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Questioning the Paddy Stereotype in Edna O'Brien's "Shovel Kings"

Jeanette Roberts Shumaker

London is the place where the incessant labour
that was the navy's life can be forgotten for a
while in the pubs of Camden Town and the dance
halls of Cricklewood, so much so that it becomes
a veritable home from home.

Jean-Philippe Hertz (7)

- 1 Known for decades for her novels and short stories about passion, adultery, and relationships between mothers and daughters, Edna O'Brien seemed preoccupied by so-called "women's concerns," which may have caused her neglect by critics, according to Lisa Colletta and Maureen O'Connor (4). However, starting in the 1990s O'Brien broadened her focus to encompass contemporary Irish issues in several novels.¹ O'Brien's collection of short stories, *Saints and Sinners*, winner of the 2011 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, continues this broadening trend.² This is especially the case in "Shovel Kings." Based on tales told by an old Irishman in a London pub, "Shovel Kings" critiques the stereotype of the "Paddy," the Irish manual labourer who lives in England.³ O'Brien has lived in London since 1959, spending most of her writing career in exile, like James Joyce and Elizabeth Bowen (Greenwood 11). Several scholars shed light on the Irish experience in England: Mary J. Hickman and Bronwen Walter discuss stereotypes of the Irish in England; Liviu Popoviciu, Chris Haywood, and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill explore the challenges facing Irish emigrants there, as do Kevin Kenny, Aidan Arrowsmith and others. Julia Kristeva's examination of exile from a psychoanalytic perspective also provides insight into O'Brien's short story. As a Bulgarian who immigrated to France, Kristeva portrays the struggles of the emigrant living in a foreign land in *Strangers to Ourselves*. Kristeva's ideas about the foreigner's alienation, which are rooted in Freud's work on the uncanny, expand O'Brien's story's implications beyond the Irish experience of emigration.

- 2 According to Kevin Kenny, beginning in the 1920s, Britain became the most popular destination for Irish emigrants. The Irish remain the “largest labour migrant and ethnic group in Britain” (Arrowsmith 173). In 1961—a year or two after O’Brien’s protagonist moved to London—the Irish in London numbered 172,493, as a result of long-term, high unemployment in Ireland (Murray 39). By 1991, more than 32% of the Irish emigrants in England resided in London (Walter 62). A larger proportion of Irish men working in England in the early 1990s (12%) were classified as unskilled than of Englishmen or Black Caribbeans—whose proportions of unskilled were 5.45% and 8.4%, respectively (Hickman and Walter 279). As such, Irish male emigrants to England face “high rates of injury and early death” and a shorter life expectancy than men who remain in Ireland (Popoviciu, Haywood and Mac an Ghail 176, 177). Yet they are a “deprived community” in terms of housing, mental health services and employment discrimination (Herron 2). In 1991, the Irish in London followed only Black Africans in their “lack of self-contained accommodation,” while “a disproportionate number” of Irish were homeless (Walter 85). The 1991 unemployment rate of 19% for Irishmen in Britain was nearly double that of whites from the UK (Greenslade 39).⁴
- 3 Hickman and Walter explain that in centuries past and continuing in the 1990s, English people often increased their self-esteem by denigrating the Irish, Welsh and Scots (268). Walter writes that in London it was still common in the 1950s and 1960s to see signs saying “No Irish, no coloureds,” near others saying “No dogs” (86). The “dirty Irish” was a common stereotype among the English, even in the 1990s, but “the central stereotype [is] of the male, working-class ‘Paddy’” who personifies “‘brawn’ rather than ‘brain’” (Hickman and Walter 271-272). Popoviciu, Haywood and Mac an Ghail write that the British have defined Irish masculinity as what British masculinity excludes —“working with the body (for example, the navy)” (179). It is ironic that the Paddy is the main Irish stereotype when actually, since 1921 the majority of the Irish living in England have been women (Hickman and Walter 272). The Paddy is also known for his heavy drinking that can trigger violence (272). As Arrowsmith comments, the Irishman who lives in Britain “denotes religious and political subversiveness, social barbarity, moral laxity and a wild sexuality” (163). In O’Brien’s story, London police in the 1960s and later enjoy watching “the Irish slaughter one another. They hated the Paddies” (17). Heather Ingman provides an historical explanation for such xenophobia: “the colonial stereotype of the feminised Celt” caused the Irish to generate “a hypermasculine republican form of masculinity” that highlights “their manliness” (255).
- 4 Walter remarks that in London prejudice against the Irish is especially marked, since Irish accents act as stronger markers of ethnicity there than in Liverpool or northeast England, where local accents more closely resemble Irish ones (88). In Britain an Irish accent can trigger the “Irish joke,” generally aimed at the Paddy’s supposed stupidity (Hickman and Walter 272). In the 1990s English cartoons still mocked Irish construction workers at building sites and pubs (274), revealing underlying fears of Catholics and “foreign invaders” (272-274). The Irish who claimed public benefits in England were often called “scroungers” in the 1990s (276). In reaction to such prejudices, Irish men in England typically resided in Irish neighbourhoods, “Irish worlds” (288). In fact, Tom Herron writes that London is “a displaced capital of the Gaeltacht” (3). The decision to live in an Irish neighbourhood makes sense in that more “anti-Irish abuse” is reported in English neighbourhoods with “small Irish populations” (Hickman and Walter, 286).

According to Popoviciu, Haywood and Mac an Ghail, the British usually deny their racism against "the ghettoised male migrant" (176), but "pervasive institutional mechanisms of exclusion across public spaces operate against the Irish" (171). Irishmen "are simultaneously discursively positioned as white Europeans and as members of an inferior race" (Popoviciu 173). Arrowsmith explains that "the white Irish are assumed [by the British] to have assimilated unproblematically into a 'British' identity" (165). O'Brien's story suggests otherwise.

- 5 Having come to Camden Town, London from Ireland at the age of fifteen, O'Brien's Rafferty has remained in England for forty years, working at a series of construction jobs. O'Brien's narrator meets Rafferty, now in his mid-fifties, in an Irish pub in London—one of the protective "Irish worlds" to which Hickman and Walter allude (288). Irish enclaves are harder to find in a twenty-first century London where "over twenty languages" are spoken in a single working-class neighbourhood (O'Brien 32). When Rafferty had left London for short periods to work on specific jobs, he had yearned to return to Camden, "where I had put roots down" (21). With "huge hands" that are "a dark nut brown" in contrast with his "sallow" skin, Rafferty has "a lopsided knuckle, obviously caused by some injury" (5). Wearing "a black felt homburg hat" (5) along with old clothes that suggest his age, poverty and identity as an "Other" in modern London, Rafferty describes his teens spent among Irish work gangs, in which some of the labourers spoke Gaelic but not English. Rafferty observes that even the non-English speaking Gaelic speakers "understood the foreman and the ruthlessness of him" (12).⁵ Yet young Rafferty "believed that a great future lay ahead of me" (11).
- 6 Rafferty repeatedly refuses the female narrator's invitations to buy him a drink or share a cab she has paid for. As Kristeva writes of emigrants in general: "Indifference is the foreigner's shield. Insensitive, aloof, he seems, deep down, beyond the reach of attacks and rejections that he nevertheless experiences with the vulnerability of a medusa" (7). Rafferty explains: "you had to be tough, on the job and off the job, even if you were dying inside" (17). To live under London's bridges with other Irish alcoholics in his early middle age, Rafferty had to become even tougher. Later, sitting at a bar in his fifties, Rafferty seems imperturbable. Yet he pushed his mother, wife and even the narrator away because "of a heart that was immeasurably broken" (42). Speaking of exiles like Rafferty, Kristeva remarks: "The lost paradise is a mirage of the past that he will never be able to recover" (10). Rafferty recalls hunting with a white ferret on Sundays when he was a boy. He misses his long-dead mother, telling the narrator about an idyllic day picking berries with her shortly before he left for London.
- 7 When Rafferty finally returns to Ireland to retire on charity in his fifties, he is unhappy there and, within two weeks, moves back to his small, Spartan room in Camden. "He doesn't belong in England and ditto Ireland," says a friend of Rafferty's (41). Or as Kristeva comments, "Always elsewhere, the foreigner belongs nowhere" (10). Rafferty complains that in the pubs in Ireland, no one wants to listen to his stories about working in England. But Kristeva finds such an experience to be typical in the emigrant's new country, not the exile's homeland: "Who listens to you? At the most, you are being tolerated" (16). By contrast with Kristeva, and confirming Rafferty's experience, Popoviciu, Haywood and Mac an Ghail report that in Ireland, the returning older emigrant male is often seen as "psychologically flawed, prone to alcoholism, etc."—as the "Other" to the resident Irishmen who are prospering in the new Ireland

(180). They add that generally only the Irish emigrant men who return with wealth feel comfortable in Ireland (180).

- 8 Having lived in secular London for decades, Rafferty finds the overt piety of Ireland hard to tolerate, for religious objects and pictures deck his new home there, and the housekeeper is constantly praying. In his disapproval Rafferty displays a kind of hybridity similar to that which Bertrand Cardin sees as characteristic of O'Brien's fiction: "O'Brien's fiction is an atemporal, displaced, dislocated network, endowed with intercultural hybridity" (79). Rafferty, a cultural hybrid, is too old to relearn Irish mores. Similarly, Popoviciu, Haywood and Mac an Ghiall speak of "Paddy the hybrid—the insider/outsider" (179-180). Another reason for Rafferty's dissatisfaction in Ireland is that he is beyond the age for taking advantage of the Celtic Tiger boom that supported "unprecedented in-migration and the return of younger immigrants" (Stoddard 149). Popoviciu, Haywood and Mac an Ghiall state that aged Irish emigrants who return home often find Ireland very different from the country they left (177); many are bachelors or divorced, with "limited social support networks and virtually no contact with families in Ireland (178). These statements are true of Rafferty.
- 9 Rafferty survives the loss of his dream of moving back to Ireland, persisting with his old routine in London after he returns there. The reader wonders whether Rafferty, in his mind, continues to live in the dreamed Ireland of his youth, even while sitting in a London pub. Kristeva notes of the exile that, "No obstacle stops him, and all suffering, all insults, all rejections are indifferent to him as he seeks that invisible and promised territory, that country that does not exist but that he bears in his dreams, and that must indeed be called a beyond" (5). Rafferty's poverty is typical of that of aged Irishmen in London: in his study of fiction about the Irish in London, Tony Murray notes that the city has long been full of impoverished elderly Irishmen (42). Rafferty walks the London streets each day, without seeming to have a goal for his own life. Kristeva explains such a seemingly aimless pattern: "according to the utmost logic of exile, all aims should waste away and self-destruct in the wanderer's insane stride toward an elsewhere that is always pushed back, unfulfilled, out of reach" (6).
- 10 A cause of Rafferty's enduring alienation in London was his father's cruelty to him. His father locked the teenager out of their Camden room so he could entertain a prostitute, before beating the boy for finding out. Rafferty's father then moved back to Ireland. For years Rafferty felt he couldn't go home to Ireland while his father was alive because he'd kill his father if he did. No longer is Rafferty just an Irish emigrant seeking work in London, but an exile who cannot return to his homeland. In his impulse to commit patricide in response to domestic abuse Rafferty resembles Christy Mahon in J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*. Declan Kiberd observed in 1988 that "a revolt by angry sons against discredited fathers" is a common theme of Irish literature (179).
- 11 His father robbed Rafferty of home not so much by moving him to London as by betraying his mother there. The disillusionment with parents that is typical during adolescence is extreme for Rafferty, who condemns his father while worshipping his mother. Kristeva writes that hating is common among exiles: "Hatred makes him real, authentic so to speak, solid, or simply existing" (13). Rafferty's hatred of his father seems his most intense, enduring emotion, deflecting other resentments he might have felt with as much cause—such as for his exhausting, ill-paid, inescapable labour in a foreign land. On the positive side, though, Rafferty seems to enjoy his freedom from his father's control after his father returns to Ireland. Kristeva observes that, "Certainly

foreigners become intoxicated with... independence, and undoubtedly their very exile is at first no more than a challenge to parental overbearance" (21).

- 12 Rafferty's drinking as a teenager, once his father leaves the boy alone in London, is a way to show he is finally a free adult. But there are other reasons why Rafferty drinks more and more as the years pass.⁶ Kristeva writes of the immigrant's frustration, "He has fled from that origin—family, blood, soil—and, even though it keeps pestering, enriching, hindering, exciting him, or giving him pain, and often all of it at once, the foreigner is its courageous and melancholy betrayer" (29). The existential guilt of the exile underlies Rafferty's alcoholism. As a boy and young man earning little, Rafferty could not have saved his mother from his father, but he should have, he believes. "His father, he believed, had killed her, had worn her out" (25). Rafferty tells the narrator that it was "too much" for him to learn from his mother before he left Ireland that she loved him better than her daughters and husband (29).
- 13 Another reason Rafferty develops a drinking problem is because his happiest times are spent among other Irish workers at London pubs. Kristeva explains what such moments might mean for exiles: "A miracle of flesh and thought, the banquet of hospitality is the foreigners' utopia—the cosmopolitanism of the moment, the brotherhood of guests who soothe and forget their differences, the banquet is outside of time" (11). In the warmth of the Aran Pub as a teenager in Camden, Rafferty finally feels happy in his new city. Through his decades in London, Rafferty makes most of his friends at its many Irish pubs. In line with this, Popoviciu, Haywood and Mac an Ghiall assert that Irish male emigrants' lives are "highly gendered, taking place within all-male environments" of Irish pubs, construction sites, clubs and games. In his fifties, as a guest of Irish pub owners in London at a Christmas dinner for lonely men from Mongolia, Africa and Ireland, Rafferty imagines that their convivial happiness is what domesticity means. Mary J. Hickman remarks: "In the heterogeneous diaspora space of contemporary Britain, Irish immigrants and their children have formed transethnic alliances" (40). Hence, it is not surprising that Rafferty enjoys the company of Africans and Mongolians who may feel at least as displaced in London as he does.
- 14 Rafferty gave up his chance at domestic happiness when his drinking drove away Grania, the young woman who lived with him in Camden during his youth. As his father betrayed his mother by purchasing women, Rafferty betrayed Grania via purchasing alcohol. As an aging bachelor, all that Rafferty now owns is the suitcase he brought from Ireland as a boy, with his mother's gifts of missal, crucifix and striped pajamas. Kristeva explains that the foreigner's poverty is both humiliating and liberating: "Available, freed of everything, the foreigner has nothing, he is nothing" (12).
- 15 This freedom of the exile does create charisma in Rafferty's case. Kristeva explains of the foreigner: "Your awkwardness has its charm, they say, it is even erotic..." (15). Grania became interested in Rafferty even though he was too shy to dance with her, unlike the other Irish men at the Cricklewood dance hall. The aging Rafferty is paid to sit among old furniture for sale on a London street because his Irish songs attract prospective customers; this Paddy has been commodified for his quaint charm. "He was totally at ease out in the open," the narrator explains (10). Ironically, a life spent in hard labour in all weathers has made Rafferty comfortable with being part of an outdoor furniture display. Popoviciu, Haywood and Mac an Ghiall state that since the late 1990s, the British represent the Irish in positive terms in popular culture (179).

That the narrator writes a story about Rafferty also suggests he still has the power to interest those who meet him.

- 16 Kristeva explains how the exile's conviviality masks pain: "One who is happy being a cosmopolitan shelters a shattered origin in the night of his wandering. It irradiates his memories that are made up of ambivalences and divided values. That whirlwind translates into shrill laughter" (38). Over his decades in London, Rafferty's sorrow makes him grotesque—a stereotypical Irish alcoholic. Later, after he's learned to limit his drinking, Rafferty wears absurd talismans that are popular with tourists such as a Gaelic harp pin. He has learned to tolerate—"with a quiet sufferance" (8)—the St. Patrick's Day green beer and shamrocks abounding in London's Irish pubs. Popoviciu, Haywood and Mac an Ghaill note that the "deterritorialisation" of the Irish is seen in the "global attraction of Irish theme pubs" (171). Wearing his harp pin as he lures customers to buy old furniture in the street, Rafferty himself has become deterritorialised, a sentimental emblem of stereotypical Irishness.
- 17 Rafferty also wears a pin that he says represents his guardian angel. How trite these emblems seem, even laughable, except when the reader recalls Rafferty's loneliness and alienation that might make cheap mementos of Ireland a comfort. Kristeva asks: "Split identity, kaleidoscope of identities: can we be a saga for ourselves, without being considered mad or fake?" (14). Is a displaced Irishman like Rafferty wearing a harp pin an impostor? At least that is better than seeming to be a madman, as Rafferty must have done when he lived under a bridge, begging with other Irish drunks.
- 18 Coupled with Rafferty's opacity is the narrator's mysteriousness. Who is the narrator who recounts Rafferty's tale? "The foreigner's friends, aside from bleeding hearts who feel obliged to do good, could only be those who feel foreign to themselves" (Kristeva 23). O'Brien's narrator remains mysterious, except for her middle-class penchants for psychoanalysis and white wine. Unusual in a story written in first person, the narrator merely retells Rafferty's stories, not her own. Her extreme reserve suggests that she feels uneasy about herself; perhaps she, like O'Brien and Rafferty, comes from Ireland, explaining why she frequents Irish pubs. The narrator's reserve confirms what Hickman and Walter found regarding Irish female emigrants in England: unlike Irish men, Irish women often try to hide their accent and origin to avoid prejudice against them (287). Reviewing *Saints and Sinners* in the *Guardian*, Sylvia Brownrigg comments: "O'Brien tells Rafferty's truth but tells it slant, via a female narrator... Rafferty's tale of drink-destroyed lives and helpless yearning for home is interwoven with references to the narrator's more settled circumstances (as she herself becomes the listener in the chair, absorbing Rafferty's account)." The narrator is thus Rafferty's analyst or secular confessor. Maybe she is a long-term London resident like O'Brien, who left Ireland at the age of 29.
- 19 Like the Chinese workers who completed the Herculean task of building the railroads in the American west, Rafferty's comrades dig English soil so that electric cables, water mains, motorways, hospitals, or factories might be constructed: "imagine those men, young though they were, destined for all eternity to be kept digging some never-ending grave" (12). The grave they create is ultimately their own, via a life spent digging one hole and then another in a seemingly endless series of jobs.
- 20 While O'Brien writes specifically of the Irish emigrant male, Kristeva writes more broadly about the work ethic of emigrants everywhere: "The foreigner is the one who works. While natives...think that work is vulgar and display the aristocratic manners of

off-handedness...you will recognize the foreigner in that he still considers work a value" (17-18). O'Brien concludes her story by memorializing Rafferty and the other Irishmen who created the undergirding of modern England. Their nicknames give them an intimate, if mythic, presence: "a litany—Haulie, Murph, Moleskin Muggavin, Turnip O'Mara, Whisky Tipp, Oranmore Joe, Teaboy Teddy, Paddy Pancake, Accordion Bill" (42). Rafferty's reference to young Irish labourers as "gladiators" adds to the impression of the timelessness of builders' anonymous yet essential role in creating civilizations throughout history (16). Discussing fiction about Irish emigrants (not including O'Brien's story), Tony Murray identifies the "long-established oral tradition of Irish exile and masculinity" (54). Rafferty's tales about his life told over a pint fit him into this tradition, which Murray calls "latter-day mythologies of a recent yet almost already forgotten era of London Irish life" (44). That some of the Irish men Rafferty knew died in accidents while they dug adds to their mythos. Kristeva observes of the foreigner that, "Since he has nothing, since he is nothing, he can sacrifice everything" (19). These Irishmen sacrificed homeland, family and life in the service of Britain. Kristeva also comments that the foreigner's happiness is that "of tearing away, or racing, the space of a promised infinite" (4). Rafferty's colleagues' moments of joy exist on an epic scale, even though they spent most of their lives imprisoned by the trenches they dug. Recalling a long ago party on a construction site, Rafferty describes "dancing in that London wasteland, as if in some Roman amphitheatre" (39). It is not just that, when paid, "Men felt like kings momentarily" (13). Rafferty himself possesses "a strange otherworldly dignity" (9). O'Brien's title suggests that these Irish labourers ruled empires underground, digging the necessary trenches for the empire that had sacked their homeland in eons past.

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NOTES

1. *The Country Girls* (1960) and *Time and Tide* (1992) are two of O'Brien's famous works that center on women. Her recent novels about contemporary Irish issues are *The House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), *Down by the River* (1996), *Wild Decembers* (1999) and *In the Forest* (2002). Michael Harris speaks of "O'Brien's shift in focus from the individual subject to the national culture" (125) in these novels. However, Amanda Greenwood notes of these novels that "political commentary sits uneasily with the 'Colleen image' which continues to be imposed on O'Brien by reviewers and literary critics alike" (11); Heather Ingman assesses critics' reaction to O'Brien's novels in a similar manner (253).
2. See Frank O'Connor Short Story Award. Web.
3. Ellen McWilliams points out that most fiction about Irish emigrants concerned men, until recently (2). O'Brien's story adds to this body of work, while deviating from her own early emphasis on female emigrants to London in her *Country Girls* trilogy of novels published between 1960 and 1964.
4. As Popoviciu, Haywood and Mac an Ghail remark, the Irish are "one of the world's most internationally mobile labour emigrant populations" (171). Popoviciu, Haywood and Mac an Ghail also observe that the Famine emigrants get the attention from the Irish who live in Ireland, while Irish emigrants since World War I (like the men in O'Brien's "Shovel Kings") "are written out" (171); the reason for this is that the Famine emigrants can be blamed on the British, while post-Independence emigrants cannot (171).
5. Speaking of exiles in general, Kristeva explains the painful experience of knowing the wrong language: "Bearing within oneself like a secret vault, or like a handicapped child—cherished and useless—that language of the past that withers without ever leaving you" (15).
6. Writing in 1971 (when Rafferty, aged about 26, would have been drinking heavily), sociologist Margaret J. Sargent explains that the Irish, like the Australians and Americans, have a "utilitarian style of drinking" that is more likely to result in abuse than the drinking styles of other cultures; utilitarian drinkers use alcohol to alleviate depression or other personal problems (85). Discussing Irish drinking patterns in a 1973 article, Brendan and Dermot Walsh note that the male emigrant Irish in London do have "a high rate of alcoholism," with a rate for admission to English psychiatric hospitals because of drinking at five times that of native Englishmen (20). The Walshes speculate that the cheapness of alcohol in England compared to Ireland encourages greater consumption by the Irish emigrant, who is "exposed to new pressures and uncertainties which might have predisposed him to seek refuge in alcohol" (23).

ABSTRACTS

« Rois de la pelle », la nouvelle d'Edna O'Brien, extraite du recueil *Saints et Pécheurs*, aborde le stéréotype de "Paddy", le travailleur manuel irlandais en Angleterre qui a « tout dans les muscles mais rien dans la tête »... Dans un pub de Londres, la narratrice écoute le récit de Rafferty, ouvrier du bâtiment pour qui les travailleurs irlandais à l'étranger sont des « gladiateurs », des créateurs anonymes et éternels de civilisation tout au long de l'Histoire. Comme le suggère le titre de la nouvelle, ces travailleurs creusent les fondations d'empires, y compris ceux qui ont blessé leur propre nation. La nouvelle est ici analysée à partir de la réflexion de Mary J. Hickman

et Bronwen Walter sur les stéréotypes relatifs aux Irlandais en Angleterre d'une part, et à partir de l'étude des exilés sous l'angle psychanalytique qu'élabore Julia Kristeva, d'autre part.

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Jeanette Roberts Shumaker is a professor of English at San Diego State University, Imperial Valley, less than a mile from California's border with Mexico. She has published articles on Irish women writers in such journals as *Women's Studies*, *New Hibernia Review*, *Estudios Irlandeses* and *Studies in Short Fiction*. Shumaker also publishes essays on Victorian and Edwardian fiction. In 2009, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press published a book on Leonard Merrick, a neglected Anglo-Jewish writer that she co-authored with William Baker.