Portrayals of Womanhood in Irish Women's Fiction

Vukelić, Adrijana

Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku

Diplomski sveučilišni studij anglistike; smjer: nastavnički (dvopredmetni)

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Zadar, 3. svibnja 2023.

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1. Introduction: Irish Womanhood and Female Sexuality

The position of women in twentieth-century Ireland became significantly more difficult after the Catholic Church rose to prominence. The Church-State alliance dominated all aspects of Irish society, including the family, religion, and education. Women were viewed as sexual objects, housewives, mothers, and devout wives who aspired to be like the unattainable Virgin Mary. In accordance with the beliefs of the Catholic Church, female sexuality was a forbidden topic that could not be discussed in public. The alliance between Irish state and church tended to control and discipline the female body, especially the sexualized bodies of women who had disobeyed the moral teachings of the Catholic Church. The Church-State alliance looked after and often punished 'deviant' women in order to "isolate the sexually dangerous female body and thus keep the nation pure" (qtd. in Delay 73).

Numerous "fallen women" (for example, those who got pregnant outside of marriage) were simply shipped off to Magdalen Asylums run by the Catholic Church. The inmates of these shameful institutions had to atone for their "sins" through hard labour, and thus their 'deviant' female bodies remained under control. For the health of the Irish community, "fallen women" had to be eradicated as a contagious disease and had to do penance for any indecent thought: "The woman who has never known the pollution of a single wicked thought – the woman whose virgin bosom has never been crossed by the shadow of a thought of sin! – the woman breathing purity, innocence and grace, receives the woman whose breath is the pestilence of hell!" (qtd. in Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish 20*).

When it comes to women writers, Irish literature was always rather hostile to them. Censorship, which was in force throughout the twentieth century, made it even more difficult. According to O'Drisceoil, the Censorship of Publication Act prohibited the works of James Joyce, Samuell Beckett, George Bernard Shaw, Frank O'Connor, Francis Stuart, George Moore,

Oliver St John Gogarty, and Walter Macken (148). Needless to say, many female writers were banned as well. For example, some of Kate O'Brien's novels, such as *The Land of Spices* and *Mary Lavelle*, were censored in the thirties and forties. However, O'Brien's *The Ante-Room,* for example, was "the closest Ireland has come to producing a Catholic novel" (qtd. in Ukić Košta 55). *Mary Lavelle* was banned because the main protagonist gets involved in an illicit relationship with a married man, but also because Kate O'Brien introduced a lesbian character. Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy,* written in the early sixties, was banned as it was considered to demonstrate persistent disobedience to Catholic moral doctrines. The novel's protagonists, Baba and Kate, defy the expectations of the Catholic Church by diving headfirst into the sea of passion, sin, and sexuality. This is what Edna O'Brien says about people's reactions to her *Trilogy*: "I was amazed at how frightened people were of the truthful written word" (O'Leary 30). Brian Moore, another banned author, believed that Irish censorship had liberated him from his Irish convictions and literary nationalism, "I said to myself, I've written my Irish books; I must move on. It freed me. I think it freed me and I think it helped me" (O' Drisceoil 157).

This diploma paper will examine selected novels by some of the the above-mentioned banned writers, Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien, but it will also analyse novels written by younger writers such as Anne Anright and Emer Martin. My paper will thus focus on the following texts: *Mary Lavelle* (1936) by Kate O'Brien, *Down by the River* (1997) by Edna O'Brien, *The Gathering* (2007) by Anne Enright, and *The Cruelty Men* (2018) by Emer Martin. The paper will explore how the selected authors represent Irish womanhood and sexuality in their texts..

Kate O'Briens' *Mary Lavelle* takes place in 1922. The eponymous protagonist engages in an illicit affair with a married man while living in Spain. The protagonist of Edna O'Brien's 1992 novel *Down by the River*, Mary MacNamara, struggles against conservative Irish society

and the influence of the Catholic Church after her father raped her. Anne Enright's *The Gathering* is set in the early 1980s and offers an insight into an Irish family following the suicide of the main protagonist's brother. Emer Martin's *The Cruelty Men* starts in 1935 and spans a period of more than thirty years, until the late sixties. In many instances, it paints a vivid picture of Ireland in the twentieth century, and that is why I will begin my analysis with this novel. The members of the fictional O'Conaill family, who are sent to industrial schools, and Magdalen laundries, are also the narrators in the novel.

2. Emer Martin: *The Cruelty Men*

The Cruelty Men "is a dark novel, replete with stories of disillusionment, misery, and tragedy. It casts a searing light into the social inadequacies, inequalities and injustices of the new Irish State" (Gaughan). As for the title of the novel, as Martin herself states, the cruelty men "were men, sometimes retired police officers, who were tasked with locating destitute children and placing them in industrial schools for their own protection" (Terrazas Gallego 6). Many poor Irish families endured the cruel fate of having their children separated from them and sent to industrial schools at the hands of cruelty men. The vast majority of these families were impoverished and unable to provide for their numerous members. Additionally, children born outside of wedlock, those with only one parent, and the homeless were placed in industrial schools. Regardless of the mother's ability to care for her child, the child was frequently taken away, never to be seen again. This demonstrated the brutality of the system, which was, needless to say, controlled and administered by the Catholic Church. Later, some of the children testified under false names about the brutality of the system and the harsh consequences they suffered while attending the schools. Children were barely able to write due to the inadequacy

of their schooling. Mary, a former attendee of St. Francis Xavier Industrial School in Ballaghaderreen, County Roscommon, provided one of the following testimonials:

> I never knew my mother. She never visited and I have no memory of her. It never really occurred to me that people would love children. We never experienced it – never had hugs or kisses or anything like that. It just never arose.
>
> From when I was about eight or nine, I noticed I wasn't going to school a lot. … I couldn't read or write. My writing isn't too bad now, but I still have problems with the reading. (Raftery and O' Sullivan, *Suffer The Little Children* 319)

In *The Cruelty Men*, Mary O'Conaill, the eldest sister and one of the narrators, cared for her siblings while fighting against the system by hiding the fact that her parents had died. However, she is not the only female protagonist and the narrator in the novel: we also have insight into her sister Maeve's perspective, and later in the novel there are parts where we hear Maeve's daughter' voice and her story. Mary, the eldest of six siblings, was forced to adopt the role of a caregiver at the age of eleven. She is a devout Christian who is convinced that the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom she holds in the highest regard, guides her actions and decisions. However, at one point, Mary states:

> I prayed to the Virgin Mary, for I knew that though Meath was full of fairies and spirits, they were not inclined to need us or help us. Wasn't it us that had taken the land from them right at the very beginnings before anyone wrote anything down? That's why we needed a Virgin. I never prayed to the man on the cross. Who could? (Martin, *The Cruelty Men* 77)

Mary's childhood was marked by hard work, as she had to care for her siblings after their father abandoned them in search of their mother. According to Caneda-Cabrera, "Mary, who had sworn to keep the family together, becomes a surrogate mother at age eleven, and by age

sixteen, her black hair has entirely turned grey" (176). Mary accepts a position as a housekeeper for the Lyons family, which consists of Patricia, Brian, their two children, and Patricia's unborn third child. They reside in Kilbride, Meath, where Patricia is an educator and Brian is a solicitor. Mary arrives at the Lyons household in a poor physical and emotional state: "I walked those miles without shoes. My hair was grey and very short; my crocodile hands almost tore a hole through Mrs. Lyons' rose-petal skin when she put her hand out to shake mine. We got an electric shock off each other." (Martin, *The Cruelty Men* 75)

She becomes so close and attached to them that she loves their children as her own. Her favourite among them was a little Teresa (Baby). She "retells her folktales and recites her poems to Baby while she witnesses the country's movement into modernity among the educated classes" (Caneda-Cabrera 178). Throughout the novel we see Mary living in a loving substitute family. Due to their harmonious family life, the Lyons family seem to be an ideal Irish family in mid-twentieth century Ireland. As Mary begins working for Patricia and Mr. Lyons, she learns what constitutes a "genuine" family. She gradually becomes part of their family, providing Mrs. and Ms. Lyons with advice when they seek it. On the other hand, they offer Mary assistance whenever she needs it. After the death of her parents, it appears as if she has been given a new family which will care for her.

Mary's visit to her brother Padraig in the hospital following his back fracture exemplifies their caring nature. She always blames herself for his injury and death because she believes that none of this would have occurred if she dared to confront those who carried him away, including her brother Seamus, who had sent Padraig to the institutional school. Mary adored Padraig deeply and treated him as if he were her own son:

> My Padraig was very beautiful, with a thick head of dark hair, and a fine, sculpted face and firm jaw. He hated to be touched before but now he opened his eyes and looked right at me.

> But he did not smile. Instead, big tears flowed down his face and down mine and we just looked at each other. For the first time since he was twenty months old, Padraig allowed me to hold him. Musha, he could not wriggle away from me, for his back was broken, and he was frozen in plaster of Paris. (Martin, *The Cruelty Men* 202)

That can be best illustrated by the fact that her other siblings have repeatedly referred to her as their mother. Mary embodies the qualities of a devoted mother and homemaker. She has never had a boyfriend or been in a sexual relationship. She does not comprehend what it is like to be loved by a man because she does not desire a touch or a kiss from a man. Furthermore, she even states that "marriage is good for men, but not so good for women" (Martin, *The Cruelty Men* 416). Mary embodies the mother figure in Irish society because she raised her siblings and also cared for the Lyons family. In this novel, she is the closest representation of the ideal woman in Ireland: caring, affectionate and asexual. In addition, "like the rest of the family, Mary is an Irish speaker, who must give up her native tongue to survive in the new "free" State" (Caneda-Cabrera 175).

Mary O'Conaill places others' needs before her own, never complains, and never expects anything in return. However, Mary's sexuality is never questioned. She does not discuss her own physical pleasures in any way. Either she does not care about herself or she does not wish to care about herself. Never once did she mention a need to have her own children. Based on Raftery and O'Sullivan, "children are a country's most precious asset. But not in Ireland. We were treated like we were unwanted, something to be hidden, to be ashamed of" (274). Thus, Mary endeavoured to be a good substitute mother mother to her siblings, but her family gradually fell apart nevertheless. "The children of the O'Conaill family are scattered one by one" (Caneda-Cabrera 177). Seeing her family falling apart, Mary would rather not have children on her own and be forced to give them away.

Mary's sister Maeve, on the other hand, is a totally different young woman and represent another kind of Irish womanhood. She uses her beauty to seduce men who enter the shop where she works. She wears short skirts and dresses to draw attention to her thin legs and body. Maeve has the same blue eyes and blonde hair as her sister Mary, but she is the polar opposite of her. She is not very religious, she is fun loving and enjoys life, and only seeks to make a living and go to America (like one of their sisters whose perspective we don't have in the novel). Being very pretty, Maeve attracts many men who only want to use her sexually. One of the men she meets is Kevin, the fiancé of Catherine, who is the daughter of her employer's family, the Boyles. Besides being a truck driver, Kevin also delivers bread to the business every day. Kevin likes Maeve and enjoys staring at her. Consequently, he enters her room one night and rapes her: "If you make a noise I'll have you thrown out on the street you dirty bitch, I know what you think when you look at me. I've watched you from the landing window when you take boys into the alley (…) You dirty whore" (Martin, *The Cruelty Men* 108-9). After the rape, Maeve's destiny is sealed.

Maeve became pregnant and since she was not married a priest placed her with nuns until she gave birth. However, after she had given birth to twins, the nuns sent her to a mental institution where she was used as a test subject for medications and forced to perform manual labour. Maeve became depressed and miserable, her hair turned grey, and little of her former beauty remained. Maeve made two separate attempts to drown herself and her twins in the lake but was apprehended and transferred to Magdalene Asylum. Maeve thus turns into one of those unhappy Irish women who fell victim to the cruel system and the alliance between Church and State. She is now simply seen and perceived as a prostitute. Therefore, she spent the rest of her life in an Asylum (Finnegan 25). In *The Cruelty Men*, the character of Maeve O'Conaill was denied her right to a happy family life. Before becoming pregnant, Maeve had a good job, was attractive, and had many admirers. However, her plans were shattered once she got pregnant

out of wedlock. Maeve shared the sad fate of many young unmarried women in Ireland who got pregnant and were consequently shipped off to Magdalene asylums by their families. Irish familes wanted to avoid the stigma of the pregnancy out of wedlock and hid their daugters and sisters.

Catholic nuns who ran the asylums ordered Maeve to work hard and took her children away:

> ‘What have I done?’ I asked, confused.
>
> ‘How do you mean, child?’
>
> ‘Why am I to leave the orphanage part and come to this part? Am I being punished?’
>
> ‘We need someone to do the ironing and they said you were a good worker.’
>
> A good worker? They’d never told me that. I’d worked for years as a skivvy for these nuns and nothing satisfied them. Now they were putting me in with the laundry women, the Magdalenes, the lowest of the low.
>
> ‘Hard labour is the cure for the sexually charged mind, my dear.’ (Martin, *The Cruelty Men* 403)

She endured the brutality of the Catholic Church's supposed moral doctrines with great anguish. As Caneda-Cabrera argues, “Maeve represents the traumatic experience of women who are excluded because they do not fit the model of sexual morality and are thus punished and doomed to historical silence and societal shame” (177-8). Maeve has to repent for her ‘sins’ and wash them away both literally and metaphorically. The Church repeatedly emphasises sin to persuade women that they have committed the gravest sin and thus sealed their fate. Most Magdalens were unable to endure long and difficult labour and horrible living conditions. According to Sebbane, “the women were expected to wash away their sins literally, just as Mary Magdalene had washed Jesus' feet” (3). Despite this, it was nearly impossible to flee the

Asylum; even if a woman managed to escape, she would constantly have to live in fear for her life. What is especially sad in this novel is that the next generation of women, Maeve's daughter, shares her mother's destiny. We follow the daughter (who has no name but is only assigned a number) who is growing up in the Magdalene asylum and will probably remain there for the rest of her life. She is punished because of her mother's sins, and simply because she is an illegitimate child. Towards the end of the novel two women are reunited at the same asylum without knowing each other's identity.

Teresa (Baby) Lyons is another female protagonist and narrator in this novel. This young woman seems to represent Ireland's future in many ways, as she belongs to a new generation who might have access to education and more public life. However, the Catholic Church views Baby as a renegade because she desires an education even though her parents did not tell her about the Cambridge scholarship: "I wasn't really listening to him until he said, 'A scholarship to Cambridge is a great honour for the family but you made the right decision. England is no place for a girl.' 'What scholarship? I never got that.' I was gobsmacked" (Martin, *The Cruelty Men* 397).

In a way, Baby symbolises another victim of a system that requires women to be uneducated in order to be accepted by conservative society. If she had been a man, she would have been able to apply to college and realise her full potential. She concludes that for the happiness of her family, she needs to give up the education opportunity that she was offered. Since the system is so cruel, the safest way to avoid trouble while pursuing higher education is to live pious lives in matrimonial congregations. Baby turns out to be a model Irish woman in all other respects: she is engaged and expecting her first child towards the end of the novel. Since she is fond of Mary whom she has known her whole life, she is also very interested in Mary's family and her siblings. Mary's younger brother Sean became her friend too: "Seán, an intelligent and sensitive young man whom Mary manages to send to school and college, becomes a Christian Brother

who witnesses the evils of physical and emotional abuse around him" (Caneda-Cabrera 178). He saw no alternative to committing suicide. We see in the book that many Irish men lived difficult lives in mid-century Ireland, and Sean is sadly one of them. He is also a victim of a cruel system which dominated many aspects of Irish life for much of the 20th century.

Another female protagonist in the book, Sheila, Seamus's wife and Mary's sister in law, is the least religious character in the book. She comes across as manipulative and only considers her own interests. As a young woman, she acted purely and lovingly before marrying Seamus O'Conaill so that she could have a roof over her head. However, once she got married, she never really adhered to the norms of the Catholic Church and did not display "the proper behavior" of an Irish woman / wife / mother. She does not clean, cook, or take care of her children. The marriage between Seamus and Sheila is tumultuous, as they argue constantly. Moreover, their children live in deplorable conditions since their partners do not provide for them. At one point, Sheila wants Mary, her sister in law, to move in with them and be their housewife. After Mary declines the offer, Sheila accuses her of being a witch and beats her with a shovel in front of their doorstep:

> Her hair was witch grey as a child. She turns into a hare at night. She should be locked away too with the rest of them. There's none of ye worth the steam of my piss. Oh I rue the day I got involved in this wretched family.' Sheila swung around and belted Mary with the metal of the shovel; it came down on her shoulder and she fell like a tree. Sheila stood over her, she raised the shovel top again and brought it down on her back as Mary tried to get up. She poleaxed her with the sharp end of the shovel and then dug in into her neck as if trying to chop her head off. (Martin, *The Cruelty Men* 274)

Sheila never felt remorse for the actions she committed against her sister-in-law. She always placed the blame on poor Mary, claiming that everything that went wrong in their family was

Mary's fault. The female protagonists in *The Cruelty Men* portray various kinds of womanhood mostly showing how extremely hard it was for women to live in the conservative country which heavily controlled their identity.

3. Kate O'Brien: *Mary Lavelle*

Mary, the main protagonist of Kate O'Brien's novel *Mary Lavelle*, is a young, devout girl who travels to Spain before getting married and settling down. The narrative provides contrasts between Ireland and Spain, and the novel's intriguing and complex plot offers readers an encounter with the Irish heroine as she struggles for inner peace. Mary Lavelle decides to embark on an adventure and goes to Spain to work as a governess for the Areavaga family, where she earns her own money and enjoys the benefits of Spain. As Gordon states, "upper class Spanish families were in the habit of hiring respectable middle-class Irish girls to teach English to their children" (17). Such behavior was usually considered unthinkable for Irish women at the time, as the narrative is set in the twenties. Ireland did not offer much pleasure to the young, adventurous girl, and Mary was captivated by the idea of seeking pleasure in Spain. Moreover, this would enable her to gain insights into Irish society from an outsider's perspective. Therefore, "in *Mary Lavelle*, Ireland is configured as a closeted space that cannot accommodate women who do not fulfil the traditional female spousal and maternal role" (Finlay-Jeffrey 39). It turns out that Mary does not fulfil this role as she eventually gets involved in an illicit affair. The woman who 'strays' from the path fostered by the Church-State alliance is immediately stigmatized and shunned by Irish society and the Catholic Church. According to the conservative Irish society, a "fallen woman" is a traitor and a prostitute.

Contrary to the moral doctrines and principles of the Catholic Church, Mary Lavelle was unfaithful to her fiancé and had sexual relations with a married man. As Rooks-Hughes

states, “the sacrifice of the body is what is at stake” (86). Moreover, Mary Lavelle willingly and deliberately consents to Juanito taking her virginity, hoping he will be her first and only long-lasting lover:

> He took her quickly and bravely. The pain made her cry out and writhe in shock, but he held her hard against him and in great love compelled her to endure it… The curls were clammy on her forehead now, as on that day when she came into Luisa's drawing-room from the bullfight. She was no longer Aphrodite, but a broken, tortured Christian, a wounded Saint Sebastian. (O’Brien, *Mary Lavelle* 9)

This may be the best example from the novel that accurately portrays Mary Lavelle in her true light, as Mary violated the religious principles of the Irish Catholic Church. Regardless of what happens later in the story, if John refused to marry Mary or if she became pregnant with Juanito's child, she would be considered a “fallen woman” and probably sent to the Magdalene Asylum for the rest of her life. Mary is an untypical Irish woman of her time. She decides to travel and find a job on her own in Spain, but she primarily wants to see the world before getting married; she flees Ireland and its influence. As for differences between Ireland and Spain, Gordon argues that “both cultures adore the extreme and the ideal, the dualistic, the choice that negates all other choices. They worship the self-denying hero who, his spent flesh still on fire, gives all“ (17). Neither her father nor her fiancé prevented her from temporarily entering the “new life“ outside Mellick, which was extremely unusual given the great influence that familes had on daughters and the extent to which they controlled and determined their lives. However, Mary realises that after having “committed a sin“ in Spain, she will have to face the cruel reality once she goes back to Ireland: “That was all. That was the fruit of her journey to Spain. Anguish and anger for everyone and only one little, fantastic, impossible hope. Yet there it was – a real story. As real as the bullfight – and, oh God, oh God, as beautiful.” (O’Brien, *Mary Lavelle* 300)

By leaving Ireland and exploring new territory outside the Church-State alliance's sphere of influence, the main protagonist in *Mary Lavelle* demonstrates great courage. Her sexuality is awakened when she falls in love and gives in to a passionate relationship with a married man. According to Gordon, "she's read a lot, so she knows that a real woman is supposed to feel more when her lover kisses her than boredom and an eagerness for the kiss to be over" (17). We can question Mary's capacity to voluntarily give her body to Juanito. Although she left Ireland, she still carries with her the cultural and societal influences of her upbringing in Ireland, which continue to shape her identity and perspective. Mary desires a life of adventure but knows she must eventually marry John to fulfill her destiny. By being unfaithful to John, however, she has jeopardised her role of a good Irish woman/wife/mother and the subsequent family life with John. Throughout the story, Mary's attitude towards John gradually alters. She initially displays extreme contempt for him:

> Oh, John – I must stop. You mustn't think that all this gabble means that I don't miss you. I wish I could tell you how I do! Hardly five minutes go by in which I don't think of you, or want to show you something or talk to you. I get the most awful fits of loneliness for Mellick, and panic about everything. (O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* 9)

In contrast, at the end of the story, Mary seldom writes to John and questions the possibility of their marriage:

> Here in its usual corner, in its leather frame, the little snapshot of John. She picked it up. John smiling, with his fox-terrier pup on his arm. She stared at the photograph in despair. What was she to do? What on earth was she to do about this honourable, decent, tender-hearted man? What a stranger he seemed now! (O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* 253)

Mary seems to have disgraced John by betraying him, and endangered Juanito's marriage by having an affair with him. Both Mary and Juanito were aware of the cost of their relationship.

In the end, they are both unhappy, desiring each other's kisses and comfort and wishing for an eternal love that was never meant to be.

However, lesbian lust is what captures the reader's attention in the narrative too. Gordon argues that Mary transitions from a girl to a woman because "she is even able to absorb, with compassion and a lack of revulsion, the declaration of lesbian love that is offered to her by Agatha Conlon" (18). Agatha reveals to Mary that she has romantic feelings for her rather than platonic ones: "Well – did it disgust you?" "Please don't say that. You take one kind of impossible fancy, I take another" (O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* 258). This type of lesbian lust would not have been possible in Ireland during the twentieth century. As Finlay-Jeffrey argues, "sexuality in Kate O'Brien's novels is held in juxtaposition to Catholicism. Any discussion of lesbianism in her work naturally leads to a consideration of how it is held in an uneasy tension with a Catholic moral code" (44). Even if Mary had romantic feelings for Agatha, Irish society would not have tolerated such a "sin". To make their relationship work, they would have to remain in Spain, or they would have to forego any romantic involvement. Nonetheless, "whilst the feminist aspects in her work has since been examined by contemporary scholars, the lesbian elements in her work have been neglected by all but a small number of academics" (Finlay-Jeffrey 37). A lesbian character, however, was also a reason why censors of the day banned the novel.

While being in Spain Mary seems to enter a liminal space where she is at odds with the 'proper Irish behaviour'. She cannot fully enter womanhood and is thus neither a daughter nor a wife. Mary is an Irish girl who is seeking her place in the world, whether in Ireland, Spain, or elsewhere:

> To go to Spain. To be alone for a tiny space, a tiny hiatus between life's two accepted phases. To cease being a daughter without immediately becoming a wife. To be a free-

> lance, to belong to no one place or family or person – to achieve that silly longing of childhood, only for one year, before she flung it with all other childish things upon the scrapheap. (qtd. in Finlay-Jeffrey 38)

Thus, through the character of Mary Lavelle, the novel portrays a more comprehensive representation of Irish society. Mary possesses all the feminine qualities of an ideal Irish woman, but she lacks the Irish goodness necessary to immediately settle down and enter marriage. The liminal space maintains her in a position that is neither positive nor negative. She has the option of returning to Ireland and succumbing to its regime, or staying away and becoming free. As a result, Mary Lavelle grows as a character throughout the story. This trait is characteristic of O'Brien's narratives. The theme of female growth in a non-Irish setting is consistently present in her fiction. In this way, O'Brien establishes a regular pattern throughout her body of work: “Each protagonist searches for meaning and independence separate from marriage and family“ (Tucker 83). Consequently, O'Brien succeeds in creating a protagonist who is able to leave Ireland and form an identity with other women of diverse sexual, and economic backgrounds in a foreign country. What they have in common is a change that will influence the story's progression and occur later in the narrative.

Correspondingly, O'Brien infers a concept of transnational feminism in *Mary Lavelle,* meaning that female relationships are “uneven, often unequal, and complex. They emerge from women's diverse needs and agendas in many cultures and societies“ (qtd. in Tucker 83). The essence of this concept is to facilitate female characters' ability to challenge patriarchal society and interact with one another in narratives. This is one of the reasons why O'Brien populates her novels with diverse characters. Their mission is to persuade Irish people that there is more to life than marriage and family. Furthermore, consideration should be given to the Limerick represented by “Mellick“ in *Mary Lavelle*. The significance of the setting makes O'Brien's works even more captivating. Numerous comparisons had previously been made between

Joyce's Dublin and O'Brien's Limerick, the birthplace of numerous heroines who embody the essence of Irish identity and culture. It is especially evident in Kate O'Brien's 1962 travel guide:

> The freest spirit must have some birthplace, some locus standi from which to view the world and some innate passion by which to judge it. Modestly I say the same for my relationship with Limerick. It was there that I began to view the world and to develop the same passion by which to judge it. It is there indeed that I learnt the world, and I know that wherever I am, it is still from Limerick that I make my surmises. (qtd. in Tucker 84)

This passage indicates that O'Brien will never forget her hometown, regardless of where she goes. Similarly, she is unwilling to compare Ireland to the rest of the world, as doing so would highlight the possibility of her losing her Irish identity. Regardless of where she lives, she wishes to remain Irish. Mary Lavelle, the protagonist of the novel, is actually afraid of losing her "Irishness". Moreover, Mary must constantly remind herself that her hometown is Mellick and that her time in Spain is merely a brief adventure that will expose her to new surroundings and people, as well as offer her the chance to become independent and secure a stable job. Mary is losing a part of her stable Irish identity after she spends some time in Spain, not only because she has had a forbidden love affair but also because she will lose all of her assets when she marries John. She is starting to appreciate Spain: "Somehow, the intensely formal drama of the bullfight frees Mary to know and to appreciate Spain. Her gentle charges, the three daughters of Don Pablo, involve her in the routines of their sheltered and cultivated lives" (Gordon 18). The only thing she is left with once she goes back to Ireland is a memory of him and their beautiful, tragic love: "Mary has also embraced this queer liminality. The novel ends in another liminal space, with Mary boarding a train to return to Ireland to break off her engagement to John" (qtd. in Finlay-Jeffrey 47). Mary's exposure to the opposite side of the liminal space - the possibility of losing her Irish identity - makes it unlikely that she and John

will develop a romantic relationship. She is no longer sufficiently "Irish" to marry an Irishman in a stable relationship. However, Mary Lavelle chooses to return to her hometown. She knows that she will be probably known as a "bad" Irishwoman who defied the tenets of the Catholic Church. She must now face the consequences of her risky lifestyle in Spain, which has profoundly altered her womanhood and her sexuality.

4. Edna O'Brien: *Down by the River*

Unlike the previous two novels under discussion in this paper, *Down by the River* is set in contemporary Ireland. The main protagonist, Mary MacNamara, a fourteen-year-old girl, is raped by her father. Since she gets pregnant, she travels to England to obtain an abortion, but the Irish Church and State want to to prevent her from undergoing the procedure. Mary lacks the support of her mother, who died of cancer at the beginning of the narrative. As in Edna O'Brien's other works, the protagonist is torn between her own views on womanhood and sexuality and those fostered by the Church-State alliance. She must decide whether to go against the Catholic Church's principles and have an abortion, or whether to comply with the Catholic Church's beliefs and give birth to a child who will indicate an incestuous relationship.

Mary is a young girl who cannot achieve a meaningful relationship. Her only companion was her friend Tara, who did not fully understand her. She was too embarrassed to live freely as other young women her age did. Thus, Rooks-Hughes claims that "lack of differentiation – confusion of boundaries, in-betweenness – permeates O'Brien's fiction" (91). We must not forget that Mary is a teenager. She learns about masturbation and sex from a magazine: "Look under the mattress, there's something there I want you to read for me. It's all about S-E-X. I got it in town. […] Mary, my best years are passing and your best years are passing, remember

that" (O'Brien, *Down by the River* 29). She was aware that she would become pregnant after her father raped her. Her sexuality and women's rights were severely violated.

Mary's ignorance of female biology consequently influences her perception of the society in which she resides. Given her young age, Mary handles her problems as best she can. She struggles to find her voice and preserve her mental health in a society still dominated by the Church-State alliance. As Dougherty argues, "Mary's experience of sexual assault feminizes her for the first time, and her father attempts to force her to acknowledge his feminization" (397). This automatically makes her a sinner in the eyes of the Church. Mary becomes pregnant one night when she is supposed to go to the disco with her friend Tara. Before she leaves the house, her father breaks into her room and rapes her:

> The voices inside her are hectic now, one saying 'Don't panic … Keep him talking then it won't happen,′ and a shakier voice saying 'Tara will come … She is in the taxi now … They are passing the pillar-box … They are coming near the gate … They are coming up.' Then no voice because it has begun and no one is coming to prevent it. (O'Brien, *Down by the River* 96)

The poor girl is deemed a prostitute by Irish society. Mary prays ceaselessly to the Virgin Mary for relief from the abhorrent pregnancy, pain and disgrace. She cannot confide in anyone because no one will believe her. However, another female character, Mona turns out to be her true friend who is warm and encouraging. Mona wants her to be fearless and speak out on behalf of all the souls whose lives have been destroyed by the Catholic Church:

> The girl she saw was Mona, older than herself, blonde and chatty. (…) But you have to act brave… You have to put on a good show… Do you know what the doctor said to me, Asian fellow, he said, beautiful girl like you, how did you get caught out. And I said

> to him I'm a terrible woman, that's how I got caught out. (O'Brien, *Down by the River* 146)

As Mary finally releases her voice, she also emulates Mona's voice, as it was the first time someone stood out to the Catholic Church: "Mary agrees to finally perform adult female subjectivity, … she is acceding only to what she and Mona perceive as the not-yet-abject identity of maiden, the female subject who might be known but has not yet been" (Dougherty 405).

Once Mary expresses her opinion, she begins to believe that she can alter the situation in her own way. Nonetheless, at some point, Mona makes fun of the Catholic Church by comparing an unborn child to a turd (Dougherty 405). In this manner, she informs Mary that she can manipulate the Catholic Church because she is the only true custodian of her body. It is her decision whether she wants to undergo an abortion or not. Mary learns that she is capable to transcend the boundaries of her Irish identity by the end of the story. She is no longer identified as a good Catholic woman who should bear children or be punished for her pregnancy. She shows that a woman does not have to adhere to the system's expected values and norms.

A passage from the final chapter in the book demonstrates Mary MacNamara's symbolic dominance over Irish society:

> Her voice was low and tremulous at first, then it rose and caught, it soared and dipped and soared, a great crimson, quiver of sound going up, up to the skies and they were silent then, plunged into a sudden and melting silence because what they were hearing was in answer to their own souls' innermost cries. (Edna O'Brien, *Down by the River* 297-8)

Although we do not know the outcome of her actions after the abortion or the consequences she will have to face, it is evident that the Catholic Church will pursue her. In addition, her womanhood and sexuality will be subject to scrutiny. However, although portrayed as an extremely vulnerable young woman, Mary gradually gains strength and uses her female qualities to assert her Irish identity and challenge societal norms.

5. Anne Enright: *The Gathering*

In *The Gathering*, the main protagonist is Veronica Hegarty, a 34-year-old woman living in Dublin. She is a stay-at-home mother who takes care of her two daughters, Emily and Rebecca. Her husband, Tom, is a successful businessman. The plot revolves around Veronica's efforts to determine the cause of her brother Liam's suicide: “Having been raised in a family of twelve – “the whole tedious litany of Midge, Bea, Ernest, Stevie, Ita, Mossie, Liam, Veronica, Kitty, Alice and the twins, Ivor and Jem” – Liam was the one with whom Veronica spent most of her childhood and adolescence” (qtd. in Smith 634). Given the context of contemporary Ireland where the novel is set, Veronica is the most independent of all female protagonists under discussion in my paper. Unlike other women we have analysed, Veronica is not religious. She does not believe that God can solve her problems, especially those associated with her brother's suicide. As Dell-Amico states, “Liam is a haunting, amorphous presence, even though he can be categorized variously as a victim of abuse, an emigrant or exile, an alcoholic, and a suicide” (79).

Already at the beginning of the novel Veronica talks about her brother. She emphasises that she does not have any sons, but she enjoys imagining how Liam would respond to certain situations involving her daughters: “So I offer Liam this picture: my two daughters running on the sandy rim of a stony beach, under a slow, turbulent sky, the shoulders of their coats

shrugging behind them. Then I erase it. I close my eyes and roll with the sea's loud static" (Enright, *The Gathering* 1). She was very close to her brother and constantly considers what he would think or feel in the various situations she finds herself in. However, she does not care what others think of her lifestyle. The Church views her as a woman who is subservient to her husband. However, she will never belong to a traditional Irish family because she defies many of Church and State requirements. Veronica and Tom "are fashioned as a prototypical boom couple whose fortunes mirror Ireland's move from an inward-looking post-Independence nation to an economic "tiger" (Dell-Amico 67). It is clear, however, that their marriage has been in shambles for a very long time; she no longer cares about her husband. This is not a happy marriage. Their children's defiance is increasing, and Veronica recognises aspects of her own personality in their actions. She is also aware that her family believes she is lost and in need of help. The loss of her brother, the sole source of happiness in her life, has rendered her depressed and unsuccessful. Veronica feels compelled to determine the cause of her brother's death:

> I owe it to Liam to make things clear-what happened and what did not happen in Broadstone. Because there are effects. We know that. We know that real events have real effects. (…) We know that there is a difference between the brute body and the imagined body, that when you really touch someone, something really happens (but not, somehow, what you had expected). (Enright, *The Gathering* 251)

Veronica decided to investigate the possible causes of her brother Liam's suicide by travelling to Dublin. The fact that she wanted to go there alone and without any companions indicates that she was attempting to organise her thoughts and find inner peace. Significantly, Veronica rarely speaks to her husband because she wants to prioritise her brother, and communicates with her two daughters infrequently. She describes her brother's life from infancy to death incessantly, but she is not yet fully aware of his passing. "Liam is clever. No. Liam is dead. Liam was clever, I should say" (Enright, *The Gathering* 118).

It is rather obvious throughout the novel that Veronica had an unquestionably close relationship with her brother, and seems to think that Irish society tore Liam apart and drove him to suicide. Veronica also constantly feels guilty and appears to bear some responsibility for her brother's suicide. While her husband disapproves of her decisions, she feels that she could say anything to her brother. To what extent she is unsatisfied with her (married) life is also seen in the affair she has with an Australian man: "…until suddenly I was prostrate and speechless with love for the Australian, endlessly lying there and listening to the house, the footsteps going through their rise and fall for the dull chirrup of his voice" (Enright, *The Gathering* 114). It turns out that Veronica had many men in her life, feeling free to do whatever she pleased with her body. This fact, of course, puts her in a position of a woman who does not comply with the norms and rules of the Catholic Church at all. However, she states explicitly that "she would have to love every man she slept with in order not to hate herself" (Enright, *The Gathering* 162).

Veronica's sarcastic tone distinguishes her from the protagonists in other novels analysed here. There is no embellishment of any kind; she tells the story exactly as it occurs. However, "by focusing on Veronica, … Enright facilitates her book's exploration of the larger problem of ignored groupings within Ireland beyond the specific matter of neglected children" (Dell'Amico 69). The Catholic Church does not believe that Veronica should investigate the reasons for Liam's suicide. According to the Church, she should first concentrate on her own life and avoid engaging in activities outside of her knowledge and experience. However, she violated the primary rule established by the Catholic Church; she is unfaithful to her husband. She is a "fallen woman" who must atone for her transgressions. Despite knowing that her husband Tom once loved her and might still love her, she finds sexual fulfilment with other men. Veronica seems to have difficulty understanding the true nature of love. She frequently describes her romantic relationship with her husband Tom and expresses doubt about their

marriage. As a result, she is indecisive. Since she fears for the safety of their daughters, Emily and Rebecca, Veronica is unable to decide whether or not she wants to divorce her husband. This is how she describes her daughters:

> Rebecca is eight now, she looks like me. Emily is six, she has black hair and the ice blue eyes you get on the Atlantic seaboard-Hegarty eyes, only more so - and I think that, if we fix Emily's teeth, and if Rebecca stops being dippy and learns how to be tall, than they both have a chance of being truly lovely, some day.
>
> My children have never walked down a street on their own. They have never shared a bed. They are a different breed. They seem to grow like plants, to be made of twig and blossom and not of meat. (Enright, *The Gathering* 69)

As shown by the appearance and behaviour of her two daughters, Veronica is dissatisfied with her marriage. Emily takes her father's side and Rebecca takes her mother's in a family argument. The author may have intended to emphasise the contrast between Veronica and Tom by highlighting the differences between the girls. In addition, the couple quarrels frequently, especially when Veronica recalls her brother's suicide. The reader has the impression that Veronica's entire first-person narration is derived from her analysis of life before and following Liam's suicide. She attempts to determine why he committed such a heinous act, why he did not confide in her, and what was happening in his life. It is important to note that when describing her childhood, Veronica frequently mentions her grandmother Ada. Consequently, "to Veronica, Ada is the source of a familial malaise, the effects of which continue to blight her children and grandchildren to the present day" (Dell-Amico 61). Ironically, she portrays her mother as unimportant in this regard, while she highlights the life of her grandmother. Additionally, Veronica resembles Ada more than her mother:

> To be fair, my mother is such a vague person, it is possible she can't even see herself. It is possible that she trails her fingertip over a line of girls in an old photograph and can not tell herself apart. And, of all her children, I am the one who looks most like her own mother, my grandmother Ada. It must be confusing. (Enright, *The Gathering* 13)

Later on, we discover that Ada's existence is crucial to comprehending Liam's fate. However, according to Dell'Amico, "Veronica makes up many of the scenes concerning Ada, as well as those concerning Ada's relationship with the man who molested Liam, … Lambert Nugent" (61). Even after they broke up, Ada's ex-boyfriend Lambert Nugent continued to visit her on occasion. At the end of the story, Veronica states:

> I know he could be the explanation for all of our lives, and I know something more frightening still – that we did not have to be damaged by him in order to be damaged. It was the air he breathed that did for us. It was the way we were obliged to breathe his second-hand air. (Enright, *The Gathering* 209)

The conclusion is that Lambert Nugent may be the most plausible explanation for Liam's suicide and his later alcoholism. Nevertheless, "the many descriptions of the past concerning Ada and Lamb are speculative, scenes that neither Veronica nor anyone else ever actually witnessed" (Dell'Amico 61). This also makes her an unreliable narrator throughout the novel.

In *The Gathering*, we can conclude that "Veronica blames Liam the most for destabilizing her sense of self, despite him not being the only one who makes her feel vulnerable" (Smith 642). The relationship with her huband is just as dysfunctional. She realizes that she must step aside for her husband and quit her job so that he can "lead" the marriage in a patriarchal fashion. "Enright further associates the couple with money and possessions by presenting them as eager participants in a consumer economy, a hallmark of Celtic Tiger Ireland" (Dell'Amico 67). As a patriarchal society, Irish culture views marriage as a union between two partners in which the

man controls everything. Veronica believes that her spouse cannot control her life because she is educated and mature enough to reconsider her decisions.

Dublin and Ireland seem not to offer Veronica Hegarty the kind of future she desires as a modern woman. According to Edna O'Brien's *Mother Ireland*, Ireland "is a state of mind as well as an actual country. It is being at odds with other nationalities, having quite a different philosophy about pleasure, about punishment, about life, and about death" (35). Veronica seems to be at odds with such a country and wants to be respected as a woman. She has concluded that she is more than a mother and wife due to the respect she has earned as a successful businesswoman. However, Irish society does not want Veronica to pursue a successful business career, as this is not the appropriate role for a good Irish woman. Her husband will manage the business, thus leaving her to manage the household and raise the children.

6. Conclusion

This paper has tried to analyse various female protagonists and images of Irish womanhood in the selected novels by four authors. Mary O'Conaill and Maeve O'Conaill are the main protagonists in Emer Martin's *The Cruelty Men*. Mary spends her entire life working for the Lyons, whereas Maeve is a life-long inmate of a Magdalene Asylum. The novel shows how women from poor Irish familes lived extremely difficult lives throughout much of the 20th century. Mary in Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* is the only one of these female protagonists who travels abroad to broaden her understanding of life. Her misery is due to the fact that she fell in love with a married man. She engages in a sexual activity with him regardless of the consequences. Mary eventually returns to Ireland and to her hometown Mellick, showing that she is a "good" girl who adheres to the Church-State alliance's regulations.

In Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River*, the focus was on Mary MacNamara, a teenage girl, and her dreadful fate of being raped by her father, resulting in pregnancy and a decision to have an abortion. Despite this, we are aware that Mary eventually finds her voice and speaks on behalf of all women who may one day be in her position. In *The Gathering* by Anne Enright the main protagonist and narrator Veronica Hegarty writes about her brother's suicide. Veronica never learns the possible motives and causes for Liam's murder, but is aware that some kind of sexual assult must have happened in Liam's childhood.

This diploma paper has focused primarily on how the Church-State alliance in Ireland controlled female protagonists in every aspect of their lives. The paper attempted to analyse the ways in which these women struggled living within the confines of Catholicism or/and struggled to break free from the clutches of the tacit Church-State alliance.

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PORTRAYALS OF WOMANHOOD IN IRISH WOMEN'S FICTION: Summary and keywords

The aim of this thesis was to examine portrayals of womanhood in Irish fiction by analysing four novels: *Mary Lavelle* (1936) by Kate O'Brien, *Down by the River* (1997) by Edna O'Brien, *The Gathering* (2007) by Anne Enright, and *The Cruelty Men* (2018) by Emer Martin. The paper attempted to show how female protagonists struggled against the strict and unavoidable Church-State alliance in twentieth-century Ireland. This alliance severely constrained their options and desires.

Keywords: womanhood, female sexuality, Catholic Church, State, Irish fiction.

PRIKAZI ŽENSTVA U PROZI IRSKIH AUTORICA: sažetak i ključne riječi

Cilj ovog diplomskog rada bio je analizirati prikaze ženstva i ženske seksualnosti u irskoj prozi na primjerima četiri odabrana romana: *Mary Lavelle* (1936.) autorice Kate O'Brien, *Down by the River* (1997.) autorice Edne O'Brien, *The Gathering* (2007.) autorice Anne Enright i *The Cruelty men* (2018.) autorice Emer Martin. U analizi se pokazalo da se protagonistice romana tijekom 20.st. bore protiv strogog i neumitnog saveza Katoličke crkve i države u Irskoj, a koji je duboko određivao njihov identitet i ograničavao im prava.

Ključne riječi: ženstvo, ženska seksualnost, Katolička crkva, država, irska proza.