ideals of Irish womanhood, standards on sexuality and family relations all led back to "what Church considers right" (6). Being Catholic soon became intertwined with being Irish, and with that came many moral standards; no premarital sex or sex outside of the marriage, heterosexuality as the only right option when it comes to sexual orientation, no divorce, or contraceptives. As one can see, many of the rules undeniably harshly affected only Irish women's lives. For unmarried women in Ireland, there were institutions where they would be separated from their babies, such as mother and baby homes and Magdalene laundries. Catholicism pushed the traditional gender roles for a big part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where a man would be making himself a life outside of his home, and the woman was confined to domestic space taking care of the family.

### **3. Early twentieth century Irish women in *The Land of Spices***

Kate O'Brien was an Irish writer who wrote about something completely out of her contemporary world. She would ignore the issue of today and draw the mind of the reader towards a different time. Furthermore, she would still touch upon many important topics of the day throughout her books, many of them would even be considered brave. Her novel *The Land of Spices* is set in early 20th-century Ireland following the life of a young student Anna Murphy

as well as the life of Helen Archer, Reverend Mother to a Catholic convent school. *The Land of Spices* is one of O'Brien's books that focuses on Catholicism the most. The novel revolves around the relationship between the two over the ten years that Anna spends at a Catholic convent school. Since she is the youngest student she is often looked down upon, not trusted and even ignored by the nuns who are her teachers. She looks up to Reverend Mother, follows her leads, and asks for advice, finding a safe space as well as an authority to respond to. Anna Murphy does not necessarily want to become a nun, and she is not driven by the thought of following in Reverend Mother's footsteps. However, she agrees with her principles and train of thought.

Kate O'Brien was also sent to a boarding school as a little girl and we can say that Anna Murphy is her alter ego. *The Land of Spices* can also be seen as an autobiographical novel in many respects. In both Kate O'Brien and Anna, we find an inexperienced young lady, with a burning passion to learn, explore and achieve something. Both are taken away from their families and their mothers early on. They are both eager to find a safe space that every girl needs. Kate O'Brien emphasises remembering her mother as happy and always laughing at her, and the thought of making her mother happy pleases her (O'Brien 00:02:40-00:04:24). (). Anna, on the other hand, grows more and more confident each time she feels like she made Reverend Mother proud. It could be seen as a need to prove oneself to a parent. We can argue that Anna finds a substitute family in the convent school and Reverend Mother indeed functions as a substitute mother to the girl.

The relationship between Anna and Reverend Mother can be seen as a two-way street. While Anna sees Reverend Mother as a mother figure and a guide, Reverend Mother sees Anna as an opportunity to do something she wishes somebody had done with her when she was Anna's age. It is also possible to connect Reverend Mother to Kate O'Brien in a way that shows us O'Brien's period of life where she was lost, confused and thinking about regretting not doing

some things differently. Reverend Mother sees Anna's potential and is nourishing it to the fullest, as Anna is an intelligent and ambitious girl. She is making sure to raise her in the glory of the convent's beliefs while still showing her the beauty of the outside world. Reverend mother encourages Anna's dreams and ambitions. A part of the novel where Anna recites Matthew Arnold's poem "Requiescat" and Reverend Mother recognizes it from her childhood is a crucial moment of connection between the two. She remembers her own father with whom she had a special bond: "Father would like this child, the quiet surface of her mind was oddly saying, as she pursued the remembered poem" (O'Brien, K. 86).

We can argue that both Anna Murphy and Reverend Mother (or Helen Archer as was her name before entering the convent) offer a different image of Ireland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Reverend Mother, for instance, is not even Irish but English, and is not especially happy to live in Ireland. At the time Irish women were expected to be ladylike, to behave, to serve and to please the ones above them which would more often than not be men. Anna has to obey Reverend Mother and other nuns as her teachers, and Reverend Mother has to follow the instructions of the Bishop. However, they both seem to be strong and independent characters. Even though Kate O'Brien demonstrates that men have all the power, especially priests and bishops, she makes them side characters that barely bring any importance to the plot of the novel. This is a novel almost entirely focused on female protagonists. These strong female protagonists were not especially appreciated by the censors of the day and that was another reason why the novel was banned.

When Reverend Mother and Father Conroy (one of the few male characters in the novel) have a conversation, we see that he displays a vivid hatred towards everything that is not Irish. He views Ireland as an ideal country in all respects and does not especially approve of the European-oriented convent school run by an English nun. When Reverend Mother tries naming several things the young students can benefit from spending some time abroad, he is again

suspicious: “No doubt, Reverend Mother – but it isn’t Irish, is it, now?” (O’Brien, K 9). On the one hand, Ireland is for him an ideal country, Irish Catholicism the best possible version of Catholicism and on the other, he keeps belittling Reverend Mother since she is an English woman. He makes her sound ridiculous and uneducated: “You see Reverend Mother?” Said Father Conroy triumphantly. “That’s what I meant, you see, about our girls going off to Bruges” ...“Was it Father? I don’t see the connection.” The young priest looked dumbfounded at her stupidity.” (O’Brien K. 15).

Throughout the novel, the glimpse into the lives of female characters shows the strong impact of the Catholic Church. After all, the setting of the novel is a Catholic school for girls. According to Fellion and Inglis, around the twenties Ireland approved the right of free opinion, But it kept the power to ban anything not resembling Irish morality (253). For Anna Murphy, the convent school is her home and her shelter where she spends ten years and comes of age. Reverend Mother, on the other hand, resorts to Catholicism in her darkest moment, when she needs a new beginning. After realising that her widowed father is gay and probably in a relationship with another man Helen Archer decides to become a nun. Her father was her role model solely because there were only the two of them for most of her childhood, but their relationship was still quite distant and tense. Even before the incident, Reverend Mother believed her family to be a rather complicated one.

Helen never truly felt her mother’s love since she lost her at such an early age. Reverend Mother’s mother died when she was just six years old. As a consequence she grew up protecting herself from getting hurt and being emotionally unavailable: “And though she grieved for her death, could not feel that it was an outrage against the sense of life...She was broken inside” (O’Brien K. 145). Although debatable, her new beginning after entering a convent could also be seen as her running away from the truth she did not want to admit. Young Helen saw her father in an intimate embrace with another man and was deeply hurt. Her turn to religion could

be seen as her way of paying for her father's sins. The Church gave her an occupation, a purpose, and leverage to not have her life wasted. However, she struggles to separate being Helen from being Mother Reverend. She is lost when it comes to her identity, stuck within a country that is not hers while being obligated to respect it as if it was, struggling to take down her guard and face her emotions.

#### 4. Mid-twentieth century Irish women in *August is a Wicked Month*

Edna O'Brien, probably the most significant Irish female writer, started writing in the early sixties. According to Ukić Košta, in the sixties, many new media were looked down on, such as cinemas and newspapers. These gave the Irish an insight into the latest lifestyles, which the Church often frowned on (6). At the time Edna O'Brien also seemed to give different portrayals of Irish life and Irish women. She wrote openly about sexuality at a time when sexuality in Ireland was a highly controversial and taboo topic. Her novel *August is a Wicked* follows the journey of Ellen, an Irish woman trying to find herself again after her divorce. She leans into different love affairs but finds herself puzzled as she never feels complete and fulfilled. Ellen decides to treat herself to an once-in-a-lifetime vacation down a French Riviera while her son stays with his father. There, she tries to reinvent herself by living life to the fullest and do all the things she could not have done by being a wife and a mother.

O'Brien shows the desperation of Ellen to be something else, something other than a mother and a wife. But, following the Irish norms, Ellen does not know how to be anything but. She has always been a father's daughter, then a husband's wife, and later on, a son's mother. Through this particular Ellen's conflict, O'Brien implies how strongly Irish women in the sixties were still driven by patriarchy. Consequently, the impact of Irish Catholicism on Ellen is seen early in the novel. She struggles internally because of her divorce. Ellen does not regret

or miss her husband, she is rather being scared of being marked with the sin of divorce: “She had been brought up to believe in punishment-sin in a field” (O’Brien, E. 36). She grew up in a Catholic family; the respecting of vows was innate to her. After she could not save her marriage, she made peace with expecting the worse, because in her head, she deserved it. Especially since Ellen lived in a time where society looked down on any failed marital relationship, so the need for Ellen to become independent, in their eyes, makes her a bad Catholic, a bad Irish woman.

During her stay in the French hotel, Ellen was almost raped twice. The first incident happens with a room service boy whom she did not invite in her apartment at any point, while the second attempt happens with a man she liked and with whom she went to a room. Ellen was left scared and confused by the server boy’s actions, realizing she cannot go to a foreign place as a young woman, alone, without great precaution. However, the second attempt of rape just disappointed her. Ellen meets Piers Longfield in the hotel, he is a violinist who plays there. After some small talk, he ends up inviting Ellen into his room. She felt a glimpse of excitement going into his room, she expected talks until the dawn, walks on the beach, a kiss under the stars, a classic French love story. That revelation caused her to accept the truth, that she is not a woman for a one-night stand. Moreover, trying to be rebellious in the bar will not provide her the self-discovery she came here for. It is the whole topic of sexual desire in Irish women that got O’Brien’s novel to be marked as controversial in the sixties.

Ellen represents all the women of Ireland who have sexual needs and desires, who fall in love and fall out of love, Irish women who want and need somebody to talk to without being judged, rather than good Irish girls, who follow the norms and “their purpose”-being a mother. However, during her stay in France, Ellen encounters women who act very differently. They are vulgar, direct, free and show the world outside of the Catholic Irish way of living.



The main protagonist of the novel showcases the internal struggle of Irish women between following what they were taught was right and being the Irish traditional woman. Ellen displays the sacrifices most women in Ireland had to make for a long time, losing their own voices, always being told what to do, how to do it and what to not even think of doing.

The novel has a contemporary background. Ellen's inner thoughts represent the haunting of steering away from the Church, moreover the embodied disappointment of not being good enough that most women in Ireland were born with. She even blames herself for her son's death. Ellen's son died in a car accident while he was away on a camping trip with his father. It is obvious that the accident would have happened, even had she not gone on vacation. Despite that, she looks at it as another punishment for her sin, this time, for not being a better mother. In this novel we can see that Ellen is tormented by the whole concept of motherhood. She loves her son, but she does not feel like being a mother is everything she wants to be, or everything she can be. In addition to it all, the constant guilt of not being a good enough mother is a permanent feeling she has to fight every day.

It is not until the very end of the book, when Ellen sees her ex-husband happy with his new family that she finally learns something about herself. She feels happiness and completion by knowing about her husband's well-being. It is that particular event that teaches her that her whole life she has been living for somebody else. Afterwards, she makes a decision to change her ways and finally starts living for herself and what makes her happy. With that, O'Brien portrays the transition from the gender roles of Irish women in the family before the sixties to the more active and independent roles they take after the sixties. In other words, she portrays Irish women living with a purpose to please their families versus Irish women standing up for their happiness and working towards it.

Considering all of the above, O'Brien represented, through Ellen, the struggle of being

a woman in the sixties, the danger of travelling alone, the frequency of rape attempts, as well as the failed punishments for the men who do it. In addition, O'Brien touches upon the inherited rules of Catholicism and the way it impacts all Irish women's decisions or haunts them if they try to act against it. Another issue represented in the novel is the everlasting misconception to need a man by their side in order to feel complete, when in reality, Irish women in the sixties start to discover themselves outside of motherhood and marriage and explore the perks of freedom.

### **5. Late twentieth century Irish women in *Stir-Fry***

Emma Donoghue's *Stir-Fry* is a novel set in contemporary Ireland. It is a story about Maria, an Irish girl who moves away to a big city (Dublin) for the first time after growing up in a small village. From a different perspective, the underlying topic of this novel can be seen as Ireland going through a transition from being Catholic and traditional to being a more modern and liberal Ireland. Through the plot, Maria is a character that represents two sides of Ireland, a traditional and a contemporary one. The naive, young, inexperienced girl growing up in a village represents the strictly Catholic, traditional Ireland with rules to follow and ideals taught to children from a very early age. On the other hand, Maria who moves to Dublin, experiences the modernized world, the controversy and freedom, as well as getting to know different sides of sexuality and gender roles, stands for contemporary Ireland.

Maria finds herself renting a room from two ladies, who she, soon after living with them, notices are lesbians. Ruth and Jael's relationship brings up the controversy of the contemporary world, especially in Ireland. Maria feels uncomfortable with them since they go against everything she ever knew. Her discomfort portrays the existence of traditional Ireland within

the contemporary one. In this novel, Donoghue introduces homosexuality, homophobia, the feeling of guilt connected to one's sexual desires etc. All of those topics were still a very taboo topic in Ireland, even in the nineties, especially considering Donoghue's protagonists in *Stir-Fry* are mostly women. In addition, they are not just Irish women, they are Irish women living independently, like Ruth and Jael, for example. As time passes, Maria, the main protagonist, starts to like Ruth and Jael and does not care that they are actually in a romantic relationship.

Maria grew up believing that the only way a romantic relationship should exist is between a man and a woman. That is what Catholicism has taught her and what she believed to be true until moving to Dublin. She realizes how one's sexuality does not define them as a person, and consequently she realizes how unfair and incorrect the Catholic view of homosexual people truly is. Growing up Catholic, she would always make connotations between homosexuality and bad people,. However, meeting Ruth and Jael changes her opinion completely. She realizes that their sexuality only defines who they are attracted to and that one needs to know a lot more about somebody to be able to tell whether they are a good or a bad person. She even goes further and questions her own sexuality. Donoghue showcases a new wave of Irish women during the nineties who are finally allowing themselves to question their sexuality as a glimpse into a more liberal world. When Maria comes to terms with Ruth and Jael's romantic relationship, it marks a switch between a little girl from a village into a more mature woman living in a city.

Ruth and Jael's relationship makes Maria question her own sexuality when she starts getting closer to them and experiencing feelings she cannot quite explain. According to Borges, throughout the book there are parts that normalize homosexual relationships as well as judgements based off of stereotypes (86). Here Donoghue gives the reader a glimpse of the societal norms of the nineties in Ireland. For example, Maria's friend Yvonne is often confused as to why Maria would even hang out with 'that kind' of people. Yvonne here functions as a

character through which Donoghue implies indirect homophobia. Maria has to defend herself by explaining to Yvonne how Ruth and Jael do not fit specific lesbian stereotypes. These stereotypes here imply a very masculine appearance, bad temper, and men-hating. Maria seems to imply how Irish women who do fit those stereotypes are somehow worse than Irish women like Ruth and Jael.

Even though Maria comes to terms with both Ruth and Jael's relationship, as well as her own sexuality, she is still finding herself feeling awkward and uncomfortable with that realization. Especially when she hears the way Yvonne talks about Ruth and Jael. Maria might have a better idea of how she wants to live now that she is in Dublin, but she is still affected by opinions of the people around her. She needs other people not to see homosexuality as something shameful in order to truly be comfortable with it. In other words, a large part of the book can be connected to the amount of Irish women coming out as homosexual in the nineties, with some accepting them, but most still feeling uncomfortable about the whole "end of the traditional Ireland" movement by which most of the Catholic norms are either questioned or critiqued.

One can also analyze the way Donoghue imagined her characters by setting them in three different stages of Ireland, much like the actual topic of this paper. Maria, from the beginning of the novel, represents early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland. She is timid, naive, keeps to herself and to what she is taught to do, growing up fulfilling her duties and purpose as a woman in a traditional and Catholic country. Then there is Ruth, who fits perfectly within the middle twentieth century Ireland norms when considering her personality. She has the motherly figure attributes to her, and is always taking care of her friends and her household. However, she still loves to be in control of her life. She is living with a woman and she is not dependent on a man, which is still a very unusual occurrence in Ireland. Therefore, she has the traditional side of Ireland, as well as the more modern side, just like the women's awakening in Ireland during the

nineties. And lastly, Jael is a free bird, loves art, she is direct, blunt, especially when it comes to her sexuality. She is not afraid of Catholicism or the people driven by it. She is confident and is very well representing the late twentieth century Ireland where Irish women are escaping the life of Catholic ideals and are taking their own lives under control.

To conclude, Maria, the main female protagonist of this novel is an example of what the transition from traditional to contemporary Ireland looked like for Irish women. For a long time now she has thought about what life is going to turn out like and if it is even existent outside of the place she was raised in: “She realized that all the women she knew were wives and mothers.”, “and could not sleep for worrying what she would turn out to be.” (Donoghue, 13). She was most of the time confused, scared even about everything she is witnessing, even concerned about some people. However, overcoming that, accepting her friends, not letting people like Yvonne bash them, blending into a city girl and leaving her old life behind is the peak of this coming-of-age novel. It shows the path Maria had to take to reach the level of maturity needed to become a woman, find her new identity and actually survive outside of a small rural place. That way Maria represents Irish women going against rules that limit their lives, changing the traditional gender roles, sexuality and taboo topics in general by bluntness and confidence.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have discussed and analysed three novels by Irish female authors written and set in three different periods of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the narratives are set in the early, middle and late 20<sup>th</sup> century, this paper explores different problems of a particular time, addressing the differences between decades, especially in terms of representations of Irish womanhood. Different positions of Irish women, taboo subjects, controversy, religion and

societal problems are some of the issues I have explored. In addition, the paper goes into a deeper analysis of 20th-century Ireland, as well as Irish Catholicism. The novels are analyzed chronologically, from Kate O'Brien's 1941 *The Land of Spices* to Edna O'Brien's 1965 *August is a Wicked Month*, and lastly with Emma Donoghue's 1994 novel *Stir-Fry*.

Firstly, in *The Land of Spices* Ireland is portrayed as a conservative and gloomy country. The impact of Catholicism seems to be on one of its highs while the position of a woman still sits low on the hierarchy. Marital problems are being mentioned and serve as an example of couples living unhappily, simply because the topic of divorce was not to be spoken about. On the other hand, Kate O'Brien polishes up the background of the convents where she portrays it as a school and safe space, rather than mentioning the Magdalene Laundries for example. In addition, the novel implicates merely a homosexual relationship between Mother Reverend's father and another man, which is also the reason for the book being banned.

On the other hand, Edna O'Brien's *August is a Wicked Month* represents Ireland in the sixties. Ireland in this novel has a pinch of contemporary background, however, it is still highly driven by Catholicism. It deals with topics such as sexual desire, and the freedom or struggle of a woman to feel it, motherhood and the heavy burden it puts on Irish women, making them feel like being a mother is their only purpose.

Lastly, the analysis of *Stir-Fry* shows Ireland at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I have demonstrated that in this novel many 'taboo' topics are addressed rather directly and that homosexuality is portrayed sympathetically. Donoghue's novel shows a switch from the traditional to more modern Ireland through the main protagonist and her growth. Ireland is slowly, but surely separating its ways from the Catholic Church. Although Catholic influence is still strong, Donoghue shows Irish women in a phase of their lives where they put themselves and their needs before the Church.

In conclusion, by analysing all three of the novels and focusing on problems and issues from different periods, it is obvious that, although slowly, Irish women did manage to escape the life and identity imposed on them by the Catholic Church. However, to some more than others, Catholic ways are always going to guide them. Irish female writers have proven to be brave, direct, stubborn, and strong. They went above and beyond to write about certain topics that would bring them trouble, simply because they felt that these topics were too important not to be brought up to the readers. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Irish women went through so many difficult phases; they were belittled, silenced, forced to marry, carry children, stay inside and not speak. Our selected writers, Kate O'Brien, Edna O'Brien and Emma Donoghue demonstrate that their Irish women are no longer silent and do not necessarily obey the social forces that were heavily influential in Ireland throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In their fiction, they demonstrate that Irish women have finally gained a voice.

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## FEMALE CHARACTERS IN IRISH WOMEN'S WRITING ACROSS THE DECADES:

### Summary and keywords

This final paper sets out to explore female protagonists in three selected Irish novels written and set in different periods of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *The Land of Spices* by Kate O'Brien was written in 1941 but set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; Edna O'Brien's 1965 novel *August is a Wicked Month* is set in the sixties, and late 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland is the setting of Emma Donoghue's *Stir-Fry* published in 1994. The paper analyses numerous issues portrayed in the selected novels, such as womanhood and motherhood, Irish patriarchal society and societal norms, the influence of the Catholic Church, gender roles, homosexuality, and homophobia.

**Key Words:** Kate O'Brien, Edna O'Brien, Emma Donoghue, *The Land of Spices*, *August is a Wicked Month*, *Stir-Fry*, Catholicism, womanhood, sexuality

## ŽENSKI LIKOVI U IRSKOM ŽENSKOM PISMU KROZ DESETLJEĆA:

### Sažetak i ključne riječi

Ovaj završni rad istražiti će ženske protagonistice u tri odabrana irska romana napisana i smještena u različitim razdobljima 20. stoljeća. *The Land of Spices* od Kate O'Brien napisan je 1941. godine, no radnja se odvija na početku 20. stoljeća; Roman *August is a Wicked Month* 1965. od Edne O'Brien smješten je u šezdesetima, a kraj 20. stoljeća vrijeme je radnje romana *Stir-Fry* od Emme Donoghue, objavljen 1994. Ovaj rad analizira različite probleme prikazane u odabranim romani, kao što su ženstvenost i majčinstvo, irsko patrijarhalno društvo i društvene norme, utjecaj Katoličke crkve, rodne uloge, homoseksualnost i homofobija.

**Ključne riječi:** Kate O'Brien, Edna O'Brien, Emma Donoghue, *The Land of Spices*, *August is a Wicked Month*, *Stir-Fry*, Katoličanstvo, ženstvenost, seksualnost