

**Building a Female Identity in Postcolonial Ireland:
Religion, History and Sexuality in Edna O'Brien's
A Pagan Place (1970) and *Mother Ireland* (1976)**

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Introduction: Postcolonial Ireland and Edna O'Brien

This essay stems from the belief that Ireland is the first and the last colony of the British empire and that its historical legacy has underpinned much of the literary production of the country. (González Arias, 2007: 109)

I start my Master's thesis by using Luz Mar González's words in her essay "Ireland" because this is exactly what lies at the genesis of my work. Even though the colonial condition of Ireland has been and still is debated, as I will show later, there are enough arguments to defend it as a reality and, therefore, to argue for Ireland's current postcolonial situation. The Anglo-Irish Treaty, signed in 1921, partitioned the Irish territory into Northern Ireland, which still is under British sovereignty, and the Irish Free State, but it was not until 1948 that the latter was constituted as the Republic of Ireland and abandoned the British Commonwealth of Nations. Regardless of the consideration of Ireland's full independence from England in 1921 or 1948, the fact is that the decolonization of the mind takes generations (Moane: 2002), and this identity crisis of the postcolonial Irish mind has been frequently articulated by Irish writers.

Yet, as I have already mentioned, the fact of considering Ireland as a postcolonial country has generated a lot of debate which I would like to summarize here. Generally speaking, there have been two strong and opposed positions: that of the nationalists, who support the postcolonial identity of Ireland, and that of the revisionists, who vehemently argue against it. The former's version of history has been described as "Yeatsian" by its detractors (St. Peter, 2000: 67), while the latter has been accused of neocolonialist and monocular by the nationalists (Maley, 1999). It is true that one cannot deny the "Yeatsian" approach to history of the nationalists, who have tended to romanticize certain historical episodes, such as the 1798 Society of United Irishmen rebellion or the Easter Rising, to offer a moral tale of the struggle of Ireland against the British oppressor (St. Peter, 2000: 68). However, historical distortions have also been carried out by the revisionists, who have gone so far as to consider the Easter Rising as a product of the imagination (Mustafa, 2002: 75). Therefore, taking into account both versions of Ireland's history, admitting their own distortions and hidden agendas, one can get a grasp

of what lies beneath each discourse. In this case, I am going to focus on the Yeatsian view since I have defended the current postcolonial situation of Ireland.

Far from denying the mythical, Yeatsian version of history provided by the nationalists, I want to justify its creation as a psycho-affective need for the equilibrium of the Irish people (Fanon, 2004: 148). As Richard Kearney proposed in his 1984 Field Day pamphlet *Myth and Motherland*, Yeats offered the image of Mother Ireland as a spiritual and symbolic compensation for the colonial calamities of historical reality. To a reality of division and dispossession, the poet responded with symbols of unity and self-possession. That is, the creation of an alternative historical discourse by the nationalists is nothing more and nothing less than a self-empowering strategy meant to separate their own history from that of England and its empire. This alternative history, however, is double-edged: on the one hand, it grants Ireland independence from its long-time oppressor, yet, at the same time, it perpetuates the silencing of a part of the population –women, children and non-Catholics. In addition, this version of history forces a series of stereotypical identities unto its citizens, especially women, who will feel oppressed and alienated by their own people if they dare to reject the model imposed on them.

In any case, Ireland's postcolonial status has not only been contested by revisionist historians, but also from within the field of postcolonial studies. Actually, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, none of whom are Irish, one must say, asserted in their seminal work *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) that Ireland should not be regarded as postcolonial. The voices coming from the field of postcolonial studies against Ireland's classification as postcolonial rely mainly on two reasons. First of all, there is Ireland's location and, secondly, its alleged participation in the building and maintenance of the British empire. Regarding location, the detractors of Ireland's consideration as postcolonial compare its proximity to its supposed colonizer, England, to the distant location of all the other colonies. Yet, as Willy Maley argues, "proximity can amount to colonialism by proxy", since it can and has been used as "a pretext for annexation, colonization, conquest and invasion" (Maley, 1999: 14). Furthermore, linked to the topic of location are those of race and ethnicity. While other colonies such as India or Africa present clear racial and ethnic differences for the English, the Irish, despite being ethnically different, are racially white. Nonetheless, the Irish were frequently constructed

as racially “other” by the British to highlight the former’s subaltern position (González Arias, 2007: 118). With regard to Ireland’s partnership in the British empire, although this might be true to a certain extent, one might find it astonishing to see how little profit the Irish received from this supposed imperial complicity. While England was in the zenith of its imperial expansion, people in Ireland were starving to death with the British government not doing enough to help them, which has resulted in the Famine often been considered as “a form of genocide engineered by the English against the Irish people” (Kee, 2000: 77).

However, no matter if Ireland’s position is more or less similar to that of other colonies, the fact is that postcolonial scholars in the past often tended to homogenize all colonial experiences. As Lloyd, Kiberd and others have argued, one should not forget that, even though all colonial experiences present some similarities, they also differ (González Arias, 2007: 114). Hence, the differences between Ireland and, let us say, India, should not make one disregard Ireland’s position as postcolonial. What is true, nonetheless, is that Ireland stands out as an anomaly in the British colonial expansion, which emphasizes and perhaps explains the liminality of postcolonial Irish identities.

On top of that, the consideration of Ireland as a former British colony can be analyzed at two different levels, and each of them should be undertaken by using a different approach (Cleary, 2003: 26). On the one hand, there is the subjective level, which has to do with the self-consciousness and self-representation of the Irish in relation to their past and, on the other, the objective level, which refers to all the ‘objective’, structural, socio-cultural institutions that would prove colonization to be real. At the subjective level, it is quite clear that the Irish were colonized by the English, as their literature and their own version of history show. As for the objective level, there are many instances of how the British tried to transform Ireland’s culture, ranging from the 18th century Penal Laws, aimed at changing Ireland’s religion, to the renaming of places in the 19th century so as to anglicize them, just to mention a couple of examples. In short, I think that it is possible to assert, both at a subjective and at an objective level, that, despite its peculiarities, Ireland was a colony of the British empire. It could be thought that since Ireland became an independent country in 1921, the pernicious effects of colonization could have waned. Yet, according to Geraldine Moane, the Irish, as a

formerly colonized people, have suffered from retraumatization through a process of transgenerational transmission of historically traumatic events. This process has resulted in the contemporary presence of certain psychological patterns, forms of thinking and behaviours, such as excess guilt, obsessive compulsive patterns, and addictions (Moane, 2002: 115).

Not only can one find evidence of Ireland's postcolonial status in history, but also in its literature. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin examined in *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, there is a series of traits which seem to be recurrent in all postcolonial literatures. One of the most important features of postcolonial literatures is that of hybridity, the surpassing of boundaries in linguistic, cultural, political, racial and religious terms (Ashcroft, 2001: 123). As my analysis of Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* (1970) and *Mother Ireland* (1976) will show, many of these characteristics of postcolonial literatures can be found in contemporary Irish literature. Going no further than Ashcroft's enumeration of the factors involved in postcolonial hybridity (2001), one can easily confirm that all of these hybrid aspects are present in current Ireland. Linguistically, there is a mixture of Gaelic and English; culturally, Irish and English traditions coexist; politically, there are still the tensions between unionists and nationalists; it has already been mentioned how the Irish race was constructed as "other" by the British, and the racial "othering" of the Irish still resonates in the Irish mind; and finally, in terms of religion, we can find syncretism between Catholicism and Druidism which at its turn clashes with Protestantism.

In addition to hybridity, one of the characteristics of all postcolonial literatures is the theme of exile. As put by Joseph O'Connor in his introduction to the anthology *Ireland in Exile*, "[e]migration is as Irish as Cathleen Ní Houlihan's harp, yet it is only since the sixties and the generation of Edna O'Brien that Irish writers have written about the subject at first hand" (O'Connor, 1993: xv)¹. Edna O'Brien can be considered, thus, a pioneer of Irish exilic writing, as well as one of the very first writers who exposed the darkest and most hidden secrets of Ireland, such as domestic violence or sexual abuse by

¹ This first-hand experience is translated into a prolific trend of autobiographic writing of Irish migrants in Britain and other English-speaking countries. For more information on the topic of Irish exile's autobiography, see Harte: 2007.

representatives of the Irish Catholic Church. These silenced and traumatic experiences became a recurrent topic for Irish writers, especially women, during the 1980s and, most especially, the 1990s and 2000s². Being ahead of her time by exposing the ugly facets of an idealized Irish society gained Edna O'Brien her being banned for years in her own country and the Catholic Church's publicly burning her books (Colleta and O'Connor, 2006: 4; Guppy: 1984).

In any case, Edna O'Brien is just an example among many other possible ones that illustrate this autobiographic trend in contemporary Irish fiction. The genres of the *Bildungsroman*, the autobiography and travel writing have been widely used by contemporary Irish writers, especially by those absent from Ireland (Ward, 2002: 240). O'Brien's focus on the past is also a *leit motiv* for Irish writers of the 1960s and 1970s. As Derek Hand explains, "[w]hat marks off these works is a retreat into the past, into the 1940s and 1950s, as if attempting to drive a wedge between the world that was then and the world that is now" (Hand, 2001: 228).

Whereas Irish fiction before the 1960s usually focused on historical narratives of the nation, Edna O'Brien, together with other writers of the sixties, such as John McGahern or John Broderick, shifted her focus from the nation towards the sovereignty of the individual (Hand, 2011: 240), a move which had a very important effect on her novels. As Derek Hand puts it, "[t]he effect on the novel is that, rather than dealing with a singular hidden Ireland, its proper focus is multiplied and hidden Irelands and the *individuals who escape traditional labels and stereotyping* are now the object of the novel" (Hand, 2011: 240, emphasis added). It makes sense for these Irish outsiders who escape traditional roles to become the object of Irish postcolonial literature, since one of the main characteristics of any postcolonial identity is its particular heterogeneity and hybridity (Ashcroft, 2001: 125-126). Still, this turn towards the individual should not be

² Some examples of this tendency to expose previously silenced traumatic experiences in contemporary Irish fiction, as mentioned by Constanza del Río (2010: 8), are: Jennifer Johnston's *The Invisible Worm* (1991) and *Grace and Truth* (2005), Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996), Kate O'Riordan's *The Boy in the Moon* (1997) and *The Memory Stones* (2003), Mary Morrisey's *Mother of Pearl* (1996), Lia Mills's *Another Alice* (1996), Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* (1992), *The Dead School* (1995) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998), Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996), Anna Burns's *No Bones* (2001), Seames Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996) or John Maher's *The Luck Penny* (2007), among many others.

interpreted as an abandonment of national concerns, but quite the opposite: the individual experiences narrated in contemporary Irish fiction can often be interpreted allegorically. In other words, as I will show later in the analysis, in contemporary Irish narrative personal stories can easily become symptoms of national history. According to Liam Harte and Michael Parker,

[i]t is quite common, therefore, to find traces of allegory embedded in the fabric of recent Irish fiction. The private individual experience often becomes an illuminative metaphor of the public and national destiny; texts frame the history which itself has framed them (2000: 2).

Having been born in 1930 in County Clare, one of the most rural areas of the West of Ireland, the effect that both the declaration of Ireland's independence and the process of decolonization have had on Edna O'Brien's life is obvious, and it clearly shows in her writing. I have chosen Edna O'Brien for my Master's thesis as representative of a particular trend of Irish writing, based on allegorical autobiographical narratives that illuminate national concerns, which started back in the 1960s and persists until today. Relying on postmodern notions of history as story and the impossibility of an objective truth (Hutcheon, 1988), writers such as Edna O'Brien have offered their own version of Irish history based on their personal experience, and have also exposed the hidden facets of Irish society which were kept out of the official discourse.

The corpus I will be dealing with, *A Pagan Place* (1971 [1970]³) and *Mother Ireland* (1976), has been chosen for two main reasons. First of all, despite the differences between each other, both literary works have in common a reflection of form in content and vice versa, which clearly manifests the hybrid, liminal identity of a postcolonial Irish woman who does not entirely fit in any of the constructed female identities in post-independence Ireland. As all identities, these postcolonial Irish female identities are not natural, but imagined and politically driven (Masolo, 1997: 285), and since they are ideal, they exclude many other possible realities. In the case of post-independence Ireland, these constructed identities basically are "a backlash against everything that's British" in the context of "a terribly rigid Catholic, censorial, punitive society (...) which kept

³ Further references will be to the 1971 Penguin edition.

women and children down” (Moloney and Thompson, 2003: 115). Thus, the construction of female identity in Ireland was greatly influenced both by Catholicism and by the patriarchal national discourse. As Patrick Ward argues, the female figure was underrepresented and repressed in Irish literature and society due to the asexualization and depersonalization of women by processes of idealization and marginalization. Women became, he continues, “ideologically mute, epistemological ciphers and politically powerless” (Ward, 2002: 153). According to Ward, women in Ireland were confined within a few restrictive and phallogentric stereotypes (2002: 53), which amounted to being either the Virgin, if you conformed to the norm, or the Whore, if you escaped it. However, these constructed images of femininity clashed with reality, since women in postcolonial Ireland “stood in the same relation to Irish men as Irish men stood in relation to their English and Anglo-Irish superiors” (Ward, 2002: 154). That is, once the process of decolonization of Ireland began, Irish men reinforced their strength and independence, which England had denied them, by subjugating their women. Therefore, despite the apparently privileged position that women occupied in the Irish imagery, Irish women were in fact doubly, or even triply, subjugated: first by the English colonizers, but then also by the Catholic Church and by Irish men. The exposure of this subaltern position of Irish women as a product of national and religious constraints make Edna O’Brien a pioneer of contemporary Irish fiction, a literature that has become concerned with all these topics in recent years.

In any case, neither the narrator in *A Pagan Place* nor the narrator in *Mother Ireland* seem to feel comfortable with any of these pre-constructed female identities. Actually, in *Mother Ireland* O’Brien herself admits to not feeling at ease with either identity, the angelical or the demoniacal, which ultimately forces her to leave her native country: “[t]hat is why we leave. Because we beg do differ. Because we dread the psychological choke” (1976: 143)⁴. Her liminal status as an in-betweener reflects that of Ireland itself, “existing at the edge of Europe, alongside distant marginal cultures in the imagined geography of the empire” (Lennon, 2003: 157). This explains why Luke

⁴ Further references will be to the 1976 Weidenfeld and Nicolson edition.

Gibbons, very correctly, describes Ireland as a First World country with a Third World memory (Gibbons, 1996: 3).

If the first reason to choose Edna O'Brien for my Master's thesis is her pioneer status in contemporary Irish fiction, the second reason to focus this essay on *A Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland* is the very limited scholarly attention these two early works have received. While O'Brien's first trilogy, composed of *The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girl*, later published as *Girl with Green Eyes* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964), and some of her later work have received wide critical attention, both *A Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland* have received almost none and there are no monographic studies devoted to them. Studies focused on O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland* might shed light not only on Edna O'Brien's literary merits and value, which have already been recognized, but also, and most importantly for me, on some of Ireland's postcolonial subjects who have been doubly silenced by the hegemonic discourse: first for having been colonized, and secondly, for being women, always the most oppressed in a patriarchal society⁵. Therefore, any contribution to the academic discussion of these two literary works, no matter how modest it is, is very much needed.

In short, the aim of this Master's thesis is to analyze the postcolonial traits that appear in Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland*. This is extremely important for three reasons. First of all, my analysis supposes a novelty both in postcolonial and in Irish studies, which have devoted almost no attention to the two works on which I am going to center my analysis. Second, even though Ireland's colonial past is still put into question by some sectors, I will analyze certain postcolonial features which appear in two of O'Brien's early novels, a fact which will add to the reasons for arguing Ireland's postcolonial status. Third, since Edna O'Brien's upbringing in early postcolonial Ireland permeates her partly autobiographic literary writing, one can clearly see both in *A Pagan Place* and in *Mother Ireland* the identity problems of a person who, before her (self-) exile to England, felt a psychological exile inside of Ireland due to her

⁵ Edna O'Brien's literary quality has been recognized with several prestigious awards, such as the Kingsley Amis Award in 1962, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize (Fiction) in 1990, the Grinzane Cavour Award in 1991, the Writers' Guild Award in 1993, the European Prize for Literature in 1995, the Irish PEN Award in 2001, the Ulysses Medal in 2006, the Lifetime Achievement Award in Irish Literature in 2009 and the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award in 2011.

difference from the traditional, idealized conceptions of what an Irish woman should be like. Yet, at the same time, she felt alienated in England due to her Irish background. This postcolonial split identity, characterized by hybridity and liminality alike, can help understand current social problems in Ireland, such as alcoholism, drug abuse or sexual deviations, which would have a traumatic colonial past at their core.

As has already been said, though one should avoid to homogenize the different experiences of postcolonialism and make them come down to a series of fixed traits, hybridity is one of the main characteristics both of postcolonial identities and postcolonial literatures⁶. Thus, hybridity can be found in Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland*, especially in formal aspects. In addition, as I will try to argue, liminality also plays an important role in O'Brien's writing, particularly in the identity construction of both semi-autobiographical female narrators⁷. Like Ashcroft, I think that the concept of hybridity is "an important feature of post-colonial attempts to disrupt colonial binaries. In its 'excessive' disruption of the certainties of essentialist categorization it is a consummate example of excess" (2001: 123)⁸. Hybridity, in its turn, gives way to what Homi Bhabha calls "the third space" (1994). This "third space" is an ambivalent territory in which to overcome the exoticism attached to the colonized

⁶ The concepts of hybridity and the "third space" have been discussed and criticized by Amar Acheraïou (2011).

⁷ Regarding the autobiographical aspect of O'Brien's fictional writing, there are many parallelisms between *A Pagan Place's* and *Mother Ireland's* narrators and the author herself. For example, in *Mother Ireland* there is a photograph of her father, Michael O'Brien, accompanied by a footnote in which Edna O'Brien describes her father as a gambler, and explains his hobby of killing mice. This description and anecdote recall *A Pagan Place's* narrator's father. Furthermore, like *Mother Ireland's* protagonist, Edna O'Brien also went to Dublin to attend the Pharmaceutical College. More parallelisms between her life and her fiction can be found out in interviews like the one by Shusha Guppy for the *Paris Review* (Summer 1984, No. 92), in which the author declares that "any book that is any good must be, to some extent, autobiographical, because one cannot and should not fabricate emotions; and although style and narrative are crucial, the bulwark, emotion, is what finally matters".

⁸ The "excessiveness" of the hybrid postcolonial subject can be recognized in *A Pagan Place's* narrator, whose narration of her past, despite her flat and matter-of-fact voice, often seems excessive, for example in terms of the amount of descriptive details or the tendency towards hyperbole. This excessiveness of the postcolonial subject, Ashcroft argues (2001), could be explained by his/her need to create a self-identity which breaks with the colonial binaries.

culture, thus promoting the emergence of a hybrid reality within which cultural difference is possible⁹.

Hybridity can be seen very clearly in the form of the two books which concern this essay. In the case of *A Pagan Place*, the hybrid writing starts with its difficult categorization into a genre. It can be considered fiction, more specifically, a *Bildungsroman*, yet, at the same time, it has something of the autobiographical, as has already been commented on. Furthermore, this semi-autobiographical *Bildungsroman* is filled with various intertexts which create a kind of written patchwork: there are hymns, songs, prayers, jokes, verses from poems, letters, extracts from personal journals, and even newspapers' headlines¹⁰. Finally, hybridity in terms of identity finds utmost expression in the lack of name in three of the four main characters in *A Pagan Place*, including the narrator. This namelessness could be interpreted as a total dispossession of the self due such a high level of hybridity that provokes an identity crisis. The narrator's parents are simply "Father" and "Mother", and the narrator remains nameless even at the very end, when she explicitly refers to her name, but still does not reveal it: "Your name was in capital letters on the lid and you were *ashamed* of it, so boldly was it printed. In the convent a name awaited you, a saint's name but you didn't know it yet" (O'Brien, 1971: 202, emphasis added)¹¹. The only main character who does have a name is the narrator's older sister, Emma. Incidentally, the only main character with a name, Emma, lives her life without taking into account the role she, as an Irish young woman, should be playing and, of course, is punished for it.

⁹ As pointed out by Moloney and Thompson, Irish culture has been advertised as exotic and Irishness has been marketed as a commodity to consume (2003: 134). Therefore, a parallelism between Orientalism and Celticism could be made. For further information on the relationship and comparison between Orientalism and Celticism, see Innes: 2002.

¹⁰ Many of these intertextual elements, such as songs, jokes, stories and anecdotes emphasize the narrator's voice as a product of orality. Orality would also explain especially the beginning of *A Pagan Place*, where the narrator jumps from one topic to another through a process of association. This oral quality is not only very characteristic of the Irish literary tradition but, simultaneously, contributes to the hybrid textual patchwork of the novel.

¹¹ The fact that the narrator is ashamed of her name points towards the colonial legacy that persists in her mind and which makes her feel ashamed of her own identity, that is, her Irish roots, which were considered as inferior by the British colonizers.

Related to this lack of names is the pronoun the narrator uses to refer to herself throughout the whole novel: “you”. Some authors argue that this second person singular pronoun is used because the grown up narrator retrospectively talks to the young one (Greenwood, 2003: 36), while others postulate that the reader is being directly addressed by the narrator (Herman, 1994). I would rather say that the use of “you” instead of “I” reflects the identity displacement, the sense of alienation and the liminal status of the narrator as a postcolonial subject trapped in between two different cultures and not completely belonging to any of them. This sense of alienation could also be described by Homi Bhabha’s notion of “unhomeliness”, that is, the trauma of cultural displacement due to which the postcolonial subject needs to take psychological refuge as a result of his/her double consciousness (Bhabha, 1994).

The interpretation I suggest of the use of “you” as an indicator of self-alienation seems to make sense, since the end of the *Bildungsroman* does not resolve the identity crisis of its narrator: even at the very end, her name is not mentioned and she still uses the second person singular pronoun to refer to herself. This self-alienation is also manifested in the external focalization that the narrator uses throughout the whole novel, thus transforming the protagonist in the object focalized, instead of being an active subject. This would also explain the factual, plain tone used by the narrator even in the most dramatic scenes. Far from being an emotive discourse, it is a matter-of-fact narration of her past, which could be explained as a self-defense mechanism: the only way she can cope with her traumatic past is by detaching herself from those facts.

With regard to the hybrid nature of *Mother Ireland*, the text also shows generic hybridization. Whereas *A Pagan Place* is a mixture of personal memoir and *Bildungsroman*, *Mother Ireland* still contains that autobiographical component and adds to it a (meta-) historical narrative. In addition, it also has an element of travel literature, and it contains Irish myth and folklore, all of it alternated with very illustrative black and white photographs by Fergus Bourke¹². Likewise, *Mother Ireland* also contains various

¹² Fergus Bourke (Dublin 1934 – Connemara 2004) was considered one of the greatest photographers of Ireland. His career extended for over 40 years, and some of his photographs of his natal Dublin were accepted in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York as early as 1966. Fergus was the first photographer asked to join the Aosdána, an elitist association of artists in Ireland who have achieved a distinction in the Arts and who are granted a stipend to concentrate only on their art.

intertexts, such as poems, letters, fragments of novels, police reports, songs or prayers. Curiously enough, the second person singular pronoun also makes its appearance in this book, and the moment in which it appears might support my interpretation of the “you” in *A Pagan Place* as a symbol of the self-distancing of a postcolonial identity. Just after the narrator (which one could perfectly understand to be Edna O’Brien herself) talks about Ireland and “the sadness of being cut off, [...] a cultural atrophy that goes all the way to the brain” (33), as well as of some “small voices that are sad with *their own alienation*” and “the mass psyche of a people who are throttled” (33, emphasis added), she shifts from the passive form she was using to a “you” that she will continue using well until the end of the chapter: “Romantic Ireland, quite dead, *you* say, when *you* are sitting down to high tea in Athlone, imploded with drop scones, apple pie and soda bread. It is here that *you* recall that the Brown Bull of Ulster gored the White Bull of Connaught” (O’Brien, 1976: 33, emphasis added).

Apart from instances of hybridity, one can also find examples of liminality in *Mother Ireland*. While describing the differences between the tourist vision of Ireland as opposed to the “real” Irish experience, the narrator expresses the identity clash that this causes in the Irish. Accordingly, Irish identity is seen as double-sided, and the narrator does not feel comfortable with either side:

[W]hen you are Irish you know both sides and you are curiously uneasy with both. Uneasy with the outsiders who expect their version of you to manifest – jolly witty roistering, even more uneasy with the natives who want you or anyone to lift them corporally out of their mire and desperation and bring them straight to heaven in a chariot (38).

While hybridity describes a mixed state in which two or more things coexist at the same time, not as juxtaposition, but as a mingling which results in a transformation of the initial elements, liminality is more about an in-betweenness, a neither this nor that, neither here nor there. During the analysis that follows it will be shown how and when hybridity and/or liminality better describe and help to explain Edna O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland*. As I will try to argue, hybridity and liminality are the basis of a female postcolonial identity in Ireland, as manifested in these two early works by O’Brien.

My postcolonial analysis of Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland* will be divided in three different thematic sections, all of which are of central importance in the creation of a female Irishness. First, I will focus on religion; second, on history; and the third section will focus on gender and sexuality. It goes without saying that all these themes are usually intertwined and sometimes it will be difficult to choose exactly where a particular fragment belongs, while there are elements that could be analyzed from different angles. My analysis will try to be as comprehensive as possible, but for reasons of space, in some cases a particular element which could be included in more than one of the sections will be analyzed within a single section, the one which seems to be more prominent or offers more fruitful results. In all of these different thematic sections, I will engage in a symptomatic reading of the novels. That is, as well as analyzing that which is written, I will also focus on textual silences, absences and the use of rhetorical indirection, looking for symbols which could be hidden between the lines. Finally, I will conclude this essay with a recapitulation of the three sections of the analysis and a small consideration of how they articulate a sense of Irishness and exile as a result of these factors.

1. Religion: the colonizer from within

Take an average Irishman –I don't care where you find him—and you will find that the very principle in his mind is, 'I am not an Englishman, because I am a Catholic!' Take an Irishman wherever he is found, all over the earth, and any casual observer will at once come to the conclusion, 'Oh; he is an Irishman, he is a Catholic!' The two go together. (Burke, 1874: 117)

Even if nowadays Irish people might consider that “Catholicism changed from being the colonial victim of oppression to a post-colonial oppressor” (González, 1995: 104), their religion still is such a major component of their sense of Irishness that many Irish will feel that their national identity is being threatened if Catholicism is attacked. The pivotal importance of Catholicism for an Irish national consciousness can be explained by its opposition to the colonizer's religion. In that sense, during the colonial period Catholicism served as a shelter in which the native Irish, dispossessed of their native language and of their political and financial power, could reaffirm their self-identity as an independent people with their own traditions, regardless of the colonial situation¹³. Hence, for the colonized Irish, prior to the emergence of political and cultural nationalism at the end of the 19th century, Catholicism became their only badge of identity. As Emmet Larkin explains, after the Famine Ireland experienced a so-called “Devotional Revolution” fostered by an identity crisis provoked by the disintegration of Irish traditional culture. In this situation, Catholicism provided a “substitute symbolic language and offered them a new cultural heritage with which they could identify and through which they could identify with one another” (1984: 83). In fact, the image of Irishness triumphing after Independence was based on a Catholic Irish identity and the recovery of Gaelic culture.

¹³ It has been argued that no other native language has suffered such a decline and marginalization due to colonial invasion as the Irish language (Carroll, 2003: 5). Regarding the loss of political and financial power of the native English, the example of the Penal Laws, according to which only Protestant men could inherit land, is very illustrative.

However, Catholicism in postcolonial Ireland has brought its own share of problems for Irish identity, especially for women¹⁴. Some Irish voices go as far as to say that in the twentieth century “the church has done a lot more harm to Ireland than Britain has” (Moloney and Thompson, 2003: 172). Similarly, Edna O’Brien’s narrator in *Mother Ireland* equates the Christianization of Ireland by Saint Patrick with an utter change in the mentality of the Irish, who “fell under Patrick’s rule and the yoke of the Scriptures” (O’Brien, 1976: 12). Hence, Catholicism is interpreted as a restraining element rather than as a unifying one. Even now, in the 21st century, Catholicism is at the core of many social problems, such as institutional child abuse or the banning of abortion¹⁵. Surprisingly, all these issues which are now in the spotlight already appear in Edna O’Brien’s early novels.

Actually, one of the most powerfully dramatic scenes in *A Pagan Place* is the one where a young priest molests the narrator, just a pre-adolescent girl then. This episode extends from page 169 to 178, with another very intense scene following narrating the protagonist’s arrival home to her parents. From the very beginning, the text is full of hints, symbols and details which signal that there is something sexually turbid with the priest. We are told that “he was very partial to Mary Magdalene and went into rhapsodies about her hair and the ointment with which she anointed Jesus” (169). It is widely known that, quite often, Mary Magdalene is said to have been Jesus’ lover. Once the priest goes to the narrator’s house, she explains that he has his eyes on her: “He looked at you, fixed you with his eyes which were grey” (169), and, just a few lines after, “[h]e looked at you”, again.

¹⁴ Male writers such as James Joyce also aired the pernicious effects of Catholicism on pre- and post-independence Ireland.

¹⁵ A quick search on the Internet offers many pieces of news in different newspapers, and webpages devoted to these topics. For instance, the *Irish Central*’s headline for its 4th of November, 2013 edition “British organization launches campaign to legalize abortion in Ireland” (<http://www.irishcentral.com/news/British-organization-launches-campaign-to-legalize-abortion-in-Ireland-230478171.html#ixzz2jlvJZGsE>) or *The Independent*’s “British abortion provider starts battle to bring abortion clinics to Ireland” the 2nd of November, 2013 (<http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/british-abortion-provider-starts-battle-to-bring-abortion-clinics-to-ireland-29721318.html>), as well as the existence of “The commission to inquire into child abuse” (<http://www.childabusecommission.ie/>). These examples clearly show the relevance that these issues still have in contemporary Ireland.

Nonetheless, the clearest clues come when the priest signs the narrator's autograph book. This emphasizes the narrator's childishness and innocence, since that book is where all her classmates write dedications for her. And, not only what the priest writes but also where and how he does it, reveal his dark intentions:

He signed your autograph book. He signed on the very last
page, as if the book had come to an end, which it hadn't. He
hewed on it before closing it. It was a secret:
My body is but a cabbage
The leaves I give to others
But the heart I give
To you. (171)

There is going to be a secret having to do with the priest giving a hidden part of his body to the narrator, and somehow this will mean the end of the narrator's childhood. Immediately after signing her book, the priest insists on taking the family out. The narrator and her mother hurry to dress up. The narrator mentions that she "put a button-down dress on and left the two bottom buttons open to be able to make greater strides" (171). This innocent remark already points in the direction of her being undressed by the priest, just some hours afterwards. The priest takes the narrator and her parents in a boat to cross a lake which the narrator sinisterly associates with death: "You had only been on that lake attending funerals before" (171). Perhaps it is the death of her childhood that she is symbolically alluding to. Furthermore, the narrator describes the lake in a way which could be interpreted as a symbol of her obliviousness regarding the priest's intentions: "There was no telling what went on down through the level of the water, down to the very bed. No one knew that, not even the fishes. The fishes only knew their own realm" (172). In this sense, the priest would be figured as the muddy waters which do not let anyone see the bottom, and the oblivious narrator would be like a fish, trapped in those waters without knowing what is going on.

From that moment onwards, the sexual innuendo in the narration is overwhelmingly disturbing and goes *in crescendo* until the scene's dramatic outcome. The narrator is still unaware of her dangerous situation, but there are many hints which make the reader suspect the priest: "Something went through [the narrator], a shiver. It had come out of nowhere. It was like mercury in a thermometer suddenly shooting up"

(172). The apparently unknown origin of the shiver, described as sudden heat, can be read between the lines if we take the narrator's mother's previous remark on the midges as a symbol of what will happen between the priest and her own daughter: "There were swarms of midges. Your mother said it was later on you'd feel the bites when you got under the covers and the heat aggravated them" (172-173)¹⁶. Once the narrator is metaphorically under the covers with the priest, she will realize where that shiver came from. Meanwhile, "[the priest] gave you [the narrator] half-smiles that only you could detect" (172). The mother announces that she and the narrator's father must leave to milk the cows, because "the cows suffered, their udders were pierced with pain if they were left un milked too long" (173). The tension here is such that this apparently trivial comment could be interpreted as a very explicit sexual reference to the need that the priest has to release his "milk", that is, to ejaculate.

When the parents are leaving, the priest declares that he is taking the narrator with him: "The priest said he was taking [the narrator] to Hilda's. He didn't ask for permission, he simply presented them with a *fait accompli*" (173). The fact that he does not ask for her parents' permission might be pointing to the Catholic Church's indisputable power in 1940s-1950s rural Irish society. Unfortunately, once the narrator's parents leave, the reader's suspicions are confirmed.

At Hilda's, it is obvious that the priest and Hilda's relationship is not chaste: "They were having a lovers' quarrel" (174). Then, Hilda and the priest leave the room for a short time, during which the narrator, who wishes she were invisible (174), examines the tealeaves in the cups, and a bowl of tea roses: "There were insects crawling quietly, making quiet, eventful journeys from one petal to the next, from one flower to another. There were no gaps in between. Insects did not have to use any ingenuity to get about" (174-5). Just like these insects, the priest is going to move from one woman, Hilda, to another, the narrator, without trying to conceal his actions. This symbolic cluster reminds us of the midges' significance some pages earlier. Then the priest comes back, without Hilda, and his hunting game with the narrator as prey begins:

¹⁶ There are more examples of the use of flies as a symbol of evil. For instance, the devil Beelzebub is known as "The Lord of the Flies", and this is also the title phrase chosen by William Golding to signify evil in his novel *The Lord of the Flies* (1954).

He came and squeezed your arm and asked what mischief you were up to. He said how soft it was. It was nearly fleshless but the bones were weak from the way he clasped it. He said that was why a cat played with a mouse, to make her soft, to loosen her muscles. (175)

Now the priest is the cat and the narrator is the mouse with which he plays before hunting her. His authority is once again manifested when he takes the houseboat key: “He knew where the key was. He had *carte blanche* to go there any time” (175). Just as he did not ask permission to take the narrator with him when her parents leave, he does not need now to ask for permission to take the key and the narrator with him to the houseboat. He appears to get away with everything he wishes to do. It seems that this time the narrator has a premonition that this is not going to be a simple boat ride: “When you stepped from the pier to the boat you knew you were taking a monumental step” (175).

Once inside the boat, there is a sense of claustrophobia and helplessness: “Inside the cabin everything was on a smaller scale and you had to get used to crouching” (174)¹⁷. This “smaller scale” might be making reference to her dead-end situation in that boat while “the village began to recede” (175) and, allegorically, to what was happening in Ireland at a greater scale, that is, to the country’s social and cultural stagnation and its suffocating policies. Taking this into account, it could be understood that the underlying message is that the Catholic Church is figuratively and sometimes even literally raping the Irish and their future, whose insularity is also both literal and figurative. The victims of that abuse feel isolated and the perpetrators get away unpunished due to their powerful position and to the complicity of the rest of the country, who are in an inferior power position and seem to have no other option but to accept those abuses.

Now the priest starts to undress and touch her: “He sat on the edge of your seat, touched your knees a few times, then unlaced your shoes, removed them, then your ankle socks” (176). The narrator tries to stop him, though in vain:

You begged for mercy. You made all sorts of rash promises,
how you would be good, how you would be bad, how you
would never eat jelly, how you would dance a hornpipe,

¹⁷ This sense of claustrophobia in a symbolic religious space is repeated and corroborated more explicitly in *Mother Ireland's* chapter “A Convent” (99-108).

how you would do anything he asked. You had to crouch and he petted you across your lap and said what a nice friendly lap it was. (176)

The childishness of the narrator is emphasized by her way of perceiving and coping with the situation. She tries to stop the priest by promising she would “never eat jelly”, and compares the way he behaves with what other familiar figures of authority do. She explains that “he spread the dress at either side *as your mother might*” (176-7), and that “he felt your flesh, pressed parts of it, *like a doctor* who was looking for different responses in you” (177, emphasis added). Indirectly, the figure of the priest is here linked to the mother. This connection manifests the oppressive nature of both institutions, the family and the Church. The priest’s comparisons with the mother and the doctor also highlight the age gap between them, as well as the unequal power relationship. The atmosphere becomes more and more claustrophobic for the scared narrator: “You had to sidestep because of the narrow space between the bed and the table which was stationary” (176). Significantly, the only place to sit on is the bed (176), the sexual connotations of which do not need to be further developed. The priest then finds a couple of bottles of spirits and offers some to the narrator, who rejects it. The way in which he drinks is lecherous: “He got the very last drop by putting his tongue inside the bottle” (176). Having in mind the sexual intentions he has, the way he puts his tongue inside the bottle to get all of its liquid out may evoke an act of cunnilingus.

Another detail which I find very telling is the distorted self-image the narrator sees reflected in the priest’s buckle: “You could see yourself in the buckle of his belt, distorted and gulping, but nevertheless you” (176). In my opinion, this can be read at many levels, all of them related to the traumatic experience the young narrator is suffering. What I want to emphasize is how this distorted self-image might be understood as a sign of her distorted psyche. Thus, this particular traumatic incident, can be allegorically understood as signifying how the Irish postcolonial female identity is distorted by the Catholic Church, due to the difference between a woman’s identity and the imaginary identity that society wants to impose on her. However, burdened by her education, the narrator still aspires to the ideal, imaginary identity the Church offers her. This would explain why, even though the image of herself that the Church offers

figuratively through the priest's buckle is distorted, that is, it does not correspond to her real identity, she recognizes it as "nevertheless you" (176). her aspiration to match the idealized image the Church offers will eventually be fulfilled at the end of the narrative, when she leaves Ireland to become a nun, one of the very limited and respected options that the Church offered to Irish women at that time. Furthermore, one could argue that this very brief passage in which the narrator sees her distorted image is somehow related to the second person singular narrative through which the narrator refers to herself. One of the outcomes of this very traumatic experience could be a dissociation of the self, which would explain the use of "you" instead of "I". At a microlevel, the distancing of the self could be understood as a result of the sexual abuse the narrator suffers as a young girl at the hands of the priest. At a macrolevel, this could figuratively be interpreted as the identity crisis women in postcolonial Ireland suffered due to the Catholic Church's construction of female images so alienated from reality. In that sense, just as the narrator's abuse at hands of the priest could be interpreted as Irish society's figurative rape by the Catholic Church, in this case the individual traumatic experience of the narrator leading to a dissociation of the self could also be regarded as signalling the dissociated female Irish identity as resulting from the endurance of traumatic experiences at the hands of the Catholic institution¹⁸.

Even though it might seem contradictory that in her fear the protagonist seems to enjoy the priest's masturbation, one should not forget that she might not find this intimidating because she has already masturbated herself (35). As a consequence, "his finger was not an enemy, *not then*" (177, emphasis added). Furthermore, she might not perceive it as a threat because, not only is he doing something pleasurable and familiar to her, but the priest is also a very important figure in her community, and his "attentions" make her feel special: "You were not afraid. It was an honour. You thought of him in his

¹⁸ According to Judith Lewis Herman, "[Traumatic events] shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others" (2001: 51). In the next section I will show how the colonization and invasion of Ireland has been often represented as the rape of a female figure's (Mother Ireland's) body and soul, a traumatic experience which also has its reflection in the contemporary Irish psyche. The fact that Britain's colonization of Ireland is figured as rape, sustains my reading of the Catholic Church as an inside colonizer.

cassock going through the village concealed from the raving of the swooning woman” (177)¹⁹.

When the priest proceeds to undress himself, though, the narrator is terrified and begs him to stop, a plea which he ignores, and then his finger becomes an enemy to her:

When he opened his belt and you heard it clang on the table, you strained to sit up and you tried to impede him from opening his buttons because it was nakedness that you feared above all. And you gripped his wrist and he gripped yours and each other’s wrists were locked and he was saying no and you were saying no but you were at cross-purposes. Never had the corneas of eyes bulged so. He opened his buttons, wrenched them open and presented himself and said to touch it. It was grotesque. The flesh all around it pained and raw. He said to touch it. You touched it on the snout. Your touch was fearful. You begged him to stop. You expelled his finger. He tried to part your knees, to prise them open, said it would be lonely for him, it would be unfriendly but you were petrified and you would not yield. (177-78)

Being “petrified” by an image that she describes as “grotesque”, the narrator “expelled his finger” and “would not yield”²⁰. Instead of stopping, what the priest does is to proceed to masturbate himself. “Never were you more incongruous, never were you more

¹⁹ The narrator’s ambiguous attitude towards the priest’s attentions could also be explained, on the one hand, by the exoticism attached to the young priest, who has spent some years abroad as a missionary. This exoticism could be attractive to the young narrator, who has never left Ireland, and has almost never abandoned her little village. On the other hand, her masochistic tendencies, which will be discussed later on, could also play a role in her attraction towards the priest.

²⁰ Incidentally, immediately before the priest actively starts to abuse the narrator, she “looked through the porthole and saw an expanse of stones that were startlingly white”. Being on a boat away from the village, these stones the narrator sees might remind the reader of the ruins which the narrator mentions at the beginning of the book, where some people are buried. We know of these ruins that they “had metal plaques on them saying what period in history they were built in” (11), and that “the stones were as brittle as bread crumbs” (11). Despite their frailty, though, they have remained there for centuries. One could arguably make a parallel between the stones and the narrator, whose “petrification” becomes her resilience against the priest’s abuse: “He tried to part your knees, to prise them open, (...) but you were petrified and you would not yield” (177-178). Furthermore, the iconography of death present throughout the whole abuse incident is strengthened if the stones the narrator sees through the porthole indirectly allude to the ruins on an island which is full of graves (11).

unnecessary” (178), remembers the narrator, while the priest pleasures himself. Now sex, abuse and religion are heavily intertwined:

He caught hold of your knee and ground his face in it and swung out of himself and swore to his Maker that he was doing a heinous and a hideous thing and he strained and he writhed and he imprecated, and begged for it to be over, for his joy and his agony to end. (178)

Indeed, his ejaculation also has religious echoes: “[i]t looked like hair-oil, all over you both, but it did not have a cosmetic smell” (178). This description of the priest’s semen recalls his fondness for Mary Magdalene and “the ointment with which she anointed Jesus” (169). After that, the priest says that “[...] God forgave everything and washed everything and made everyone spotless again” (178), implying that his position in the Church allows him to get away with the rape of a child. Both the narrator and the priest cry, separately (178). The narrator, perhaps in an attempt to “undo the harm” (178), and showing her childishness again, tells the priest that she will write to him (178), which turns out to be the worst thing she could have said (178): “It was over-sweet. It was like the flowers between the pages of a book, destined for putrid” (178).

Back at home, things do not get better for her. Received by her mother, the narrator “could tell that something was wrong by the tone of her Good evening” (179). As astonishing as this might seem to the reader, the narrator’s mother knows what has been going on with the priest and, yet, she has done nothing to stop it. What is more, another adult, Hilda, also knew of the intentions of the priest, and has informed the protagonist’s parents, but has not done anything either to try to save the narrator:

[The mother] said it was easily known that the hire car and the two-tone shoes were indicative. [...] She said [the narrator and the priest] went to a certain house for tea and behaved like lovers. She said it had been disclosed to her that your eyes met more than once. So Hilda was the informer. Hilda had telephoned them. [...] You didn’t know but that she had had you traced. (180)

While the mother accuses her of adultery she is drawing a chicken, and something happens that parallels the narrator’s loss of innocence and purity: “The craw that she had been pulling at burst. The brown tobacco-like content spilt all over the inside wall of the

chicken. That was fatal, impaired the flavour, for ever” (180). The abuse that the narrator has just suffered is also fatal, since it will mark her as tainted forever. In any case, if the mother is verbally offensive towards her, her father goes even further and physically abuses her:

First he started to shake you, then he began to clout you. [...] He took the ruler from your satchel and gave you a few preliminary strokes. [...] He flung it [the door] open and ordering you on to the iron bed, he raised your clothes so that they were bunched over the top half of your body, nearly engulfing you. He dragged your knickers down and you thought for certain he would see it, the smear. [...] The slaps resounded all over the house. (180-1)

The pain the narrator feels is not only physical, but also psychological: “There were two different hurts, the one on the very surface of your skin like a scald and the other in the very interior where your marrow and your predilections lay. [...] Your body, like your brain, was crammed with incidents” (181-3). In addition, on top of being externally and internally hurt, the incident constructs her as “the other” in the eyes of the community, making her a sinner who does not deserve to be a part of the community: “You were like Emma, with a secret sewn into you” (184). It is then that the narrator begins to impose a series of penances on herself. This self-harming behaviour could be understood as a product of her trauma, this being the only way in which her immature psyche can cope with it (Herman, 2001: 109-110):

You gargled with salt and water. You used lukewarm water because it tasted vile. You endeavoured to be sick then. You couldn't put your finger down your neck but you could put a goose-quill down there, and you did, and after you had been sick you covered it with leaves. It took time for your stomach to settle before you could eat a piece of cake and begin the penance again. You meant to put wire in your throat, the way [the narrator's mother] poked wire down young chickens when things got in their wind pipe but you failed to achieve that. Another terrible flavor was sulphur and you ate it dry and it got behind your nose and throat and nearly suffocated you. But the moment you heard from Lizzie that it was good for the complexion you gave it up because that was a vanity and so was putting curlers in your hair or papers, to make ringlets.
[...]

Later [your parents] invited you to sit by them, to sit, in the gloaming, to see the long dull day out. You never refused, you just never sat with them. That was your resistance. You raged against captivity. You declaimed Robert Emmet's epitaph²¹. (184-5)

Her need to get away, added to the fact that she relies on her sister in Dublin to try to escape from her daily reality but Emma replies that "there was no scope for [the narrator] in the city" (186), might help explain why the narrator is totally sure that she wants to join the nuns who visit her school looking for volunteers. Going to Belgium to become a nun would mean getting away from her very strict parents and, also, being respected by her community and neutralizing their rejection:

The elder nun said what did your parents think. You said they didn't know as yet. She said parents had the crown of authority and how you must be guided by them in all matters. You nodded. You would go away from them, far, far away, where no conveyance could bring them to you. Going through the town you were waylaid by people, shopkeepers who had always shunned and slighted you. It was as if you had already entered [in a religious order], so shy and respectful were they. It was like winning a trophy. (193)

The narrator's will to regain her honor after the priest has smeared her reputation is made even clearer in her admiration for the younger nun, because "the radiance that was hers would be yours" (195). Nonetheless, this apparently convenient choice might not be as optional or as fortunate as it seems. On the one hand, the narrator continues her penance, and therefore "everything [she] did was the opposite to what [she] wanted to do" (197). On the other hand, the Manichean female identities that are offered to the narrator force

²¹ Robert Emmet was a member of the Society of United Irishmen and leader of the 1803 Uprising against British rule. He was then captured, tried and executed. In a speech he gave before he died, he proclaimed what has been known as his epitaph: "I am here ready to die. I am not allowed to vindicate my character; no man shall dare to vindicate my character; and when I am prevented from vindicating myself, let no man dare to calumniate me. Let my character and my motives repose in obscurity and peace, till other times and other men can do them justice. Then shall my character be vindicated; then may my epitaph be written" (Phillips, 1818: 256-259).

her to become a nun if she wants to avoid being considered a harlot, like her sister Emma. The iconography of death that was present at the moment the priest abused her, is also present while she prepares for leaving. It is mentioned that “[w]hen you fitted on the dark clothes it added years to you. You could have been in mourning” (196), or that Sacco came to say goodbye, “treating the matter as if you were going to your deathbed (198). When she is leaving, she makes a wish upon a lily: “In the fort of dark trees you made a wish and felt a lily. You wished that [your parents] would be all right, that [the priest] would not injure [the lily]” (201). The lily might represent her old self, before the priest abused her, and her wish that “he would not injure her” might be interpreted as her wish for the younger generations not having to deal with the traumatic experiences she has had to undergo.

Nonetheless, despite the monolithic Catholic identity that was constructed for and by the Irish, Irish Catholicism is not as inclusive or pure as it might seem. First, the monopoly exerted by the Catholic Church excludes other religions practiced by Irish people, Protestantism being the main one. Protestantism is also excluded in the texts, both in *A Pagan Place* and in *Mother Ireland*. Very little is said about Protestant people in town, and this silence is a symptom of their marginalization. In fact, there are some references to other religions in Ireland and how those who profess them are marginalized by the Catholic majority and, ultimately, how religion also works as a separating force in Ireland. In *A Pagan Place*, the fact that the narrator’s mother once attended a Protestant service for a funeral is considered as “the biggest sin of all and the priest had to refer it to the bishop” (32). Another episode refers to how once a driver refused to give the narrator’s father and a friend of his a lift because he happened to be a Protestant Minister and the two men were coming from a monastery (67). When the nuns go to the narrator’s school looking for volunteers, “the one girl that was Protestant got sent home” (189). It is only one girl, which emphasizes her belonging to a minority in Ireland and she is marginalized because of it. The narrator explains that she “could have wept for the poor Protestant girl” (190), since her soul was irredeemably lost due to her not being Catholic. In *Mother Ireland* there is also a reference to the apparently certain damnation of all the non-Catholics. While a dead Irish and Catholic young soldier “certainly is with God” (51), “the eight neighbouring Protestants would never reach that destination and neither

would the black doctor or the travelling Jew man” (51)²². For more information on the moral monopoly of the Catholic Church in Ireland, see Inglis (1998b).

Second, Irish Catholicism is actually utterly influenced by previous Irish religious realities, as can be perceived in the syncretism of Catholicism and Druidism that appear throughout the two books this essay focuses on. In the case of *A Pagan Place*, one should go no further than the title itself, which refers to Ireland²³. In relation to the title and the mixture of Gaelic paganism and Catholicism in the Ireland that the novel represents, it is quite curious to see that, on the same page and only separated by a paragraph, the narrator talks of Druidism and Catholicism:

It was a pagan place and circular. Druids had their rites there long before your mother and father or his mother and father or anyone you'd ever heard tell of. (15)

On the way home from Mass diarrhea ran all down your legs and you got behind the wall and stayed there until everyone had gone²⁴ [...]. Your mother was not vexed, said it could happen to a bishop. Your friends passed remarks about it, wrote notes to each other, referred to it as the Incident. Your friend Jewel wrote on the backboard to remember the Incident, marmalade in colour, behind a certain wall on the Sabbath day. (15-16)

Hence, the reader perceives Druidism and Catholicism not as opposed religions, but as a continuum in the Irish tradition, Druidism representing its ancient history and Catholicism its present. This is a usual construction in the memory of Ireland, in which

²² Other Irish writers, such as William Trevor, many of whose short stories and his last novel, *Love and Summer* (2009), are set in the Ireland of the 1950s, depict much more fluid relationships between small town Catholics and Protestants. Of course, this is understandable taking into account that Trevor is Protestant. In any case, the onset of “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland would transform the panorama radically.

²³ Not only does the adjective “pagan” in the title refer to the non-Christian past of Ireland, but also to Catholic Ireland, which appears as a corrupt place where priests abuse young girls. Alternatively, in *Mother Ireland* it is London and England that are described as pagan (76). This shift suggests that identity can never be a fixed and immutable category.

²⁴ It is important to remark that Mass is associated with diarrhea, something unpleasant and unhealthy.

their Catholic tradition does not break with Druidism, but rather is born out of it²⁵. Another example of Catholicism and Druidism coexisting at the same level of reality for *A Pagan Place*'s narrator comes on page 36: “[the narrator’s mother] prayed for the safety of the house. You [the narrator] were afraid of Druids. You had things to fear from the living and from the dead”. While her mother is engaged in a Christian activity, prayer, the narrator is worried about the Druids. The living, those her mother is praying for, and the dead, the Druids, are equally real for her.

Yet, it is perhaps in *Mother Ireland* that this religious syncretism is made more evident, maybe because the narrator, instead of becoming a nun as in *A Pagan Place*, finally distances herself from Catholicism. Anyhow, one can find numerous instances of the hybrid religious nature of the Irish in this book. For example, one of the descriptions of the Irish urbanscape reads as follows: “Every so often a huge white plaster statue, with neon halo, a Jesus or a Mary or that flawless creature the Maid of Erin with hands outstretched” (36). Although at first sight the Maid of Erin might not seem valid as a Druidic figure, if one analyzes her attributes the connection can be easily made. The Maid of Erin is a representation of Mother Ireland, and she often appears accompanied by a wolfhound or a harp, symbols of Éire. Etymologically, Éire comes from Ériu, the name of a Gaelic goddess, believed to have been the matron goddess of Ireland. Therefore, the exhibition on Irish streets of statues of Catholic figures and, at the same time, of a romanticized version of a pre-Christian goddess, clearly shows the coexistence and intertwining of both Irish religious realities in today’s Ireland. The cohabitation of Catholicism and Druidism is made even clearer when the narrator recalls Connor, King of Ulster according to Irish mythology:

[...] and you are left to think of Connor who had lodged in his skull the head of an enemy king and who walked through life with this second head inside him stitched up with a golden thread. But on the day of Our Lord’s Crucifixion observing the unusual darkness he called his Druid to ask what it omened, and the Druid Bacrach said that the Son of God was being crucified by the Jews, upon which the king with the head in his head got into an unholy

²⁵ Saint Patrick, the founder of Catholicism in Ireland, apparently mixed indigenous religious traditions with Catholicism in order to make the Christian faith more appealing to the Irish (Butler, 2012).

dither, rushed at a grove and began hewing it with his sword to demonstrate how he would deal with those wicked Jews, and because of the excess of his fury the ball stared from his head, his brain gushed out and in that way he died. (O'Brien, 1976: 35)

As is shown in this passage, Catholicism in Ireland never tried to break away with the pagan past. When Irish mythology was written down in the early Middle Ages, once Ireland had already been Christianized, the recalling of the past did not deny Druidism. On the contrary, Ireland's Druidic past was mixed with the Christian doctrine, thus creating a very specific kind of Catholicism which is imbued with Druidic elements. There are many other examples of religious syncretism which could be analyzed, but for reasons of space I will leave it here.

To sum up, my aim in this section has been to show, through the analysis of certain excerpts both from *A Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland*, that religion has played a fundamental role in the identity construction of postcolonial Ireland. After Independence, there was a backlash against everything British, and that included religion. Therefore, a monolithic Catholic Irish identity was created. Nevertheless, this identity presented some problems regarding its validity as representative of the Irish. Firstly, the moral monopoly of the Catholic Church denied and silenced other religious realities in Ireland, such as Protestantism. Secondly, Irish Catholicism is heavily influenced by previous Gaelic pagan traditions. Hence, even in what is considered to be as purely Irish, that is, the Catholic identity, there is an element of hybridity. Furthermore, I have argued that Catholicism, despite having unified and promoted Irish identity both in colonial and postcolonial times, can also be considered a colonizer of its own, and this is allegorically represented in Edna O'Brien's early fiction.

2. History: the Colonizer from Without

Ireland is a First World country, but with a Third World memory. (Gibbons, 1996: 3)

I believe that memory and the welter of memory, packed into a single lonely and bereft moment, is the strongest ally a person can have. (O'Brien, 1976: 126)

I have chosen to begin this section with the two quotes above because I think that they summarize very nicely the main ideas I want to develop. On the one hand, the liminal position of Ireland with regard to its history and, on the other, the central place that history has occupied in the construction of Irish identity and the crucial role of memory in such (re)construction. Hybridity and liminality have been key for the (re)construction of Irish historical memory, as *Mother Ireland* clearly shows. This book begins with the author-narrator telling us her version of Irish history, in which myth, legend and history are intertwined at the same level. The narrator says that this version of history was written by an unidentified nun. However, although it is not said, this reconstruction is, at the same time, a retelling of the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (*The Book of the Taking of Ireland*). The *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* is an eleventh-century manuscript based on folklore and legend, in which an anonymous scholar, probably an Irish monk, compiled a history of Ireland, thus transforming traditional Celtic myths into Irish history. Therefore, as has already been mentioned in the previous section, there was no break up between the old Gaelic Celtic myths and the following Christianized history. Through a process of evemerization the monks managed to preserve ancient myths and, once turned into history, the pagan origin of such legends and myths was attenuated. In any case, what both myths and the historical facts seem to have in common is the view of Ireland as a recurrently invaded territory:

[Ireland] is thought to have known invasion from the time when the Ice Age ended and the improving climate allowed deer to throng her dense forest. These infiltrations have been told and fabricated by men and by mediums who described the violation of her body and soul. (O'Brien, 1976: 11)

Though never fully taken, the narrator continues, Ireland has been “most thoroughly dispossessed” (12). Then, on the same page, she goes on to name all the inhabitants Ireland has had, in chronological order²⁶. She begins with Caesara, niece of Noah, who apparently emigrated to Ireland before the biblical deluge, and whose people were “the first here and the first in a long line of hardy Irish ghosts” (12), and she goes on with the list of invaders until she arrives at the English colonization (30) and her present-day independent Ireland. Curiously, most of the inhabitants/invaders listed by O’Brien, going from Caesara (12) to the Gaels or Milesians (13), and including the Partholans (12), the Nemedh (13), the Formorains (13), the Firbolgs (13) and the Druids (13), are mythical figures who were evermerized in the Middle Ages and thus became historical. However, they are treated with the same accuracy and in the same detail and level of reality as the actual historical invaders which she mentions, such as the Saxons (15) or the English (30). Why is that?

One could argue that it is precisely because of the dispossession that Ireland endured for so long, finally at the hands of the English, that the Irish need to create an alternative and self-empowering history of themselves. Yet, how can a history of invasions be empowering? In essence, it is a question of the prestige of your origins. By dating back the first inhabitants of Ireland to biblical times and through the creation of a series of very important settlers in the remote past, the author concedes a superior position to Ireland with regards to England, because the former seems to have an older, longer and more respectable tradition than the latter. Furthermore, one should not forget that the compiling of myths turned into history of the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* was done in the late 11th century. In spite of the fact that the medieval scholar who compiled and wrote down *The Book of the Taking of Ireland* probably did not have any political purposes, this date became politically charged later on. While the Irish were compiling their long history of invasions in the 11th century, the English were undergoing the

²⁶ This version of the history of Ireland is similar to the one offered by Protestant writer Standish J. O’Grady in his *History of Ireland*, published in various volumes towards the end of the 19th century. O’Grady’s heroic narrative of the Irish past, mixing myth, legend and fact, offers a vision of the Celts as a strong, warrior, virile and aristocratic people. His version of the heroic past of Ireland heavily influenced Yeats, Lady Gregory and the Revivalists, and it is also assumed by Edna O’Brien in her retelling of Irish history in *Mother Ireland*.

Norman conquest. That is, what is a relatively new phenomenon in England –the English had undergone the Anglo-Saxon invasion in the 5th century, and the Roman invasion before that, beginning in 55 BC and lasting until the early 5th century—is part of the remote past for Ireland, thus making England look very young in comparison.

On top of its prestigious origins, the reconstruction of Irish history also serves the purpose of emphasizing its uniqueness and, at the same time, it represents a process of self-differentiation against the “other” that is England. This sense of uniqueness is especially visible in the fact that, in opposition to the vast majority of Europe, including England, Ireland was never conquered by the Romans: “Patrick’s forbears, the Romans, did not invade Ireland, but Tacitus records how a Roman general gazed across the sea from Scotland and reckoned that a single legion could have subdued her. He was possibly mistaken” (O’Brien, 1976: 12). Yet the rarity of Ireland lies not only in it not being romanized, but also and especially in the fact that the Irish never reclaimed a Roman origin, contrary to the majority of European countries, which frequently invented their own links to Rome to legitimate themselves. The Irish, on the contrary, have often traced their origins back to the Carthaginians, precisely a people subjugated by the Romans (Cullingford, 2001).

As can be grasped from all that has been stated, Edna O’Brien seems to play with the notions of history and story as interchangeable. This does not mean that she denies the real facts, simply that she joins a trend which started to take roots in Irish fiction in the 1960s, when the revisionist approach to Irish history was coming into being. However, as Derek Hand explains, “unlike the historians, the novelists suggest that there is no objective truth, no reality behind the myth being deconstructed” (2011: 232)²⁷. In the case of O’Brien, I would suggest that it is not so much a lack of reality behind the myth that she tries to expose, but how the workings of memory distort that which once was factual. The distorted memory of real facts is especially manifest in *A Pagan Place*, where one can find examples like the following ones:

Your father said how in the old days people would give you
a shilling or take you in but *your mother said that was all*

²⁷ The view of history as fiction is characteristic of postmodernism, as stated by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction* (1988).

baloney and that distance lends enchantment and he told her she didn't know what she was talking about because she didn't know Dan Egan or any of these people and she said no she didn't, but very standoffish like she didn't want to. (18, emphasis added)

[After an episode of domestic violence] Later still, when your mother told her sister your Aunt Bride, *she added things that did not happen*, like that the prongs of the fork were on her temples and heading for her eyes, like that she stamped her foot and dared him to. Which she didn't. *She added touches of bravery*. (21, emphasis added)

These quotations illustrate processes of distortion which facts can suffer under the lense of memory, usually with the purpose of fulfilling an objective, be it conscious or unconscious. In the first example, the narrator's father reconstructs the past as an ideal time in which there was a strong sense of community and solidarity, as opposed to the egotistic and self-centered present. The narrator's mother tells her husband that it really was not like that and that distance leads to enchantment, to which he replies that she was not even there. Who is telling the truth, then? The husband, who might be idealizing the past to make the present more bearable, or the wife, who did not know those people and "didn't want to"? The answer is not clear, but, in any case, what is important is how the unreliability of memory is stressed here. In the second example, when the narrator's mother tells her sister about a domestic episode of violence, she tries to de-victimize herself by adding "touches of bravery". In this case, it is not a question of distance, since the event is very recent, but rather her use of an empowering strategy. Just like the Irish refuse to be historically subjected to the English and thus they re-construct their own past by selecting certain episodes but deleting others and adding certain aspects so that they appear strong and independent, the narrator's mother does the same to resist her subjugation to her husband, even if it is just a discursive resistance.

In another example, the narrator asserts that she remembers the moment of her birth (28). Naturally, this is impossible. Yet, in her need for origins and identity, she actually believes in her recollections. Probably, she has heard this anecdote told by her parents so many times that it has become the narrator' memory, though she cannot objectively remember it. The creation of a memory of her origins, of a genealogy, partly

out of stories told and heard in her life, can be paralleled at a greater scale with the creation of myths of origin by the nationalists. Whilst *A Pagan Place*'s narrator creates her own memory/narrative of her individual origin and gives it reality status despite the impossibility of her remembering it and the distortions to which the facts she has heard might have been subject to, the colonial Irish subjects created their own narratives of origin, relying on traditional knowledge that probably began as factual but was modified through generations, thus helping to build a sense of self-identity which they were lacking in their subaltern position and which enhanced and legitimated their national claims. In fact, the history the narrator learns at school, both in *A Pagan Place* and in *Mother Ireland*, is very heavily influenced by these constructed narratives of origins, as the following excerpts show:

You learned Geography by heart and important dates in History and human touches of history as well, such as that Brian Boru got stabbed on the strand at Clontarf, got stabbed by a wicked Dane while giving thanks to God. (...) Your teacher Miss Davitt said how Shane O'Neill was disarmingly attractive and that Queen Elizabeth was light about him which was why she tried to have him poisoned at a feast because Hell has no music like a woman playing second fiddle. (1971: 27-28)

These *daily inculcations of history*, so immediate, so heart-rending and so riveting that it was possible to conceive of Sarsfield, Shane O'Neill and Bold Robert Emmet, and Sarah Curran his sweetheart as characters who might step out of the pages and into the room. *All had sacrificed themselves for the Cause*, and each had failed – [Bold Robert Emmet] was ready to die and asked only for *the charity of silence until such a time as his country was free and not annexed to England*. (1976: 67-68, emphasis added)

The new generations are educated in such a way that “daily inculcations of history” remind them of a glorious Celtic nationalist past, an alternative world in which their national heroes “sacrificed themselves for the Cause” of Irish independence.

The Famine also seems to be a topic which still arises hateful feelings for the English:

[John Mitchell] asked the Duke of Wellington to go to the young and gracious Queen, to appeal to her to use authority,

in short to let the Irish eat some of the corn that grew in abundance that year. He implored that the frigid and flimsy chain of official etiquette be broken and that the Duke go directly to her. It was a letter sent in vain and the appeal was not met. Some survived on such things as nettles, chickweed or sorrel and those who could tottered along to the stockyards across the country in the hope of being able to procure a portion of blood taken from heifers or bullocks. The remainder set sail for America and must constitute the bulk of the forty million of Irish extraction in that land today. (1976: 71)²⁸

The narrator, in addition to emphasizing the complete lack of help from the British when Ireland most needed it, also goes on to justify her ancestors' passivity and acceptance of that injustice, due to "an inability to curse because human passion had been quelled through starvation" (71):

The following year the Queen visited Ireland and thought that everything went off beautifully and when she stepped ashore at Cove, County Cork, the enthusiasm was immense. It is probable that the people were too debilitated to be anything else and yet they surpassed themselves according to her, by becoming noisy and jumping and shrieking. (71-72)

However, despite a generalized silence in terms of the social, political or literary representations of the reality and consequences of the Famine until very recent times, there is no doubt that the Great Hunger made a very profound impact on the Irish psyche.

Yet historical references in Edna O'Brien's early fiction are not only made to the remote past. In *A Pagan Place*, the narrator often mentions recent political and historical facts. As Derek Hand states in relation to other Irish novels of the 1960s and 1970s, "[a]ll the divided loyalties between England, Ireland, republicanism and nationalism are brought to the fore with the often-stilted lessons of Irish history being offered as dinner table conversation" (Hand, 2011: 229). With her characteristic matter-of-fact tone and the detachment of a young girl who does not really understand the importance of what adults discuss, *A Pagan Place's* narrator offers the reader a contemporary view of the social

²⁸ The theme of exile, in this case forced by the inhumane treatment of the British towards the Irish, is signalled here.

tensions “over ancient political issues” (21) still present in the rural Ireland of the 1940s and 1950s, as well as of the Irish experience of international conflicts such as the Second World War or Franco’s Spanish dictatorship, seen from their peripheral, theoretically “neutral”, position as something distant and alien.

With regard to Irish political issues which still confront members of the same community and even of the same family, there is something that they all seem to agree on, and that is the negative vision of the Black and Tans. The Black and Tans, who owe their name to the colours of their uniforms, were a group of former British soldiers who joined the Royal Irish Constabulary as temporary volunteers during the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) to fight against the Irish Republican Army, and they soon became notorious for their brutality against civilians and their property. Irish hatred for the Black and Tans was still very much alive in the 1940s and 1950s, when citizens who had experienced their violence first hand were still alive and the incidents were quite recent. For example, at the very beginning of *A Pagan Place* the reader gets to know that the narrator’s father burnt down his own house because the Black and Tans wanted to occupy it:

Your father burnt the house sooner than let the Black and Tans occupy it as barracks. [...] The Tans had it all worked out that they’d occupy your father’s house being as it was spacious with ample accommodation for themselves and for prisoners. (1971: 12-17)²⁹

Such hatred for the Tans is explained by a previous incident in which the narrator’s father and his friend Dan Egan were involved, when both of them were arrested and tortured by the British soldiers:

When your father talked of Dan Egan his eyes filled up with tears. He and Dan Egan were arrested as they walked out of a public house [...]. Tied together they were and inveigled to split on their comrades but they didn’t and they even got kicked and belted but they didn’t give in. [...] From the beltings he got, Dan Egan developed epileptic fits and when the Free State was established he applied for a pension and

²⁹ Significantly, nothing is said of the burning of Protestant Big Houses by the IRA at that same time, but, unavoidably the image of a burning house rather brings to mind republican excesses.

was given it, but your father got none and they came to a coolness and set it. (1971: 16-17)

These excerpts serve to expose the violence that Irish civilians suffered at the hands of the Black and Tans, as well as to show that British recruits tried to take hold of any Irish property they fancied. It also shows that a common hatred for the “other”, in this case the Black and Tans, created a sense of unity among the Irish, despite their individual differences: going through a humiliating and traumatic experience together “made [Dan Egan and the narrator’s father] buddies for ever” (17), and the former helped the latter seek revenge on the Tans by setting his house on fire so that the British could not occupy it as barracks. As a consequence of the tortures they suffered, Dan Egan developed epileptic fits and was granted a pension when the Free State was established, but the narrator’s father was not, and this grew them apart. However, once Dan Egan died “they became the best of friends again” (17), because the narrator’s father only remembered, or only wanted to remember, that they stood together against the enemy at a time of conflict and violence.

The generalized opposition to the Black and Tans on the part of the Irish is glimpsed throughout the novel. For instance, it is said that the brother of the narrator’s mother had been “a wanted man and had organized ambushes against the Tans” (30). Another example is the narrator’s widowed aunt, who has a photograph of Daniel O’Connell, “The Liberator”, presiding her parlour (45) and whose husband was killed by the Black and Tans:

Your aunt called her dead husband a partner. He was shot by the Tans in another part of the country, in broad daylight. When she got the wire she rushed off in a train to get his body and bring him home but when she got there they had already sent the coffin on another train and she was three days at various railway stations trying to locate him. There were quite a few coffins in those days, what with the shooting, and the ambushes. (47-48)³⁰

³⁰ Ambushes, shooting, retaliations and cruelty were nevertheless rife on both sides, the IRA and the Black and Tans.

In this particular example, the case of the late uncle killed by the Tans serves to illustrate the situation at a national level, since we are told that deaths like his were common at the time. However, not all political issues which arise in *A Pagan Place* meet such unanimous responses. For instance, Ambie and the Nigger turn out to be “mortal enemies” for unspecified “ancient political issues” (21). More explicit is the political argument between Ms. Davitt, the narrator’s teacher, who favoured the anti-Treaty position of De Valera, and the narrator’s father, who preferred Cosgrave’s pro-Treaty stance:

Miss Davitt had no romance at all. She had a cataract in one eye. A cataract was a little cloud that came down over the eye like a veil. There was another kind of cataract that meant running water. *Everything meant more than one thing*. Miss Davitt was too brainy. She got excited when she discussed politics. Your father and her had a flaming row one night and you were afraid to go to school next day in case she avenged it on you, which she did. [...] She was for de Valera and your father was for Cosgrave. Cosgrave’s crowd had sent blueshirts to fight for General Franco in Spain. (28, emphasis added)³¹

The divided loyalties between pro-Treaty Cosgrave, who had sent men to fight for Franco, and anti-Treaty De Valera is also underlined in *Mother Ireland*: “Yet up in Dublin a couple of hundred young men had gone off in blue shirts under the aegis of General O’Duffy to fight for Franco in Spain [...]. The village was sharply divided into those who voted for Cosgrave’s party and those who were for Dev’s. De Valera was the venerable hero” (23). But coming back to the previous quotation from *A Pagan Place*, I think that it is significant that, just before explaining the political differences that Miss Davitt and her father had, the narrator mentions how the same word, ‘cataract’, can mean different things, and, what is more, that “[e]verything meant more than one thing”. The polysemy she alludes to might be applied to politics, and even to history: the same event or person might mean different things to different people depending on their

³¹ This particular scene echoes the Christmas dinner scene in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* (1916), in which Stephen’s father and Dante have an argument for and against Parnell, respectively. This shows that there has been a history of conflicts and divisions in Ireland that still lingers in the present.

interpretation, historical, social and religious location.. This historical and political polysemy is highlighted in the figure of Hitler, who is characterized in opposed ways depending on who refers to him, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

[The narrator's father] had gone to hear Lord Haw Haw on someone else's wireless³². Lord Haw Haw was for Hitler, inflaming people to fight. Your father said the Germans were making great strides and that Jerry was a clever bloke and would win the war. (39)

A woman said she had it on good authority that Hitler was the anti-Christ. (128)³³

The different viewpoints on the Second World War, which was taking place at the moment, are also highlighted in another passage towards the end of the novel, at the narrator's leaving party:

Sacco said what a genius Churchill was turning out to be, a second Bismarck, a nab tactician. (...) Your father said it wasn't the Germans you had to fear now but the Reds and the Red Scourge. He said he had information first-hand from the nuns³⁴. He would have mentioned the priest also only that his name was taboo for all time. (199)³⁵

However, as mentioned before, despite having their own opinions on the subject, the Second World War is experienced as something alien to the Irish. In opposition to their personal experiences with the Black and Tans, they receive information on the Second World War through mediators, like the radio programme the father listens to or the

³² Lord-Haw Haw was William Joyce's nickname, who conducted the English-language propaganda radio programme *Germany Calling*, broadcast by Nazi German radio to audiences in Great Britain. The purpose of this programme was to discourage British troops and population. Still, quite often the only information the British could get of what was going on in the front was through Lord Haw-Haw's biased reports.

³³ Notice how a religious definition is used to describe political issues.

³⁴ Again, religion is used to validate a political view. As illustrated by these examples, religion permeated every aspect of Irish life, and, ambiguously, it could define both Hitler, or the Russians against whom Hitler fought, as enemies of the Irish nation.

³⁵ The priest he refers to is the man who abuses the narrator, who has already left the village. This is why "his name was taboo for all time".

comments the priest makes. This supposes a huge difference between the Irish and their ex-colonizers, the British, who took part in the war. Actually, the closest contact the characters in the novel seem to have with the Second World War is through the Irish emigrants in England and some Irish men who fought in the British army, a decision not very well regarded by their fellow citizens:

There was talk of a man who had died in France, fighting for the British. There was a bit of bitterness about that, some saying that to fight for the British was a scandalous thing. The women said wasn't it terrible for his mother³⁶ [...].

The person who held the floor was a girl home from England talking about air-raids. She described how one minute she was in the room of a house and how the next minute and after a rubble, the walls were gone and she was able to reach out and touch the branches of a tree that had fallen from the pavement. She was the only living thing in that household not to have got killed. The cats, the kittens, the mistress, the Austrian cook, everyone had got killed but her. She was a private nurse.

People said it was because she was a Catholic she had been so mercifully spared³⁷. Then someone said she heard that air-raid shelters were dens of vice³⁸ [...]. (128-9)

Whereas Irish opinions on the Black and Tans are founded on their own or their relatives' experiences, their stance on the Second World War is based on other people's opinions. Nevertheless, despite the narrator's father's strong sympathy for the Germans, it seems that the general opinion opposed them, perhaps because the Irish identified with the victims of German conquest: "On Saturday night the head nun would read out to us something of moral, religious or political import. [...] that poor Poland, sister of dear

³⁶ There is a gendered perspective here. While the men discuss about the political implications of an Irish man fighting for the British, the women empathize with the dead soldier's mother's pain.

³⁷ This is an example of the religious hierarchical dichotomy between the British and the Irish. The Irish consider themselves better than the British due to their religion, to the point that they say that the woman is the only survivor of the air-raid "because she was a Catholic". In opposition, the cats, the kittens and the mistress, who one understands is British and Anglican, and the Austrian cook, who probably is not a Catholic either, die.

³⁸ Again, Catholic morality permeates politics to the extent that a woman may consider air-raid shelters as "dens of vice", and so, one assumes, opt for death rather than fall into perversion.

Ireland, was in tears, suffering for faith and fatherland” (O’Brien, 1976: 103). In this case, their identification with “poor Poland”, which they consider “sister of dear Ireland” probably has to do with the fact that both countries share Catholicism as their majority religion. Hence, the nuns that talk of the ongoing War in *Mother Ireland* might very well be, consciously or subconsciously, drawing a parallelism between the current situation of Catholic Poland, being invaded by the Germans, and the not-so-remote situation of Catholic Ireland itself, invaded by the British.

As I have tried to show in this section, Irish history and its reconstruction plays a central role in the construction of national identity. The Irish building of a national identity peculiarly links its pagan past with its Catholic present, creating thus a hybrid narrative and historicizing this hybrid blend so as to legitimize their tradition as older and superior to that of their closest “other”, the British. Furthermore, their traumatic history of dispossession has been transmitted throughout the generations, causing in more recent times a division into “those who cannot forget the past” and “those only too eager to forget it” (O’Brien, 1976: 33). This tension between remembrance and forgetting recalls different approaches and stages of dealing with trauma. While the first reaction after a traumatic experience is to try to forget it so as to deny its existence, when the victim is finally prepared to confront his/her traumatic past a process of remembrance needs to be carried out in order to overcome this conflict (Herman, 1992). Hence, the different approaches to the past exemplified by Edna O’Brien’s characters reflect different stages in the process of healing from a traumatic experience.

3. Gender and Sexuality: the Double Colonization of Women

Although all societies are characterized by sexual asymmetry to some extent, one would be hard put to find a society in which the sexes are as divided into opposing alien camps as they are in any small Irish village of the west. (Nancy Scheper-Hughes, 2001)

Even though Irish masculinities have also been constructed and surely to meet the standards of socially accepted male roles has been demanding on Irish men, it is undeniable that the construction of femininity has been much more restrictive and damaging to Irish women than that of their males' counterparts (Nash, 1997: 110). The main problem with the construction of Irish femininity is that it has mythologized the figure of woman, equating it to the Virgin Mary or Mother Ireland, thus depriving real Irish women of a human figure to which they can relate and with which they can identify. This idealization of Irish femininity is in part due to the gendering of the Irish nation, first by its colonizers and by the nationalists later³⁹. As Edna O'Brien puts it in *Mother Ireland*: "Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare" (11). While the British colonizers feminized Ireland and the Irish race, justifying in this way the need of a manly figure like England to tame the country, the Irish nationalists in turn also presented Ireland as a lady in distress which needed to be saved from the English (Arrowsmith, 1999: 130-31). In both cases the feminine is identified with passivity and weakness, something that is not merely specific to Britain and Ireland, but a common-place in Western ideologies (Nash, 1997: 110). Therefore, not only were Irish women marginalized during the colonial period, but also during the process of decolonization. As Eve Stoddard explains in her comparison of the situation of postcolonial women in Ireland and other places such as Jamaica or India, "[b]ecause nationalism implies unity and tends to suppress internal dissent, in newly independent countries minority groups and women may find themselves no better off, perhaps worse off, than they were under colonialism" (Stoddard, 2006: 107). For instance, while women's sexuality was recognized in ancient Irish laws and

³⁹ Such female conceptions of Ireland already existed in Celtic Ireland, embodied in "the sovereignty goddess", a figure that nevertheless did not stand in an inferior hierarchical position in relation to men, and who was in fact the one that sanctioned male rule. On this, see Herbert (1991).

“woman could divorce a sterile, impotent, or homosexual husband, could marry a priest, and could give honourable birth to a child outside of wedlock” (Kiberd, 1996: 215), sex became a sin after colonization, and female sexuality was totally repressed and silenced⁴⁰.

Actually, the Irish Free State relegated women to their homes in the 1937 Constitution (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*), which conceived them only as wives and mothers and restricted their roles in public life and their rights as citizens. Article 41.1.1 of the Constitution stated that “by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved”, and Article 41.2.2 even claimed that “mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home”. The reasons behind this discriminatory legislation and the fact that most of the Irish accepted it can be found in the influence of Catholicism, the nationalist tradition and the economic depression (Beaumont, 1999: 100). Whichever the factors that explain this legal discrimination against Irish women may be, the fact is that they were objectified and oppressed⁴¹. So much so, that the young female narrator of *A Pagan Place*, growing up in 1940s and 1950s post-independence Ireland, associates womanhood with something so negative that she shrinks away from it: “You thought that by woman he might mean a whole series of personal things; being lonesome et cetera, things you shied away from” (1971: 86).

The silencing and repressing of female sexuality appears both in *A Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland*, whose narrators, despite choosing different paths, share their guilt

⁴⁰ As Gerardine Meaney argues, postcolonial societies usually mirror colonial power relationships, with the result of postcolonial women being “colonized” by postcolonial men: “The psychodynamic of colonial and postcolonial identity often produces in the formerly colonized a Desire to assert a rigid and confined masculine identity, against the colonizers stereotype of their subjects as feminine, wild and ungovernable. This masculine identity then emerges at the estate level as a regulation of ‘our’ women, an imposition of a very definite feminine identity as guarantor to the precarious masculinity of the new state” (Meaney, 2010: 5).

⁴¹ The objectification of women might also help to explain the self-objectification of *A Pagan Place*’s narrator, whose use of the second person singular pronoun “you” instead of “I” points towards a split in terms of agency: the “you” signaling the objectification of the self and the “I” behind the “you” resisting such objectification.

and shame towards sex, since they have been educated to consider sex a sin⁴². While *A Pagan Place*'s narrator is too young to have a real conscience of her sexuality, and she finally decides to become a nun, there are several references to female sexuality that especially affect her older sister Emma. Emma's out of wedlock pregnancy by an unknown man supposes the worst possible shame for her family. They want to get rid of the baby, but abortion was (and still is) illegal in Ireland, as the following passage shows⁴³:

From the way she shivered it was evident that she thought they were going to kill her. [...] Your father asked if it could be prevented. The doctor said that was a moot point. Your father said wasn't there ergot⁴⁴. Your mother uttered an ejaculation, a grandiloquent one, recalled the incident of the doctor's maid and the nine layers of blood-soaked newspaper⁴⁵. [...] Your father said he wanted something done and pronto at that. The doctor said indeed. Your father said it was a little matter of circumventing nature. The doctor said to cut out the follols and put it in plain speaking, and was it to terminate a life he was being asked, was that the gist. Your mother said In the name of God. [...] The doctor said to remember the Fifth Commandment, Thou Shalt Not Kill. [...] Emma clutched her stomach. [...] Her death would have simplified everything then. It was the only solution. It was what you all wanted, her death and her burial. (O'Brien, 1971: 116-117)

Getting pregnant before marriage means that Emma is a sexually active woman, something unthinkable according to the idealized image of the Irish woman, either as Virgin Mary or Mother Ireland. Since the option of interrupting her pregnancy is out of the question, her death would be a relief to her family: it "would have simplified everything then". However, they have to find another solution, and this is to send her

⁴² The Catholic teaching in Ireland which encourages women to be chaste and modest is further explored in Tom Inglis's *Lessons in Irish Sexuality* (1998).

⁴³ Abortion, as well as artificial birth control, were banned by the 1937 Constitution.

⁴⁴ Ergot is a cereal blight popularly believed to have abortive properties.

⁴⁵ As mentioned earlier in the novel, "Ambie got the doctor's maid into trouble and she put newspapers all over her bed after she drank ergot and even at that the blood soaked right down through the mattress and she had to sleep on springs until it dried out. The doctor's wife locked her in the room for five days and starved her" (1971: 37-38).

away, and “put Emma in lodgings with some devout lady, some good Samaritan who took care of such people” (125). The secrecy about her state and her whereabouts is such that, even the telegrams she sends to inform her family of the birth of her baby, immediately given for adoption, are coded. If she has a boy, she should send a telegram saying “Arrived safely in Volkswagen” and, if she has a girl, the telegram would say “Arrived safely in Hillman Minx” (134). This secrecy about her unwanted pregnancy is explained by the shame it poses to her family. The young narrator is even afraid of being ostracized by the other girls in school:

You sat between your mother and father. Everyone was eyeing them, waiting for them to divulge, to say something about Emma. [...] You were afraid your teacher might come in and make an example of you. You had missed school three days in a row. You wanted never to have to go back to school. You prayed that you might get consumption, or scarlet fever, or inherit a legacy and employ a tutor. There would be nudges about Emma. No girl would link you or have a stroll with you at playtime. You would be ostracized. (127)

Yet, if the narrator fears the possibility of being ostracized by her community, Emma is in fact isolated. Punished by her own family for having distanced herself from the female norm, Emma suffers what she herself describes as a stay in hell in a letter she sends home: “[i]t said she was not bursting to see her mother, pointed out that she had just gone through hell with a neo-Victorian confinement and the loss of her child” (150).

As for *Mother Ireland*, the reader gets to know about its narrator’s sexuality in a direct way. As in *A Pagan Place*, *Mother Ireland*’s female narrator also experiences sex as something sinful. In the passage when she almost loses her virginity to a singer, she recalls that “I felt everything melt except my troubled conscience. Then stiff as the proverbial poker I heard as though from Satan the most sickening of remarks, heard him say ‘I could go through you like butter’” (128). They are interrupted by a knock on the door, but still the narrator feels that her sexual desire is enough to condemn her, since what she feels now distances herself even more from the image of womanhood that she has been inculcated by Catholicism in her native Ireland:

Yes, you were going downhill. You had strayed far from the memory of the reality of the ellipse-shaped wounds of Christ, you found yourself living for these weekly delights where on screen you could witness ‘the dallings of divorcees and the lurid radiances of

eroticism in bold Technicolor'⁴⁶. [...] In the paper you saw mention of the type of person you were becoming—'the hot number with hair elaborately coiled and snowily peroxidized, a slut with eyebrows gone and pencil lines replaced, a brazen strap with a mouth like the squeezed cross section of a bloody sausage'⁴⁷. (128-137)

When she finally loses her virginity to another man, her thoughts on how she has been raised to conceive of sex as the greatest sin of all and as the damnation of the self are expressed very clearly:

Had one not been born, bred and raised to believe that this was the ultimate crime, constituting a smear of the body, a possible pregnancy and adieu to the friendship of God. Lost both in the corporal and in the spiritual world. Had he not been born with the same set of warped incantation except that men had more bravado than women. (139-40)

The repression of sexuality imposed on men and women alike since their very early childhood might explain certain deviant sexual tendencies (Inglis, 1998a: 31) that actually occur in the novels of Edna O'Brien. On the one hand, there is the question of sadomasochistic impulses which Shirley Peterson studies on her essay "'Meaniacs' and Martyrs: Sadomasochistic Desire in Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy*" (2006). In this essay, Peterson argues that sadomasochistic sexual desire can be interpreted as a reflection of a hierarchical and unequal social arrangement which is then internalized (153). This internalization of the social hierarchy might help explain the puzzling reaction *A Pagan Place*'s narrator has when her father is beating her after the incident with the priest:

There were more pauses than strokes. It may have been that he changed the ruler from one hand to the other or had to keep pushing his sleeve up. Each onslaught was a surprise because *he got more impassioned as he went on*. The flap between your legs began to

⁴⁶ Incidentally, Edna O'Brien's husband, writer Ernest Gebler, whom she later divorced, was actually a divorcé (Guppy, 1984).

⁴⁷ There was an anxiety in post-colonial Ireland about the foreign corruption of Irish women. As Catherine Nash puts it, "[f]oreign fashions, film, literature, music and dance and foreign notions of sexual equality, it was said, undermined the home and native honour towards women and degraded Irish women" (1997: 115). Ryan (1998) has also suggested that the vilification in the Irish national press of the 'modern girl', the young single working woman who embraced modernity, reinforces the belief that the Irish Free State sought to suppress the ambitions of young independent women.

hoise up and down and you encouraged that and *the pleasure that you forsook when you expelled the priest's finger began again, and the tumult that should have been his to witness took place unbeknownst to him on that rattly bed while other parts of you smarted and cried.* (181, emphasis added)

This passage illustrates the masochistic pleasure the narrator feels at being hit, and also the sadistic tendencies of her father, who “got more impassioned as he went on”. But these sadomasochistic tendencies are not restricted to sexuality. While the narrator invents penances for herself and does the opposite of what she wants to do, up to the point of becoming a nun, her father, in addition to obtaining pleasure from the violence he inflicts on his wife and daughters, also enjoys killing mice for fun (118-19)⁴⁸.

Another consequence of such a repressive upbringing is what Rebecca Pelan identifies as figures of idealized ‘love objects’, occasionally nuns, but more often mothers or god-like men, in O’Brien’s early (pre-1985) fiction (Pelan, 2006). These so-called “idealized love objects” would explain the attraction *A Pagan Place*’s narrator, as well as most of the women in her village, feels towards the priest (169). Furthermore, it is said that the narrator is also in love with the young nun who goes to her school in search of volunteers (195). Likewise, in *Mother Ireland* it is mentioned that “[g]irls were in love with nuns and nuns either made pets or victims of one girl after another depending on their moods” (104). There are as well some homosexual tendencies hinted at both in *A Pagan Place* and in *Mother Ireland*. In the former novel, the narrator has a kind of innocent love relationship with her friend Jewel until her parents prohibit it, seeing it as scandalous, and she also explains that some girls “went in pairs across fields to kiss and do things” (160). In *Mother Ireland*, the narrator says that “[g]irls fell in love with girls, squeezed hands or twined insteps under the long table while invariably remembering ahead to the little confessional, the mauve curtains, the sliding door and the priest’s scrupulous cross-examination” (104). One could interpret these lesbian leanings as a reaction against the heteronormativity imposed on the narrators, or perhaps as a result of their utter fear of the male sex, due to their Catholic upbringing on the one hand, and to the male harassment they are exposed to on the other. Actually, the many episodes in *A*

⁴⁸ I have already mentioned that this sadistic activity of killing mice for pleasure is also attributed to Edna O’Brien’s real father in *Mother Ireland* (54).

Pagan Place where men appear as perverts and exhibitionists could also be understood as a product of such a repressive society, which affected not only women, but also men, who manifested it in sexual deviations such as paedophilia, as in the case of the priest, or exhibitionism, like the Nigger (20).

Yet, it is not only female sexuality that is silenced and hidden in post-colonial Ireland, but also domestic violence. Women are equally unprotected by law outside and inside their homes, and the family home proves to be a very dangerous space. This is reflected in the two books which are the focus of this essay. In *Mother Ireland* there is a passing remark on an episode of domestic violence: “A man came home from the pub one Sunday, asked for his dinner and when his wife told him where to get it he took the carving knife to her and cut her from elbow to wrist. Under the influence men could do anything” (97). But it is in *A Pagan Place* that domestic violence occupies a prominent space in the narration. I have already mentioned episodes of domestic violence of the narrator’s father towards her and her older sister, Emma, but the mother’s narrator is also a victim of his fury. There is an anecdote about the father breaking some of his wife’s platters which reveals the way he treats her and how she feels:

The doctor and your mother sat on the kitchen table next to one another and her legs were down, and his hand was somewhere under her apron⁴⁹ [...].

When you came back she was asking the doctor if he thought her plates were disgraceful.[...] The doctor said on the contrary [...]. *Many were held together with gum. The dried gum made a brown smear along the face of the plate but from a distance and in an evening light they looked perfect.*

Your father broke a platter, did it looking for the strap of a safety razor. He lost his temper and threw the platter. It smashed on the tiled floor. She looked for the strap in the oak press [...]. He swung it like he was intending to slay someone. He went outside.

When she gathered the pieces up there was a crack in her voice but she didn’t complain. She assembled it and put the pieces on the very top shelf out of reach. Then she got it into her head that there was someone outside the window waiting to shoot her. She couldn’t budge. She went rigid. She sat in the chair, the only time she sat for

⁴⁹ The suggestion in this scene that the doctor is masturbating the mother is not the only sign of their fondness that appears in the novel. Later on, their mutual attraction is confirmed: “[The doctor] kissed [the narrator’s mother] once, then twice, and they were noiseless kisses and she stayed in his arms for a second, content. You knew about them being attached, from the day on the kitchen table but you knew too how assiduously they denied themselves each other’s company” (O’Brien, 1971: 125).

long, and brought her feet up under her. She was petrified. (O'Brien, 1971: 38-39, emphasis added)

There are two things that I would like to emphasize here. First, how the broken plates parallel the body and soul of the narrator's mother, smashed by her violent husband. Just as the platters are held together with gum but look perfect at a distance, so does the narrator's mother figuratively speaking: she looks alright when looked at in the public sphere, but she is actually broken due to her husband's violence. Second, I would like to point out the different bodily attitudes the narrator's mother has when she is with the doctor, whom she loves, and when she is with her husband, of whom she is terrified. While sitting next to the doctor the narrator's mother has her legs down and this posture is associated with pleasure, whereas the violence of her husband makes her feel that "there was someone outside the window waiting to shoot her", immediately after her husband goes outside. This petrifies her and she sits with "her feet up under her". The fact that she endures her marriage despite the vulnerability her husband makes her feel and the pleasure she feels with the doctor, might point towards the fact that divorce was banned in the 1937 Constitution. Thus, without the option of getting divorced and with no opportunity to find a job outside the house due to the "marriage bar", a law which "prevented the employment of women civil servants and later national school teachers after marriage" (Beaumont, 1999: 98), the narrator's mother is trapped in an unhappy marriage and in an unsafe home with no other option but resignation.

However, despite the efforts of the State to maintain the status quo, women after the narrator's mother's generation started to question their imposed roles and some even dared to reject them⁵⁰. While the narrator protagonist of *A Pagan Place* finally accepts her imposed role as a nun, even though she really does not want it, the narrator in *Mother Ireland*, to the contrary, experiments with different kinds of femininity. Even though she is also sent to a convent, and at that point "there was a subtle understanding that I would become a nun and thus devolved on me extra duties such as to walk softly, to talk softly

⁵⁰ It is important to make it clear that, as Caitríona Beaumont mentions, there were certain women and female associations, such as Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Eireann) and Cumman na mBan (The Women's League), who were against the unfair situation and fought against it from the beginning of the 20th century (1999: 96).

[...] and to keep one's mind on such things as the visions of St Margaret Mary and the mortifications of the saints" (102), she soon starts to distance herself from religion. Just one year later she does not identify with the Virgin any longer: "I looked at one of the many pictures of the Virgin along the wall and realized that she no longer spoke to me as she used to when I was a child. The visions were waning" (107). Then, when her mother denies her a can of peaches which "had been there for years" (107) just as an adornment, the narrator seems to finally cut loose with the negation of the body and earthly pleasures:

Anger pervaded like a rash and there and then I knew that I would not be a nun, rather I would be a film star and get a perm in my hair and save up for an accordion pleated skirt, high heels, perfume and fur-backed gloves. I distinctly heard W.B. Yeats call to me:

*Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping
than you can understand.*

But I turned a deaf ear. (107-108, emphasis in the original)⁵¹

While *A Pagan Place's* narrator finally conforms to what society expects of her as a woman and leaves her home to become a nun, *Mother Ireland's* narrator chooses to become exactly what her society vilifies. Even if tradition tries to take her back in the form of Yeats' refrain from his poem "The Stolen Child", she "turned a deaf ear" and goes ahead to become the kind of woman she wants to be. Still, the feelings of shame and guilt will stay with her for a long time, as her sexual experiences, which have already been analyzed here, show.

In any case, something that unites *A Pagan Place's* and *Mother Ireland's* young female narrators is their escape from Ireland to achieve the life they want for themselves. Both narrators' exiles, as well as Edna O'Brien's, are exponents of a larger social phenomenon which massively took place in Ireland until the 1960s. Under such an

⁵¹ Yeats's refrain from his poem "The Stolen Child" (1889), quoted in this excerpt, mixes Irish mythology on faeries with a religious conception of human life as a valley of tears, which will be compensated for after life, in Yeats's case, not by the privilege of proximity to a Christian God, but by a life of leisure, magic and mystery in the mists of Celtic folklore.

asphyxiating regime in Ireland, many young women saw emigration as the only alternative. As Beaumont explains with regard to Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s: “[t]he high level of emigration amongst young single women during these years may also reflect the disillusionment felt by women who opted for a new life elsewhere rather than attempt to challenge the repressive and inequitable system at home” (1999: 102). Even in the 1940s and 1950s, Beaumont argues, “life remained difficult for Irish women, the majority of whom worked at home”, and thus, “emigration proved to be the only alternative” (103). This situation applies until the 1960s, the time when both *Mother Ireland*'s narrator and Edna O'Brien herself left Ireland for Britain: “That is why we leave. Because we beg to differ. Because we dread the psychological choke” (143).

Conclusion

I will go now, was what you said, hoping that she would emerge from the house and say good-bye and have done with you, but since no such thing happened you went anyhow and the last thing you heard was a howl starting up, more ravenous than a dog's, more piercing than a person's, a howl that would go on for as long as her life did, and his, and yours. (Edna O'Brien, 1970: 202-203)

It is time now to review what has been said in this essay and reach a conclusion. My main objective throughout this Master thesis has been to examine how religion, history, gender and sexuality have intertwined to create a hybrid and sometimes liminal female Irish identity. I have argued that this instability is mainly due to Ireland's colonial past and its decolonizing process, in which women fared worse than men. At the very beginning of this essay I have pointed out that the postcolonial status of Ireland is still under debate. On the one hand there are the revisionists and some postcolonial critics, such as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989), who maintain that Ireland has never been a colonized country such as other places like India, Australia or Africa. On the other hand, the nationalists and an increasing number of Irish postcolonial scholars defend the colonial past of Ireland at the hands of the British and, hence, Ireland's postcolonial position. While both stances have created their own distortions as regards national and cultural identity, I think that there are enough arguments to support Ireland's status as a postcolonial country.

With the acceptance of Ireland's postcoloniality, I have proceeded to analyze Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland* as examples of postcolonial Irish writing, since these two literary works, which reflect some characteristics of a postcolonial identity, have not received much scholar attention. Therefore, I have engaged in an analysis of these two early works by Edna O'Brien as pioneers of postcolonial and exilic Irish writing: that is, as texts that anticipate a trend in Irish literature which would flourish in the 1980s and 1990s with the proliferation of a series of writers, usually female, who exposed certain aspects of Irish society which had been kept hidden and silenced, such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, corruption in the religious hierarchy, etcetera. The postcolonial analysis of *A Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland* has been divided into three different areas which help explain the postcolonial

sense of Irishness and the high rates of emigration in Ireland in the last centuries, especially in the case of young women. These factors are religion, history and gender and sexuality.

First of all, I have argued that Catholicism has acted as an inner colonizer of the Irish people. Though religion was the only aspect of life in which the Irish could find some solace and sense of a national identity during the centuries of colonization, after the process of decolonization there was a backlash against anything British and an emphasis on Catholicism as a symbol of difference from Britain. This resulted in oppression, especially for Irish women. My analysis has shown that the supremacy of the Irish Catholic Church entailed institutional corruption and hypocrisy, which in its turn affected Irish society, most especially the weakest: children and women. For instance, the sexual abuse that the narrator of *A Pagan Place* suffers at the hands of a priest is hidden and silenced. The victim is actually made feel guilty of it, up to the point where becoming a nun seems to be her only escape in order to be respected by her community and not to be ostracized as a “whore” by her own family and neighbours. Contrarily, *Mother Ireland*'s narrator turns away from religion and indulges in the exploration of her sexuality, a path which fills her with shame and guilt due to her Catholic upbringing. At the same time, *Mother Ireland*'s narrator's rejection of Catholicism places her in a liminal position: she does not adhere to the idea of Irish women which has been imposed on her but, at the same time, the burden of her education is too heavy for her to be completely at ease with an identity which denies that which has been understood as the core of Irishness, that is, Catholicism. However, although Catholicism as a fundamental badge of Irishness seems to offer a monolithic identity, this monopoly of Catholicism distorts other religious realities in Ireland. On the one hand, it involves the silencing and omission of the important presence of Protestants, who also suffered their own dose of violence and injustice at the hands of radical Catholics. On the other, the apparent “purity” of an Irish Catholic identity is not as pure as it would appear. Actually, Irish Catholicism is embroidered with many pagan elements which survive from pre-Christianized times. As I have noted, the Christianization of Ireland took the form of a process of religious syncretism that allowed the persistence of Gaelic elements within a Catholic framework.

Secondly, I have analyzed the history of the invasions of Ireland as a colonization from without which created a sense of dispossession in the Irish. In this section I have strengthened the importance of both facts and memory as creators of a sense of national identity. In other words, the Irish sense of identity as coming from a long line of invaders and from the suppression of their ancient cultural roots is based not only on real facts, such as the Penal Laws, but also on their construction of memory and their interpretation of these facts in relation to others, either mythical or historical. The reconstruction of the past to create a national and self-identity based on a hybrid history constituted both by myths and facts is very clearly shown in *A Pagan Place* and *Mother Ireland*. Edna O'Brien's writing exemplifies the postmodern notion of history as story, that is, as a constructed narrative which can never reach an objective truth. *Mother Ireland* begins with the narrator telling her own version of Irish history, mixing fact, myth and legend, and basing this information on a nun's book, whose veracity is never assured and which is on its turn based on the *Lébor Gabála Éirenn*, an eleventh-century anonymous scripture. That is, the story that the reader is offered as history is the narrator's version of the nun's version of a medieval version of Irish history: the past is always mediated in the light of the present, which arranges it in a certain way. In this sense, *A Pagan Place's* narrator's reflections on memory and how it distorts the past, taking as example her parents' memories on certain past events remembered differently by each of them, is a good instance of the role that memory plays in the reconstruction of the past, which in its turn legitimates the present and the sense of identity. Furthermore, the different references to contemporary events, such as the narrator's father's argument with her teacher, one supporting Cosgrave and the other De Valera, hints at the polysemy of reality and at the importance of the interpretation of a particular fact to give it one meaning or another. In any case, the need to reconstruct the past, even if it involves the inclusion of some non-historical stories, can be explained by a traumatized Irish psyche which, due to the island's history of invasion and dispossession, needs to pull together a sense of the self. This operation can be seen throughout *A Pagan Place's* narrator's account of the past, since the narrator's sense of self identity is so damaged due to traumatic events that she even uses "you" instead of "I" to refer to herself, a choice which signals to a radically split identity and to self-objectification. *A Pagan Place's* narrator's

fractured personality can be allegorically interpreted as a symptom of intergenerational traumas, such as the Great Famine, which have been transmitted from parents to children generation after generation. These transmitted traumas result in several psychological problems which also have a physical manifestation, such as alcoholism, drug abuse or domestic violence, to mention just a few.

Thirdly, I have analyzed how the repressive construction of gender and sexuality has affected both Irish men and women. Since the so-called Celtic race was feminized by the British to justify their colonization, after independence there took place a hyper-masculinization of Irish men as a means of self-assertion. However, Irish women took the worst part, since their situation in postcolonial Ireland became worse than in Gaelic Ireland and even worse than in colonial times. While women had certain rights and privileges with regard to their sexuality and marital life in ancient Ireland, and some of them took part in the fight for Independence through their participation in women's associations, once the Irish Free State was established the law was discriminatory against women and they were left totally unprotected, both in the private and in the public sphere. This could partly be explained because Irish women were taken as an allegory of the country, Mother Ireland, and were thus desexualized and idealized, relegated to the only positions of wives and mothers. This gender discrimination against women and the silencing of their sexuality is reflected both in *A Pagan Place* and in *Mother Ireland*. As has already been mentioned, *A Pagan Place's* nameless narrator ultimately denies her own sexuality and sees herself forced to devote her life to religion by becoming a nun, precisely because of the abuse she has suffered at the hands of a priest. The sexual abuse that she has been subjected to smears her reputation both in her family and in her community, so that she sees the option of becoming a nun as the only possibility to be respected by those who would otherwise regard her as a whore and ostracize her. The topic of ostracism due to a sexual misdemeanour is very clearly seen in *A Pagan Place's* narrator's older sister, Emma, who gets pregnant because artificial birth control was banned in Ireland and she cannot get an abortion since this was also illegal. Her unwanted pregnancy before marriage is such a shame for her family that they wish she were dead and send her to a religious institution where she gives birth and then her child is taken care of by the State. During her confinement, which Emma describes as a neo-victorian

hell, she has no say whatsoever with regard to her own body or baby. After being verbally and physically abused by her father, she is forced to go away and give her baby for adoption, all of it in utter secrecy. While a rigid form of femininity is imposed in *A Pagan Place*, *Mother Ireland*'s narrator experiments with other options. Nevertheless, her repressive upbringing takes its toll and fills her with feelings of shame and guilt when she decides to enjoy her sexuality. The complete identification of Irish women with Ireland is such that foreign women are vilified and seen as a negative influence which can corrupt Irish women, as seen in *Mother Ireland*.

The repression of sexuality, though especially forced onto Irish women, permeated Irish society and resulted in a series of sexual deviations and abuses which could be interpreted as a reflection of or reaction to the social order. For instance, domestic violence against children and women is a problematic issue in Ireland even nowadays, and might be the result of the hypermasculinization of Irish men mentioned before. After years of subjection to the British now Irish men take the role of colonizers of their own women and exert on them all the violence they have previously received from the English. Unfortunately, domestic violence was such a usual thing in post-independence Ireland that incidents of family abuse are mentioned both in *A Pagan Place*, where the narrator's father verbally, physically and psychologically abuses his wife and two daughters, and in *Mother Ireland*, where there is only a passing remark about an alcoholic man hitting his wife when he goes back home. There are also many examples in *A Pagan Place* and in *Mother Ireland* of sexual deviations as a result of a repressive social atmosphere. For instance, masochistic and sadist tendencies are portrayed in *A Pagan Place*'s narrator and her father, respectively, and paedophilia is clearly involved in the priest's abuse of the narrator. Furthermore, heteronormativity, together with a fear of men due to domestic violence and sexual harassment, could explain the lesbian tendencies that girls seem to show in *A Pagan Place* and in *Mother Ireland*, but which have to be suppressed and transformed into religious or marital devotion.

Taking all these factors into account, it is easy to understand why emigration has played such an important role in the creation of a sense of Irishness. Young women especially have left Ireland due to their subaltern position in their own country, where

their identity has been restricted and silenced and any deviation from the norm has been severely punished by family, Church and State alike. It is no surprise then that both narrators in *A Pagan Place* and in *Mother Ireland* end by up leaving their native land in order to develop their own sense of Irishness and womanhood, always hybrid and liminal. Their yearning for a sense of belonging is at odds with their need to escape an oppressive country.

I would like now to turn to the quotation with which I began this section, the last lines from *A Pagan Place*. Even though the narrator wishes that her mother, who could also be interpreted as an embodiment of Mother Ireland, said good-bye to her, the mother does not leave the house where she seems to be confined. Yet, in spite of that, the narrator leaves Ireland in search for her own name and the realization of her own identity, which, she thinks, she will acquire when she becomes a nun. But there is a piercing howl which, she says, will go on as long as her mother and her father and she herself live. That piercing howl might be Ireland, which always haunts both those remaining there and the exiles. Those who are forced to leave Ireland will always be in-betweeners, hybrid and liminal entities not belonging here or there, not at ease with being Irish, but neither wanting nor able to be anything else. I do not possess the space here to elaborate on this question, but I think further research on Irishness and exile, which has already been studied by scholars such as Dermot Bolger (1993) or Patrick Ward (2002), would be necessary.

Finally, I would like to finish this essay with some lines from *Mother Ireland's* ending, in which the narrator exposes the ambivalent relationship that she as an exile has with her native land. It is easy here to identify her voice with Edna O'Brien's, who had to leave because Ireland would have choked her if she had stayed there. Yet, at the same time, she felt the longing for an ancient utopian scenario in which the split consciousness of the colonized was not such, and the children of Ireland were one with their homeland, at peace with their Mother:

Irish? In truth I would not want to be anything else. It is a state of mind as well as an actual country. [...]
I live out of Ireland because something in me warns me that I might stop if I lived there, that I might cease to feel what it has meant to have such a heritage, might grow placid when in fact I want yet again and for indefinable reasons to trace that same route, that trenchant childhood route, in the hope of finding some clue that will,

or would, or could, make possible the leap that would restore one to one's original place and state of consciousness, to the radical innocence of the moment just before birth. (144)

Even though the restoration of an Irish "original place and state of consciousness" is impossible, I hope my Master's dissertation has, at least, served to illuminate the different aspects and circumstances which created the current dislocated sense of Irishness. Furthermore, I hope to have shown how and why a hybrid and liminal female identity was created in post-colonial Ireland, one that shares some characteristics with other postcolonial nations despite Ireland's postcolonial unique, and therefore, debated status.

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