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He Had Two Women to Die For, Ireland and the missus": Mothers as Abject and Sons as Scapegoats in Edna O'Brien's House of Splendid Isolation and In the Forest

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Seton Hall University

College of Arts and Sciences

**“He Had Two Women to Die For, Ireland and the missus”: Mothers as Abject and Sons as
Scapegoats in Edna O’Brien’s *House of Splendid Isolation* and *In the Forest***

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Master of Arts

In

The Department of English

Seton Hall University

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Seton Hall University
College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCE
Department of English

APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL M.A. THESIS

Emily Nix has successfully completed and made required modifications to the text of her thesis for submission for the Degree of Master of Arts in English Literature during this Spring Semester 2022:

THESIS COMMITTEE

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Dr. Martha Carpentier _____

_____ 5/16/22

Second Reader: Dr. Elizabeth Redwine _____

_____ 5/16/22

Abstract

This thesis examines the protagonists in Edna O'Brien's *In the Forest* and *House of Splendid Isolation* and applies Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Rene Girard's theory of the scapegoat. In doing so, I attempt to give a richer understanding of O'Brien's masculine and feminine characters and how their constructed identities are based on their cultural circumstances and positions in their societies. I use Kristeva's theory of abjection to analyze the single women in these novels, Eily and Josie, who become metaphorical single mothers by the invasions of young men into their homes. Then, I apply Girard's theory of the scapegoat to the young men, O'Kane and McGreevy, who eventually fulfill roles as sons. These theories give way to the fact that O'Brien's characters are extremely complex and multifaceted. Furthermore, the theory of abjection and of the scapegoat can give fuller understanding to the real-world problems in *In the Forest* and *House of Splendid Isolation* and provide a solution.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Edna O'Brien's works focused more on contemporary Irish politics and societal concerns, and their intersections with gender than in her popular first trilogy of novels, *The Country Girls*. Keeping specific Irish politics at the forefront of the novels, such as the Troubles from 1968 to 1998, O'Brien's second trilogy, and 2003 novel *In the Forest*, blend the mythic and reality with tragedy unfolding as a result. This trilogy reflects a new O'Brien era, in which feminist depictions of women's lives were enriched by a more contemporary view of women and men, as well as the psychological implications of trauma in one's past. Few critical approaches of the 1990s trilogy and *In the Forest* bring in outside theory to analyze the novels and instead focus on narrative structure, identity, and cultural criticism. In applying Kristeva's theory of abjection and Girard's theory of scapegoating, it is revealed that the single mothers in these stories, Josie and Eily, are abject characters from the outset of the novel and their deaths are a result of that abjection. Their son figures, McGreevy and O'Kane, are political, social, and mythical scapegoats, having experienced trauma that fuels their perpetuated violence.

To start, I will look at some of the critics who have reviewed the 1990s trilogy to contextualize the general opinions and critiques that circulated in the early 2000s. Critics such as Iris Lindhal-Raittila, William Hatheway, Danine Farquharson and Bernice Schrank, and Sophia Hillan King focused on identity and nationality in their critiques, while Michael Harris looked at the narrative structure and postcolonial and postmodernism interpretation. Others, such as Jennifer Slivka and Maureen O'Connor, which will be observed later, look at some more contemporary critics who look at *House of Splendid Isolation* and *In the Forest* specifically, and who apply a bit more theory and interpretations of mythology than their predecessors.

Starting with Iris Lindahl-Raittila, who gives a great introduction to O'Brien's earlier writings, helping contextualize her later ones, focuses on the latter of the two trilogies in her article "Negotiating Irishness: Edna O'Brien's 1990s Trilogy" (2006). In this article, she observes how O'Brien develops "questions of Irish identity" (75). As Lindahl-Raittila notes, O'Brien does not lay history to rest but instead focuses on how "history is everywhere, we cannot escape it, only try to change the future" (79). Because O'Brien refuses to deny history and its implications, she sees and portrays the urgency towards "a future knowledge," which Lindahl-Raittila understands to be "no set answers" for the unsolved political problems noted in *House of Splendid Isolation* (79). William Hatheway also reviews identity conversations in *House* while splicing in some postcolonial analysis, in his article "Breaking the Tie That Binds: Feminine and National Representation in Edna O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation*." Hatheway describes how, as opposed to the interpretations that the book is entrenched in mere symbolism, it instead represents "The true conflict ... a war as deeply-seated as the fight between the Irish and the British" (Hatheway 124). This critic focuses on analyzing Josie O'Meara, the novel's female protagonist, as O'Brien's represented critique of "women in Irish fiction and mythology," and the use of "language and symbolism of the past to disentangle the destructive ties" to the history that prevents an improved future (Hatheway 124). Hatheway agrees with Lindahl-Raittila's conclusion on *House*, suggesting O'Brien does not pose a possible solution towards a united future, writing "O'Brien's mission is not to give any specific proposal towards reaching such a future but rather to embark on the call to action ... She makes a good start with *House*" (Hatheway 124). Hatheway concludes that O'Brien's use of myth "combat[s] the destructive tendencies of the myths themselves," and gives new life to understanding female characters in Irish literature (133).

Sophia Hillan King observes the latter of O'Brien's two trilogies in her article "On the Side of Life: Edna O'Brien's Trilogy of Contemporary Ireland," and how they are more in touch with contemporary Irish politics and current events than *The Country Girls*. According to King, "O'Brien is utterly in touch, under the guise of near-magical realism, with the very issues that still lie at the heart of Irish life ... the sectarian violence, sexual repression, and what used to be called 'the land question'" (114). Like Hatheway, King follows Josie's story to track those themes that are central to Irish life, including her abusive marriage, the history of "the land, the house, and all that they remember" (146). King also mentions that Josie is "grieving for him [McGreevy] like a mother for an errant but much-loved child," indicating that their relationship imitates that of a mother/son (150). McGreevy stands for "gentleness itself" for Josie, and for O'Brien, he is "voicing the generally unspoken view that little was done to help the beleaguered and bewildered people of the North in 1969 by the Dublin government" (King 54-55). Whereas other critics suppose that the conclusion to *House* is a suggestion for a possibly peaceful future, King suggests it may "inform" *Down by the River*, the second novel in O'Brien's 1990s trilogy (150).

Differing from previous critics that mostly focused on identity and cultural criticism, Michael Harris views narrative, postmodernism, and postcolonial theory in *House* his article "Outside History: Edna O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation*" (2006). In this article, Harris cites Homi Bhabha's work *The Location of Culture*, where "postcolonial space" dissolves frontiers and boundaries, which in *House*, is through the "italicized insertions" of diary entries and fragmented style, resulting in a story that recalls other postcolonial and mythic narratives (111; qtd. in Harris 168). Instead, O'Brien's spliced narrative concerns itself with, as Laure Engel quotes, "versions of a collective history," which furthers Lindhal-Raittila's argument that

“Irishness” is without a singular definition but a variety of experiences (qtd. in Harris 341). Meeting in the middle of Lindahl-Raittila and Hatheway’s conclusions that *House* offers the opportunity to learn from history *without* a suggested solution, Harris argues that in *House of Splendid Isolation* “O’Brien thus not only diagnoses a seemingly insoluble political problem in contemporary Ireland but – through the chance of interaction of Josie and McGreevy – also illustrates how a possible solution could come about” (122).

Danine Farquharson and Bernice Schrank discuss gender, land, nationalism, narration, and the open-ended conclusion of *House* in their article “Intersecting Lives: *History, Gender, and Violence in Edna O’Brien’s House of Splendid Isolation*” (2006). The narration style, according to the authors, is O’Brien’s attempt at portraying the infrequencies and lack of peace in Irish history. Other than the time jumps in the novel, epistolary features “clarify as well as interrupt, subvert, and threaten to overthrow any anticipated linear sequence of the narrative” (Farquharson and Schrank 112). The discussion about the Big House explores how it was originally a sign of the “patriarchal order” in Ireland, representative of the greater colonial Big House, established by the English (Friel qtd. in Farquharson and Schrank 114). The Big House is related to Josie insofar as it is her “prison” and “an objective correlation for” her “deteriorating health” (Farquharson and Schrank 118-119). The authors also emphasize how McGreevy’s characterization at the beginning of the novel is “read differently depending on the reader,” and by the end of the novel, he “is humanized ... through the interactions with another human being” (Farquharson and Schrank 127, 129). Because the novel is flooded with unanswered stories, “such as the incomplete fairy tale Rory tells his daughter or the partial story about St. Caimin that Josie reads,” *House* “dispute[s] all claims to know everything: no story is complete and most especially not the story of Ireland” (Farquharson and Schrank 130). Farquharson and Schrank

conclude by mentioning the end of *House* and agree that the novel does not present a clear route to a better future and “that the possibility of a better future (for Ireland, for storytelling) requires a radical change in the way we read” (130).

Though these authors’ articles are helpful, they do not apply deep analysis or theory and therefore, the arguments are introductory when studying Edna O’Brien’s novels. They do not provide in-depth or enriching readings of the characters, their psychological and mythic associations, or the relationships between these characters except brief overviews of plotlines. On the other hand, Jennifer Slivka, Maureen O’Connor, and Antonella Trombatore give more insight into the direction of my argument, providing detailed information about O’Brien’s application of mythology, the sense of exile that Josie, McGreevy, Eily, and O’Kane experience, and the ambiguity of Irish identity.

Despite being laced throughout O’Brien’s novels, mythology is one of the least frequent critical approaches to her work, but one author who focuses on it is Maureen O’Connor. In the article “The Mythopoeic Ireland of Edna O’Brien’s Fiction” (2010), O’Connor explores how O’Brien’s upbringing might have affected how much she used myth and the different ways she utilizes it in her novels. O’Connor centers her argument on “the role of O’Brien’s rural, Catholic background and the related history of the Irish landscape,” and proposes that O’Brien “re-mythologize[s] Irish experience in her fiction” specifically “in a vision of the female body – and the natural world with which it was closely associated – as sacred; in other words, a social order in which women and the natural world were given political and spiritual significance” (O’Connor 214-215). This linking of women and nature recalls Irish myth that “respected ... and treasured” mythological creatures, nature, and women, “rather than denigrated their powers of reproduction and regeneration” (O’Connor 215). O’Connor explains, at the beginning of *Mother*

Ireland, Edna O'Brien's memoir, O'Brien describes countries as being attributed to either the mother or the father. Ireland is referred to as a "she" or a cow, and in the case of the latter, the Táin Bó Cúailnge myth is recalled, which is referenced in *House of Splendid Isolation* and *In the Forest*. O'Brien not only uses the Táin Bó Cúailnge myth in her novels but, according to O'Connor, includes other Irish myths that cause "her characters [to] undergo human-animal metamorphoses, emphasizing, as do the traditions she is drawing on, the vital links between the animal, the human, and the supernatural /spiritual worlds" (216). O'Connor details how McGreevy experienced "feminization" in the way he is linked to a cow when, "He thinks he's eating hay, chewing it like a cow," which he follows by helping a cow give birth (219; O'Brien 14). In helping the cow with a feminine activity, birth, there is a kind of "transgendering, or perhaps the transcendence of gender" for McGreevy (O'Connor 219). O'Connor observes how O'Kane's "human-animal metamorphoses" in *In the Forest* is correlated with his nicknames "Caoilte, son of the forest," "Kinderschreck," and "the fox" (O'Brien 4, 118, 185). Whereas McGreevy's associations with animals is through similes and metaphors, O'Kane "is, above all, an animal, and refers to himself that way, sometimes piteously, sometimes aggressively" (O'Connor 220). Despite referring to himself as an animal, their [animals'] position on the outskirts of society causes him to hate animals, and "He tortures and kills them as a boy for this reason" (O'Connor 221). O'Connor's focus on myth is beneficial when analyzing *House of Splendid Isolation* and *In the Forest*, both of which are flooded with mythology.

Jennifer Slivka presents a more psychological approach to O'Brien in her article "Irishness and Exile in Edna O'Brien's 'Wild Decembers' and 'In the Forest,'" (2013), continuing the critical conversation around O'Brien's fictional renderings of Irish struggles with identity, both personal and national. Slivka first acknowledges the women in *In the Forest* and

Wild Decembers and argues that the “local, rural communities” where Eily and Breege Brennan of *Wild Decembers* live “ostracize these Irish women;” for Eily, this is Cloosh Wood, and for Breege, this is Cloontha (116). Because Eily and Breege become mothers by pregnancies from men who are not Irish, they are not contributing to the “masculine Gael,” and the “hypermasculine Gael,” Joseph Brennan and Michen O’Kane “kills possible opportunities for new social relations promised by hybridization” (Slivka 116). Slivka then analyzes O’Kane and argues that in *In the Forest*, O’Kane hearing and seeing his mother throughout his life is a form of “the uncanny” and his mother is “the specter of unspoken critique of past wrongs” (126). O’Kane often speaks about how his mother would, in his hallucinations of her, justify his actions as being “a true son of the forest” (O’Brien 6). Because of the suffering he had experienced throughout his life, Slivka characterizes O’Kane as a “victim and victimizer” which aligns him with his role as a scapegoat. Slivka, on the other hand, also argues that O’Kane aligns more with Julia Kristeva’s description of the abject, and “the loss of his mother” is the main catalyst in his abjection and his role as a “foreigner,” who is “trapped between the rejection of a ‘worried mother’ and the ‘inaccessibility’ of the father” (Slivka 127). After losing his mother and being hated and rejected by his father, as well as ostracized by his sister and grandmother, Slivka argues that O’Kane’s marginalized status is equally maintained by the town’s labeling of him as “a wild man” (O’Brien qtd. in Slivka 127). Slivka also mentions how O’Brien does not completely demonize O’Kane, despite her adaptation of a real story of a sociopathic murderer, as it is evident in the novel that his declining mental health caused by his institutionalized maltreatment as a child is the main cause of his destructive behavior. Slivka concludes by reinforcing the idea that “O’Brien’s narratives undermine a single version of Irishness, implying that the very nature of Irishness seems to be its inherent adulteration,” which O’Kane and

Brennan's exile proves in *In the Forest* and *Wild Decembers*. Though, like critics in the early 2000s, Slivka agrees that O'Brien leaves the room "for future possibilities of amelioration and progress" (131). In her later article "A Big House Divided: Images of Irish Nationhood in Edna O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation*," (2018) Slivka shows how O'Brien's second trilogy and *In the Forest* "dismantle nationalist conceptions of Irish womanhood" (1). She begins by detailing how "the Big House" in *House* does not represent Josie's position as a woman, but instead "reflect[s] the borders between North and South, past and present," which is furthered by McGreevy's arrival interrupting Josie's time trapped in the house. Slivka also argues that the "Irish nation" is itself uncanny and attempts to "'demarcate' itself in the global community (2). The house represents what Slivka calls a "Thirdspace," where both Josie and McGreevy can retreat from the public to the private sphere until the Gardai subsequently kill Josie while tracking McGreevy to her house. Because the Gardai "invade and damage Josie's home" while McGreevy "is respectful and protective," Slivka states that "O'Brien subverts a major symbol of national authority" by switching the roles of the invader (8). Throughout the article, Slivka likens the house's position on the land to Josie's in her society, as both are marginalized and embody the uncanny; the dilapidated house in its function as the "Thirdspace," and Josie in her aging body and the way she interacts with the men in her life. McGreevy's presence also challenges the nationalist idealizations of womanhood, as O'Brien portrays "Josie more at ease as McGreevy's hostage than as a prisoner within her marriage" (Slivka 7). Whereas Josie is entrapped in her marriage and unable to do anything about it, McGreevy's occupation in *her* home grants her control of the situation as Josie understands that McGreevy will not kill her.

Antonella Trombatore takes a different yet vital approach in her article "Ex-centric Human and Natural Identities in Edna O'Brien's *In the Forest*" (2013), examining how the

characters in *In the Forest* are recentered after their descriptions marginalize them, leaving them the outskirts of society. As ex-centric characters, Michen O’Kane and Eily Ryan are re-centered in the novel and control the plot, rather than being completely banished to the outskirts of society. Trombatore writes about how O’Kane develops a mental illness after his mother’s death and is pushed to the outskirts of society when he returns to his hometown later in his life. When he finds Eily Ryan and her son Maddie living in a house on the margins of society. Trombatore argues that “they [Eily and Maddie] are a reminder of the lost relationship with his beloved mother; on the other, they are regarded as usurpers insofar as they live in his former house at the edge of the village” (223). This “traumatic combination” may be what eventually pushes O’Kane to murder the duo, but his actions are also fueled by “a society that, heavily traumatized by colonization and rapid change, is unable to cope with a new lifestyle” (223). The forest, which is also conceived as a character, is also found on the margins of society. O’Kane, Eily, and the forest all are pushed to the outskirts, fulfilling roles that Trombatore re-describes as “the forest, the murderer, and the female victim” (223). O’Kane’s nicknames that dehumanize him and make him comparable to animals, such as “beast” and “fox” push him further from human society and more towards the forest, which adopts and blends with him through the nickname “Caolite, the name of the forest” (O’Brien 4). Eily, the third victim of marginalization, is ex-centric for personal reasons and because of the mythological elements included in her character. Eily chooses to live on the outskirts of her society knowing that other citizens in Cloosh Wood will disapprove of her single motherhood and sexual liberty, as is discussed in the chapter “Fiesta.” O’Kane describes her with natural elements, which Trombatore interprets as “clearly inhuman nuances that push her far from centric human nature” (226). This posits her, from O’Kane’s point of view, as joining him in marginalization in the forest. If Eily can be “ocean, diety, water,

fire,” then she, too, would be removed from Cloosh Wood and reside in the forest with O’Kane (O’Brien qtd. in Trombatore 226). Trombatore concludes her argument by noting that “the three ex-centric identities [Eily, O’Kane, and the forest] are simultaneously rendered central by virtue of their very marginality,” which is O’Brien making greater use of “universal protagonists in Irish history” (Trombatore 233).

All of these critics present compelling, insightful arguments and have been instrumental in the development of more theoretical criticism of O’Brien’s later novels, beyond feminist or postcolonial approaches. By applying Kristeva’s theory of the abject to the mothers in these novels and Girard’s theory of the scapegoat to the sons, I hope to continue these critical efforts by presenting a new reading of Josie, McGreevy, Eily, and O’Kane; their histories, mythological associations, and gender reaffirm their abjected and scapegoated positions in Cloosh Wood (for Eily and O’Kane) and rural Ireland (for Josie and McGreevy).

In *House of Splendid Isolation*, McGreevy’s wife and child have been shot (195), and although he claims that his mother still loves him (104), it is the mother/son relationship that develops between him and Josie that nurtures him back into feeling something beyond violence and retribution. As an IRA member, McGreevy fulfills the role of the scapegoat particularly on a political level. The collective versus the individual narrative that his community uses against him (163), as well as McGreevy’s self-isolation and hatred for the Gardai, or police force (7), contribute to his role as the scapegoat because, as Girard explains in *Violence and the Sacred*, “All of our sacrificial victims ... are invariably distinguishable from the nonsacrificeable beings by one essential characteristic: between these victims and the community a crucial social link is missing, so they can be exposed to violence without fear of reprisal” (Girard 8). O’Kane, on the other hand, is a scapegoat on both a social and mythological level because of how he is

compared to an animal. According to Girard “All reduction into categories, whether implicit or explicit, must be avoided: all victims, animal or human, must be treated in the same fashion if we wish to apprehend the criteria by which victims are selected,” and if all victims are to be sacrificed without hesitation of their humanity (11-12). *In the Forest*, Eily becomes a comforting yet obsessive figure for O’Kane who has struggled his entire life to cope with his mother’s death. Dealing with abuse from the state, his mother’s death, and his family’s ostracization of him, O’Kane, like McGreevy, becomes the scapegoat in his community.

Eily and Josie are abject in their communities because of their single motherhood and physical marginalization (*House* 158, 29) (*Forest* 24, 25). As Kristeva explains “[s]he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations,” which is true for Eily in the chapter “Fiesta,” where she expresses her sexual liberty through a “pagan feast” (8) (O’Brien 103). Furthermore, Eily denies any father figures for Maddie, such as Otto and Declan, two handymen that express interest in her. Towards the middle of the novel, Eily’s single motherhood has been adjusted to include O’Kane as a son; she comforts him like a mother to avoid her death at his hands (126-127). Josie occupies her late husband’s country home that is not compared to any town nearby but is remote enough that McGreevy can invade and use it as shelter. Her isolation thus adds to her position as abject, given Kristeva’s argument that “Once upon blotted-out time, the abject must have been a magnetized pole of covetousness ... The clean and proper (in the sense of incorporated and incorporable) becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame” (8). The dilapidated home that Josie occupies asserts her abjection, but it is reaffirmed in her mother/son relationship with McGreevy, which is indicated in her love for him (O’Brien 158).

My paper will be structured in such a way that I observe the abject mothers and scapegoat sons: Josie and McGreevy, then Eily and O’Kane. At their core, these theories are wholly interrelated, and that observation will follow my explication of these mythic and psychoanalytical themes in these two novels.

First, to introduce the theoretical concepts I will be working with: Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection and Rene Girard’s theory of the scapegoat. Abjection, insofar as it is colloquially defined, can be understood as “cast off; rejected,” which is a sufficient definition for some introductory content (“abject”). However, Kristeva’s theory of abjection gives more detailed examples of what abjection portrays and is nuanced enough to analyze Eily and Josie’s pasts, gender, and single motherhood that make them abject. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva relies on examples to define the abject, as no one definition can cover the multitude of human experiences that embody abjection; this is reflected in the style of her essay, too. Separated into broader sections, each chapter is distinguished by smaller subsections, for example, “Neither Subject nor Object” in the chapter “Approaching Abjection.” The subsections allow Kristeva to explore specific circumstances that she perceives to be abject.

Kristeva’s most notable discussion of abjection is how bodily functions and excrements symbolize life. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes that

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which is irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death ... A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death ... These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death” (3).

Whereas blood may trigger mortality for some, “a wound with blood and pus,” and other functions that can be found in the human body (particularly, leaving the human body) alternatively alert Kristeva that life is present. Only in the face of the non-performing corpse, a dead body that can no longer function is the truest version of the abject found. To Kristeva, then, because the “I” is in control of excrement, that “I” which is living is more responsible and capable of life than the I is representative of death. After the human body is dead and no longer excretes, “It is no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled” (*Powers* 3-4). This dead body, at the end of its capability of production of materials, signifies the abject.

Kristeva furthers her introductory points in *Powers of Horror* by including how a lack of agency also has to do with abjection, specifically with abject women. The life of one who is abject is “not sustained by *desire*, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on exclusion” (6). The lack of agency and abjection is related to the Oedipal relationship, and the abject woman “takes the place of the other, to the extent of affording him *jouissance*” and, in turn, “transforms the abject into the site of the Other” (Kristeva 54). The abject woman’s position as the “Other” and is situated in “an abjection from which she is frequently absent” leaves her without agency in “her sexual life” that she “rarely...tie[s]... to that abjection” (Kristeva 54). Not only is the abject woman then lacking agency because of sexual relations, but as Kristeva explores, the abject lacks agency because “the abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I” (1). The abject is, as the subheading reads, “Neither Subject Nor Object,” and therefore cannot possess agency. (Kristeva 1). Because the abject figure lacks agency, an agency that is needed to create desire, they are “distinguishable from those understood as neurotic or psychotic articulated by *negation* and its modalities, *transgression*,

denial, repudiation” (6). The abject person, then, is not only removed but is conceptualized, and materialized, based on their *lack*, rather than *abundance*.

Girard’s theory of the scapegoat is instrumental, too, in analyzing O’Brien’s novels. After World War II, critics such as Hannah Arendt developed their theories based on the crimes committed against Jews during the Holocaust. Girard, too, based his theory on antisemitism and Christian violence towards Jews over centuries. In *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) and *The Scapegoat* (1982), Girard uses the violence perpetrated against Jews to describe “mimetic desire,” which introduces his greater theory of the scapegoat, but must begin with two parties *desiring* the same thing; desires only occur because humans want what other humans. In *House of Splendid Isolation* the “mimetic desire” is portrayed through IRA members and regular civilians, both from Northern Ireland and the Republic, wanting a united Ireland. In *In the Forest*, the “mimetic desire” is reflected in O’Kane’s Oedipal desire for Eily. In this theory, Girard starts by presenting the development of violence and how, once present, it cannot cease; violence can only change its trajectory. Because violence must find an outlet, “society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a ‘sacrificeable’ victim,” which can be oppressed (at least) and murdered (at most) without the rest of society questioning the violence. (*Violence* 4) Girard creates nuance in his argument and writes that it is pertinent for this “‘sacrificeable’” victim also to be a *part* of society, rather than someone completely foreign to it. As having a role within the society, even if on the margins, the victim “is a substitute for all members of the community ... The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence” (Girard 8). Other than the victim needing to be within the society where the violence exists to protect it (the society), the victim also must not be *too* marginalized. The difference between the victim and the perpetrator of violence cannot “grow too wide” or else “all similarity will be

destroyed” rendering the victim unable to attract “the violence impulses to itself” (Girard *Powers* 41). Therefore, the victim must be not completely removed from nor too different within the society. The development of the scapegoat relies on its presence, its similar desire to the main group, and if possible, as presented in *The Scapegoat*, having a difference (physical or mental) that also sets them apart (Girard *Scapegoat* 18).

Though the victims that Girard presents are just that, victims, he also details where the victim potentially holds responsibility. The persecutors of violence, according to Girard, must believe in “the stereotype of accusation, the guilt and the apparent responsibility of the victims” (*Scapegoat* 39). For example, Hitler, and consequently thousands of others, believed the Jews to be responsible for Germany’s loss in World War I, and thus targeted them in World War II. This skewed thinking, the understanding that the victim is at fault, starts with the reassurance felt by the community of soon-to-be victims. They, according to Girard, “must effectively be emptied of its poisons. It must feel liberated and reconciled within itself” (*Scapegoat* 42). Only then can the perpetrators successfully push the blame onto the victims, and fully convince themselves that the victims are, in fact, the perpetrators in the first place. Fully believing the victim is at fault, for the perpetrators, “There is only room for a single cause in their field of vision, and its triumph is absolute, it absorbs all other causality: it is the scapegoat ... There is only one person responsible for everything ... and he will be responsible for the cure because he is already responsible for the sickness” (Girard *Scapegoat* 43). The scapegoat, in this case, is fully believed to be the perpetrator, and as a result, the group whom people expect to end the violence.

It is with these two theories that we can see how the mothers (Josie and Eily) and the sons (McGreevy and O’Kane) function in their respective novels. Already being positioned on the margins of society, both literally and figuratively, the single mothers Josie and Eily fulfill

Kristeva's requirements for one who is abject. Because of their lack of agency, and the judgment received from their societies, both women are rendered abject. McGreevy and O'Kane, having suffered violence from the state level, as well as experiencing their communities going against them position them as scapegoats within Irish society. McGreevy, being an IRA member, and O'Kane, a mentally ill sociopath are viewed as perpetrators of violence *only*. Both suffer the marginalization from their communities, and their removal from society purifies their communities.

Josie's abjection and McGreevy as the scapegoat

House of Splendid Isolation begins with the voice of Josie's aborted child speaking about the land in Ireland, and how its history has seeped into the ground. The child expresses his or her desire for war to be over, wishing that "all the battles to have been fought and done with" (O'Brien *House* 3). Furthermore, the child details the natural scenery that is integral to Ireland, using a simile to describe the grass as "like a person breathing, a gentle breath, it hushes things" (O'Brien *House* 3). This lyrical narration is at the foreground of Irish myth, particularly that which is concerned with Ireland's natural landscape. As O'Connor notes, "archaic narratives" are "grounded in a vision of the female body – and the natural world with which it was closely associated – as sacred" (215). The child communicates that the earth "talks," and slowly transitions to using the female pronoun "she" (O'Brien *House* 4). This "she," can stand for Josie after she is killed at the end of the novel and has, recalling O'Connor's description of Ireland as the feminine "Mother Ireland," "Erin," or "Cathleen ni Houlihan," been absorbed by the Earth. The child expressed his or her belief, too, that "Maybe it is that the dead do not die but rather inhabit the place" (O'Brien *House* 4). In a narrative style that imitates *Ulysses*, the lack of quotation marks makes it difficult to determine whether the child is speaking or thinking;

however, the lack may, too, indicate this being a mythic experience, as there are no limitations to what the mythic can present. This association with the land begins to lay the foundation for understanding Josie as abject, as Kristeva argues that the abject asks “‘*Where* am I?’ instead of ‘*Who* am I?’” (Kristeva 8). Josie is not only compared to the earth by the child but in other instances throughout the novel, too. When thinking of her body, Josie “thought of those large dead fish which she had seen in a fish shop in Brooklyn, smothered in crushed ice, the mottled scales a-glitter” (O’Brien *House* 134). Josie’s place *in* the earth or as something that relies on nature to life, something that can be bestial as well as human, reaffirms her abjection. Kristeva argues “The abject confronts us, on one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animals*” which Josie can be seen doing, as per her existence in the earth, according to the child (12).

Her husband, James, also treats her like an animal. After hunting rabbits with his brother, James “decided to adorn her so two laid on her shoulders like tippets, the fresh blood warm and simmery” (O’Brien *House* 45). Josie is draped with the dead rabbits and James’s comment that “she need never send off to the furriers” evokes the image of Josie and the rabbits as inseparable (O’Brien *House* 45). Josie’s treatment as if she were an animal is, aligning still with Kristeva’s theory, one of the ways she is abject. Kristeva argues that

blood, indicating the impure, takes on the ‘animal’ seme ... inherits the propensity for murder of which man must cleanse himself. But blood, as a vital element, also refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation ... Impure animals become even more impure once they are dead ... contact with their carcasses must be avoided (Kristeva 96, 109).

Because James drapes the dead rabbits on Josie, he immediately associates her with the dead and the abject. This animal-like treatment of Josie continues throughout their marriage and renders Josie sexually abject, too.

In the chapter “The Past,” we learn about Josie’s marriage to James, a wealthy young man with a country home that she comes to occupy. Josie was hopeful at the beginning of her marriage, arriving joyously and excited about the prospect of wealth; “The house of the low-lying lake. Any girl would have given her eyeteeth to marry into it” (O’Brien *House* 29). Despite her excitement about her marriage, she was disgusted by the prospect of having sex with James. She tries to prepare herself for their first sexual experience together, thinking “He seemed at once so merry and so gallant ... My reserve, or is it my disgust, will pass, and when we go to bed tonight these doubts will have vanished” (O’Brien *House* 30). Josie is left disappointed not only in her first sexual encounter with James but for every time for the remainder of her marriage. James treats Josie like an animal when he rapes her, too. She recalls that “his knees cracked as his shins arched up and down in mimicry of riding his favourite filly, the legs going up and down as if it were the filly’s chestnut flanks that he nuzzled ... He has taken to holding her lips shut with one hand, clamping the way he might clamp an animal, and he has grown to like it” (O’Brien *House* 47). Though *Powers of Horror* does not detail where rape has a place in abject, Kristeva mentions “A rape of anality, a stifled aspiration towards an other as prohibited as it is desired – abject” (47). Recalling the abjected “I” that does not engage in acts and lacks the agency to engage, rape can be understood as something of the abject (Kristeva 3). Because Josie is not engaging in the sexual act done upon her, she becomes a representation of the corpse that signifies death and signifies abject. Kristeva explores a woman’s decision to go forth with sexual congress as a decision of personal choice for male gratification. The house on the lake, Josie and

James's home, is quite far from the rest of the society around them. Josie figurately and literally removes herself from society, in Kristeva's words, "to gratify ... the desire for the abject that insures the life (that is, the sexual life) of the man whose symbolic authority she accepts" (54). In trying to convince herself to not be disgusted with James, Josie is "gratifying" his sexuality; she is not thinking about her own sexuality further than acknowledging it is *not* present around James. This is further proven when, in "A Love Affair," it is revealed that Josie is in love with and has erotic fantasies of a priest, Father John. Josie's desire for Father John proves her sexuality as something within her, rather than her sexual encounters with James, which instead leaves her wanting sex to end.

After James rapes Josie, she becomes pregnant with a child that she does not want. James wanted a child, but only for the sake of having an heir. Josie, on the other hand, was not ready for a child and described the fetus as "just crying. It was not a normal child." The fetus was a product of rape, and Josie recalls that "he [James] calls her muddy, short for mother and mud, and says lewd things while he rises and rears within her ... 'You can't stop me now, missus' calling her all the names under the sun, including tinkers' names, and each time thinks, She will have a child, she will have issue, a son" (O'Brien *House* 51, 47). Once becoming pregnant, Josie acknowledges the baby as "not a baby proper," and thinks to herself that she must get an abortion; "There was no one she could tell. Her mother least of all. Her mother had always hated her ... This child and her mother were one, in league against her. No, she could not have it and she could not not have it" (O'Brien *House* 52). As Kristeva mentions, when a woman is unaware of her own abjection in sexual contexts, it is because she is "preoccupied ... with settling accounts (obviously anal) with her own mother," which is one circumstance for Josie when she learns she is pregnant. Though she disliked James early in their relationship, Josie "could not

return home to a mother who had driven her out because of jealousy” (O’Brien *house* 31). Even though she was unhappy, Josie was unable to leave her marriage. Josie’s abortion is both a site of abjection and of a possible reclamation of agency. In knowing that the abortion was a dangerous idea, medically and socially, Josie still goes through with it and, in turn, chooses to serve her own interests. Kristeva does not detail abortion insofar as it concerns the abject, however, the imagery of blood, excrement, and filth can substitute describing it. She describes childbirth in the context of Leviticus, the mother’s body starting by holding the child, and then becoming “the decaying body” (101). Though birth is natural, Kristeva argues that “Evocation of the maternal body and childbirth induces the image of birth as a violent act of expulsion through which the nascent body tears itself away from the matter of maternal insides,” suggesting that birth is more “violent” than it is normally perceived to be (101). The image of an abortion, removal of the fetus from inside a woman, can also adopt this description. Josie’s denial of childbirth leaves her in the same position as the “maternal body” that is ripped away from the born child. However, the abortion can also symbolize Josie’s agency over her body because she chooses to end her pregnancy rather than carrying the fetus a full nine-month term for James’ sake. This self-abjection is one of Josie’s earliest attempts at reclaiming agency for herself, and more specifically, in her sexual life.

Though Josie can reclaim some agency through the abortion, as well as through her sexuality and flirtation with Father John, Father John’s priesthood, a symbol of the greater patriarchal father in Ireland, hinders any action towards this agency. Furthermore, it also reinstates the nature imagery that also keeps Josie abject. Because Father John is a priest and cannot have an open relationship with Josie, she questions her love for him, thinking, “Why him? Why that man and not another?” (O’Brien *House* 133). Josie expresses her attraction to him

through flushed cheeks “and she kept wanting to kick her legs, to kick up high, to the oak beams, and show her underthighs in a pair of mauve silk stockings that had been part of her trousseau” (O’Brien *House* 137). Father John was in love with Josie, too, looking at her with “one of the softest, most meaningful lover looks that she had ever had” (O’Brien *House* 138). Father John’s love for her was evident to Josie too because “she saw by the terror in his expression that he was smitten with her and doing everything to stamp it out, but that each morning when he visited, it was reignited, like a gorse bush that has seemingly quenched but that needs only a puff of wind to be set ablaze again” (O’Brien *House* 141). The natural imagery of their passionate love continues when Josie is waiting for Father John to meet her, and she presumes they are going to have sex, thinking:

The first moments will tell everything, will tell for instance if they are mismatched; but why ask such a thing when she knows they are meant, like tubers under winter bedding, and how it was evident the moment when he described the thaw in the Swiss mountains, the water gushing in and out between rills and valleys, the flowers, the violet excrescences being born out of the seams of rock, like floats of jewellery, the faces soft, silken, the underneath parts swished and swaddled in damp (O’Brien *House* 144).

Here, Josie imagines her sexual encounter with Father John both fueled by and similar to the story he told about the Swiss mountains. Other than the obvious associations with nature that would leave Josie sexually abject, Father John’s denial of her also leaves her abject. When he does not show up, Josie remembers it as “Not rose memory now but ugly things, lumpen, brutish, that awful depletingness, like a big goose egg being skewered with a knitting needle, the juices leaking and dripping out of her and falling onto the toughened after-grass” (O’Brien *House* 145). Josie is not only abject because of Father John’s abandonment, but because of the imagery in her

description that likens the experience to an abortion. The descriptions of excrement and drainage from the body recall the violence in childbirth that Kristeva describes as abject. Josie places importance on the symbolic abortion that she experiences when Father John leaves her because she describes it; her actual abortion from her pregnancy with James is not detailed, and therefore, not as important to her. His abandonment of Josie aligns her with the abject.

In *House of Splendid Isolation*, McGreevy is a Northern Irish IRA member who is constantly on the run from the British military and Free State Garda. He is first characterized as being curled into the roots of a large tree: “curled up in the hollow of a tree once struck by lightning; cradle and coffin, foetus and corpse,” likening him to the proverbial baby in a cradle or coffin, and the tree symbolizing the coffin or cradle. (O’Brien *House* 7). The immediate juxtaposition between a fetus, and a corpse, shows that McGreevy is straddling life and death – emphasized further in his run from the soldiers. Furthermore, it begins to suggest that, if the perception of McGreevy’s death is a corpse, the alternative perception of him alive is as a fetus, which presupposes the question: who is the mother? Girard does not stray too far from Freud’s Oedipal complex to explain the desire for a mother, and Richard Golsan explains Girard’s understanding in *Rene Girard and Myth: An Introduction*, where he synthesizes Girard’s argument to be that the son’s desire for the mother is fully innocent, and it is the father who first reads this as competition (Golsan 23). Whereas “The mimetic process detaches desire from any predetermined object,” the maternal figure is the center point of the Oedipal desire (Girard *Violence* 190). Because the son is likely to either lose to the father or create familial violence in this unconscious fight, the son is occupying the role of the scapegoat. It is important to note that each father was once a son, which indicates that this is a cycle and one that does not show much room for escape. McGreevy, as a scapegoat, is fighting through an Oedipal rebellion against the

patriarchal state of Ireland. As their relationship develops, it becomes evident that Josie is fulfilling the role of a mother for McGreevy, and for Josie, McGreevy is a son.

The relationship between McGreevy and Josie does not directly emulate that of the Oedipal desire completely but is instead nuanced. McGreevy, different from the Oedipal complex, is not fighting against his birth father, but the patriarchal state of Ireland. The men that are representative of this greater state include his fellow IRA members who abandoned him, Ian and Roger, and the Guards who are chasing him. One of the guards, Rory, is established as a father in the first chapter where he shares with his child, Aoife, that he is trying to catch McGreevy. Roger says “I hope he comes this-a-way,” which is later confirmed when Aoife sees McGreevy by the river (O’Brien *House* 12, 108). Upon his arrival, McGreevy orders “Everything is to be as normal” and that it is in Josie’s best interest to avoid discussing his life (O’Brien *House* 66). However, their disconnect does not last too long, and Josie soon concludes “He has a mother or had a mother, he would not kill me” (O’Brien *House* 81). The image of McGreevy’s mother continues when Josie and McGreevy sit down to read cups and he tells Josie “he knew someone who did and who told his mother she would have seven sons, and she did” McGreevy says “I love my mother” qualified with “a real smile, there was no artifice in it” (O’Brien *House* 103). McGreevy’s connection to his mother is evident through his smile, which Josie recognized as unable to hide any secrets about him. He then goes on to wash the dishes, his “hands, pink from water and suds,” when McGreevy tells Josie that “he hated to upset his mother, to cause her suffering of any kind” (O’Brien *House* 104). As McGreevy grows closer to Josie, he reaffirms his position in the Oedipal complex and as a scapegoat.

McGreevy and Josie’s Oedipal relationship continues to develop and is most evident in the moments where Josie begins to symbolically adopt McGreevy. After learning about his

mother, as well as about some of his motivations for being an IRA member, Josie decides to share James's tacklebox with McGreevy in a tender moment. Admiring the lake behind the house, Josie

takes out a biscuit tin ... It contains her husband's fishing tackle, every single item neatly and scrupulously paced like a child's arrangement of chosen toys. She explains each thing: the feathered bait, which one for which, which hook, which line, and then holding up a mallet of iron she says, 'Guess what this is called,' and answers 'A priest.'

'A priest!' he says

'Yes, to hit the fish on the back of the pole and conk him out.' And together they laugh and wonder why it should be called a priest (O'Brien *House* 98-99).

The shared laugh, as well as the image of a child's organized toybox, continues to draw the mother/son, Oedipal connection between the two. At this point, the rebellion against the father, the patriarchal state, has been guarded by the home. This is interesting because the Big House, a symbol of English occupation in Ireland, "'stood for a patriarchal view of life'" (Corkery qtd. in Farquharson and Schrank 117). It is odd that the house, a patriarchal figure, would protect McGreevy. However, as Farquharson and Schrank later argue, "The reserves of feeling that her marriage and her extramarital affair depleted are replenished as she gradually discovers in her relationship with McGreevy the companionship ... of a friend" and "... surrogate child. McGreevy can, in fact, be understood as the catalyst that transforms Josie's captivity – within herself, her house, and Irish history – into a partial and fleeting liberation" (119). After McGreevy leaves a note for Josie in which he declares his "one wish ... that all the deaths have not been in vain," Josie finds his room "so devoid of his traces that it resembled those sickrooms

of her childhood, when after a death ... the rooms were scoured and disinfected with lime” (O’Brien *House* 122). McGreevy’s departure recalls to Josie the image of death, and because he is back on the run, a death that would be caused by the father, the Guards.

Josie’s maternal role toward McGreevy is expressed symbolically as well. Early in their relationship, Josie and McGreevy’s mother/son relationship is affirmed, in Josie’s eyes, to be safe. Before questioning him about his mother Josie thinks to herself that he has had a mother, and therefore would not hurt him (O’Brien *House* 81). Josie’s symbolic motherhood is portrayed further in the breastfeeding imagery that is portrayed upon McGreevy’s arrival. After giving her a collection of names of which she can refer to him, “She can feel her left breast against the cup of her brassier, not like flesh at all, oozy, fear dripping out of her nipple. She knows his face from somewhere, that face is notorious, she can almost put a name to it and a nickname” (O’Brien *House* 80). Although fear is the main feeling Josie experiences in this passage, the image of something seeping from her breast likens her to a breastfeeding mother. McGreevy, on the alternative side of the conversation, is thus the son. After he tries to run away, noticing that his room was “so devoid of his traces that it resembled those sickrooms of her childhood, when after a death ... the rooms were scoured and disinfected with lime” (O’Brien *House* 122). His imagined death would have been at the hands of the patriarchal father, the Guards, so Josie chases him until she falls unconscious. However, after speaking with Creena, a local girl who is an IRA sympathizer and who lets Josie know “He [McGreevy] brought you here ... carried you,” Josie thinks “The love that she had felt for him rose up in her the and flowed through, a river wild and rapid and overwhelming, red, green, and iron-brown water swishing the lining of her body, the body that had not been allowed to nestle with him and open to him,” the latter half specifically evoking vaginal and birthing imagery (O’Brien *House* 125, 158). Josie admits that

she was denied the opportunity to “open to him,” or in other words, birth him, as well as “been allowed to nestle with him,” which would not have been an approachable or appropriate action given their recent meeting. This is not the only instance that Josie wishes she could affect him, though. Right before he tries to run away, Josie “thought that by being here ... that by us talking ... something would happen ... A sea change. I’d save you ... You’d see the light; you’d quit” (O’Brien *House* 119). Josie was unsuccessful in changing McGreevy’s mind to participate in the war, though this did not stop her love for him. At the end of the novel, she insists “They must not kill him ... She will see him to his deliverance” (O’Brien *House* 220). The imagery associated with the word “deliverance” suggests a re-delivery, a rebirth of McGreevy, that is within Josie’s control. The text suggests suggesting that McGreevy takes on the role of the child that Josie had previously aborted, and now allows him to have a mother.

As a member of the IRA, McGreevy would have been hated by many in Northern Ireland, and most in the Republic. Because of the harm that was caused by the IRA, therein became a “society versus the individual” mentality, not only between the English and the IRA but many of the Irish, too. Through McGreevy’s character, O’Brien attempted to “write about an IRA soldier, not from perceived opinion of him, but to explore his thinking, rationale, conflict, ruthlessness vs idealism, etc. The character of McGreevy is more rounded, complex, and probably truthful than any of my former male characters” (O’Brien qtd. in King 55). As Girard explores, it is only the perpetrator of violence that fully believes the victim is, instead, the one perpetuating the violence; McGreevy as a scapegoat then is quite nuanced. Because McGreevy is on the receiving end of and perpetuates national violence, it is incorrect to claim that he is fully a scapegoat; however, keeping in mind the rationale behind IRA members, that being “to get the British out of Ireland ... Justice for all. Peace. Personal identity. Racial identity,” McGreevy is

on the perpetuating end of *reactionary* violence, not violence for the sake of violence (O'Brien *House* 83). As someone within the society seeking the mimetic desire between the North and the Republic of Ireland as a free state, while simultaneously being "different" enough that the majority can blame him (or, the IRA as a whole) for the problems within, McGreevy becomes the scapegoat. Furthermore, his persecution by the community establishes him as the scapegoat. McGreevy is fighting for the minority, and the one character that explicitly supports his efforts is Creena. First introduced as a savior-like character to Josie, Creena aids McGreevy in hiding, telling Guards that the path they ask about leads "nowhere," which they interpret as "somewhere" (O'Brien *House* 184). The isolation and persecution that McGreevy experienced by the state portrayed him as the political scapegoat.

Though McGreevy is more of a political scapegoat, he also embodies the mythical scapegoat apart from his relationship with Josie as the mother and his role in the IRA. This is mostly through the dehumanization and consequent identification with animals by others. In the chapter, "The Present," McGreevy is likened to a cow. He describes the grass as "smell[ing] good to him, and laying on hay, when soon he hears "a cow – moaning for all she's worth" (O'Brien *House* 7, 15). After finding her, McGreevy realizes that she is trying to give birth to a calf, but is struggling greatly; "The hooves of the calf come prodding out, then recede, then more moans as he grips her and tells her to push, in God's name to push" (O'Brien *House* 15). In helping the cow give birth, McGreevy is humanized because, rather than ensuing violence that is expected from him, he is aiding in new life. As Lindahl-Raittila notes, "The fact that O'Brien deliberately depicts a Northern Irish terrorist as an intelligent, well-behaved, and kind, even gentle man, was experienced as very disturbing by some critics on the book's publication" (79). McGreevy's portrayal as helpful and thoughtful is a rewrite of the otherwise assumed violent

nature of IRA members. Significantly, he is helping a cow give birth because cattle have been recognized as sacrificial figures for centuries. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard references the Nuers, who use cattle as forms of currency and a “symbiosis” that exists between the groups, “the closeness that characteristically prevails between pastoral peoples and their flocks” (3). Cows, also, are traditionally seen as scapegoats and used for ritualistic purposes. According to Girard, the Nuer people used cattle for “all fines and interest payments” creating a type of “symbiosis’ ... between this tribe and their cattle” (Girard *Violence* 2). He is also likened to a cow through the Cúchulainn myth. In the myth “the Mórrígan fools Cúchulainn into healing her of the wounds he has inflicted on her ... Cúchulainn blesses her three times – each time she gives him a drink of milk – and thereby cures her of the three wounds she sustained when in three different animal forms” (O’Connor 216). After Roger, the guard, mentions that he wants McGreevy to come his way, telling his wife it is about “self-preservation,” his son Caimin says “Cúchulainn did that, Daddy ... He ran the length of Ireland, kicking a ball” (O’Brien *House* 12-13). Though McGreevy is not fooled, he does attempt to cure the ailments of his community, and in his relationship with Josie. For example, when he decides to leave Josie after she catches pneumonia; despite wanting to stay with her, as is indicated by his “catch in his voice,” he believes it to be a better choice (O’Brien *House* 196). This myth extends past Caimin’s association of the two and encapsulates McGreevy’s experience sleeping in the barn and helping the cow deliver, too. In this way, McGreevy connects with the cow; both are scapegoats, however, they still help one another. In helping the cow give birth, McGreevy’s association with violence is lessened, and the cow can live whereas she otherwise would have died during the birth.

McGreevy, as we will see with O’Kane, is also likened to a fox. The fox, symbolizing a cunning and quick person, is portrayed for a short time at the beginning of the novel. The Guards who are looking for McGreevy find a wig that they assume he must have stolen for a disguise. The guard who found it says “I thought it was a fox,” to which the other replies, “A human fox,” the latter assuming that the wig was found when it was on top of someone’s head (O’Brien *House* 75). Likening McGreevy to the fox suggests that McGreevy, too, is quick and cunning. As we learn from the rest of the novel, McGreevy is quite sensitive and likable, which shows that the Guards are projecting a different image of him than reality. Much like Girard’s understanding that the victim has “an apparent responsibility” the Guards *fully* believe that McGreevy, as a member of the IRA, is at fault for the problems in their society. In dehumanizing McGreevy and calling him a fox (as well as the comparison between him and a cow), the sacrifice becomes an animal. Girard differentiates the animal and human sacrifice, writing, “The division is based in effect on a value judgement, on the preconception that one category of victim – the human being – is quite unsuitable for sacrificial purposes, while another category – the animal – is eminently sacrificable” (Girard *Violence* 11). This distinction between human and animal alongside the assumption of McGreevy as an animal result in his “sacrificable” nature. The separation is furthered in the text, too, as one of the guards “crushes and recruses it [the wig] as if it is an animal that he must restrain” (O’Brien *House* 74). If the guard is in charge of “restraining the animal,” by association, McGreevy is the animal. As a sacrificial animal, McGreevy’s place as the scapegoat is reinforced and deeply entrenched in this society.

Eily’s abjection and O’Kane as the scapegoat

Eily Ryan, the female protagonist in *In the Forest*, is also abject in her society. Early in the novel, it is revealed that Eily is an unmarried woman and that she prefers it that way. The

chapter that shares her name begins with “I would come here for the mornings alone,” showing that she preferred time to herself (O’Brien *Forest* 24). She continues to describe the Apple Tree House where she and her son Maddie had recently moved in to. A dilapidated, abandoned house that “smells mouldy, a reek of lime and damp mortar” but Eily adored, the Apple Tree House was “old ... Empty for years... rotting” (O’Brien *Forest* 25, 32). Eily is self-abjecting and, according to Kristeva, “a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), *situates* (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing” (8). In placing herself far from the population in Cloosh Wood, Eily is self-abjecting. She remains in control of her agency by controlling this abjection. Eily also self-objects in her relationships. Sven, a young man that she is in love with, requests that they “go to a new place ... drive farther and farther west until we find maybe an island with a few cows” to which Eily responds, “I’ve put down roots here and I’ve put them down alone” (O’Brien *Forest* 55). Though abjection creates a sense of loneliness, Eily is in charge of herself, which can give a new understanding of abjection. Instead of Eily feeling isolated, she feels in control of her destiny before O’Kane’s intrusion.

Like her living situation and romantic love life, Eily maintains exercises her sexual life, though she does not necessarily have control over it since it does aid in her abjection. Her female expression of sexuality is inherently part of her abjection. Other than denying Sven, Eily maintains this independence when Otto, a man that works on the Apple Tree House, expresses sexual interest in Eily, to which she replies “There wasn’t the right chemistry” (O’Brien *Forest* 48). Kristeva’s ideas about birthing imagery being abject are recalled in Eily’s adoration of bellies: “Eily loves bellies. Eily paints women with bellies. Bellies bellies bellies” (O’Brien *Forest* 96). The bellies alone recall the site of abjection for women, the site of childbirth, but Kristeva also suggests “the terms, impurity and defilement ... are now attributed to the mother

and to women in general. Dietary abomination has thus a parallel – unless it be a foundation – in the abomination provoked by the fertilizable or the fertile feminine body (menses, childbirth) (100). The woman’s ‘belly’ renders her abject because of its association with defilement. She is also a sexual free spirit, and in the chapter “Fiesta,” which portrays a “pagan feast,” [also centering the belly] in which Eily, the “Queen” of the feast, and the men run towards a lake to swim half naked: “‘Chase me, chase me,’ she taunted them, and suddenly she was running, running out of her clothes towards the water, the men chasing her and lifting her up, her half-naked body blanched under the moonlight, a laughing queen being escorted on her litter” (O’Brien *Forest* 107). Trombatore observes this chapter in her article, and posits Eily as the queen, thereby evoking the image of Queen Euvul who “may be read as an allegory of the oppressed, personified Ireland waiting for somebody to rescue her,” though the language in the chapter suggests otherwise (Trombatore 228). O’Kane follows Eily into the lake where she “scream[s], half terror, half delight” (O’Brien *Forest* 108). No longer laughing, Eily and the “six men” are “gliding together down there, through the orgies of the deep,” which O’Kane watches from the edges of the lake (O’Brien *Forest* 108). The end of the laughter, as well as the deliberate choice of the word “orgies” suggests that O’Kane is now watching Eily have sex with these men. Eily’s participation in a public orgy proves that she is sexually liberated due to her disregard for public perception of herself.

Despite her sexual liberation, which Eily and the other men and women at the pagan feast – Winnie, Cindy, May, Agatha, Peg, and Harry – embrace, the rest of Cloosh Wood renders her abject because of her sexuality (O’Brien *Forest* 103-104). Because of the tight restrictions surrounding sexuality and womanhood that were (and still are) placed on Catholic women, Eily’s actions made her stand out negatively. As a woman, Eily would have been expected to stay at

home and take care of traditionally and stereotypically female activities: cooking, cleaning, childcare, and childbearing. Her sexual liberation, home on the outskirts of society, and lack of a husband were some reasons why she was not searched for as soon as she went missing.

Cassandra, Eily's sister, reports Eily as missing, but the police officer refuses to look for her, as a missing person cannot be recorded within the first seven days of them missing. He recognizes Eily, and says to Cassandra, "Oh yeah ... I stopped her for speeding a few times ... Arty, isn't she?" Cassandra, offended, asks "What's wrong with arty?" to which the officer replies "Next think you'll be asking me to give her Housewife of the Year award" (O'Brien *Forest* 144).

Because Eily does not conform to the expectations of her as a woman or a mother in rural Ireland the officer refuses to search for her. This leads the women of Cloosh Wood to lead the search parties for Eily, Maddie, and the priest, and eventually beg the officers to aid them.

Like Josie, Eily is also likened to natural imagery which is instrumental in her role as the abject. In the chapter "Druidess," Declan, a roofer, asks Eily "what made you settle here?" which she answers with "'Back to nature,' ... with a hoot of laughter" (O'Brien *Forest* 32). Eily recognizes this sense of "returning" to nature, indicating on a realistic level that she had once been surrounded by nature, and on a symbolic level, that she needed to be surrounded by it again. Declan replies "'Mystical ... gorgeous,'" and reaffirms Eily's position as a mythical abject character. Trombatore explores how the forest as a character is "ex-centric." The forest, "an empty place ... represents the difficulties, and the mutability of post-modern Ireland" (Trombatore 232). Furthermore, the forest is "the *omphalos* of a collective trauma and sacrifice" because it is Maddie and Eily's resting site (Trombatore 233). The forest's "ex-centricity" is reaffirmed in its geographical location and its housing of death. Because Eily dies within the mythic figure, she is consequently adopted by it: "She was in a furrow face down, and the pine

needles, rust colour” (O’Brien *Forest* 226). When driving away from Cloosh Wood and towards the forest, O’Kane refers to Eily as “goat girl,” twice, and later says “We really didn’t know, did we, how good it could be ... them times rolling around up here in the leaves and the muck ... knackered ... stuffing the food into my mouth like a mother ... like a mother. I must admit I don’t often fall in love, but you got under my skin ... animal magnetism” (O’Brien *Forest* 116, 119, 124-125). Eily’s association with animals and nature is indicative of “sex and murder” as Kristeva suggests was the reason “primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism” (12-13). These animals are abject because the majority group (the “primitive society”) felt that was the best way to keep themselves safe. Eily, as an already abject woman, is taken away from others and consequently embodies that which is unsafe because she is with O’Kane.

A combination of her sexual abjection and her abjection because of her associations with nature is expressed when O’Kane rapes Eily after her attempted escape. O’Kane, in a fit of rage “tears at her clothing in an ecstasy of hate, as though tearing limb from limb all womankind” (O’Brien *Forest* 136). The imagery of a person being ripped apart recalls that of abjection because the corpse is more present, at that point than the human being. This imagery continues through the end of the chapter when Maddie is described as screaming and “clinging to her, their desperate cries as one, going up to the trees and down to the wisps of dew that have outlived the morning, rising and expiring, dying and perpetuated in that catacomb of green, up there at the edge of the world, on the point of sacrifice” (O’Brien *Forest* 136). Maddie’s and Eily’s screams become one with the nature around them which reinforces Trombatore’s idea that the forest is, too, ex-centric. The rape happening on the forest floor is an invasion of not only Eily’s body but

of her greater mythic associations, too. In raping her, O’Kane furthers Eily’s abjection, ensures the forest’s position as marginalized, and upholds the Oedipal relationship.

Though Kristeva details how women are inherently abject, as well as the historical implications that have resulted in women being traditionally considered lesser than men, the same cannot be said about men as the scapegoat. Scapegoating, Girard details, “is to quell the violence within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting” (*Violence* 14). Whether the sacrificial subject need be pure, impure, sacred, or ritualistic, his or her gender has nothing to do with the sacrifice. Men, women, children, and animals are all sacrificed equally, and for whatever reason(s) the perpetrators choose. Anybody can embody the “sacrificed victim,” and become the thing that violence needs to act on. In the cases of *House of Splendid Isolation* and *In the Forest*, it is the male protagonists that become the scapegoats. McGreevy, of *House of Splendid Isolation*, and O’Kane of *In the Forest* both seek out the female protagonists as mother figures, indicating that they are missing their own mothers from their lives. Their alienation from their mothers, as well as childhood abuse and trauma, state reactions to their actions, and eventual capture, can allow us to read these characters as scapegoats.

In the Forest’s main male protagonist is O’Kane, a Cloosh Wood-born criminal that terrorizes the town and the countryside. Unlike McGreevy, readers are given insight into O’Kane’s upbringing, which is where most of his scapegoating reside. Many critics argue that O’Kane’s main reason for the harm that he caused is the mental illness that he clearly portrays. Though he certainly has a mental illness and ultimately becomes sociopathic through continued abuse, it is not his sole motivator. As a child, O’Kane lost his mother at a very early age; before his mother’s death, O’Kane was sent to an institution called “The Castle,” where he told one of the priests, “A child and his mother are one” (O’Brien *Forest* 11). Even before his mother had

died, O’Kane expressed his strong love for her. At The Castle, O’Kane was meant to be treated for his bad behavior but was abused greatly instead. Different priests molested him during his time at The Castle. The sexual abuse that O’Kane experienced not only reinforced that what he was doing was bad. Father Damien, in particular, “clung to him until he was finished. Then he said ‘Good child, good child,’ and warned him not to tell” (O’Brien *Forest* 13). In not being allowed to tell anyone what happened, O’Kane knew that it was poor behavior. This reinforced the Oedipal desire between O’Kane and, not just his father, but those Fathers that were in the Castle. Though they did not directly seek his mother, they were the ones in charge of keeping him, as O’Kane would have understood it, away from his mother. The “mimetic desire” is for the mother to be saved. At his age, he can merely understand that The Castle keeps him removed from his mother.

O’Kane’s father played a more traditional role in the Oedipal complex, which is that he “didn’t want him [O’Kane] back,” and sought to make sure O’Kane stayed institutionalized (O’Brien *Forest* 19). Though the novel does not detail whether the father wanted O’Kane away to have access to the mother, O’Kane interprets it as so until his adulthood. Even after his mother died, O’Kane struggled to see any good in his father, and his father refused him further. Starting at his father at work, O’Kane thinks “*I’m nearer than he thinks ... I’m within striking distance of him,*” and when Father Malachi suggests that “You should go on down home and make peace with your father,” O’Kane replies “I’m not wanted there ... Nowhere” (O’Brien *Forest* 38, 40). Because his father did not treat O’Kane well, did not help him with the problems he experienced as a child, and did not welcome him home after the abuse he suffered in The Castle, O’Kane still seeks to “beat” the father. This is public knowledge, too, as Corbett and Cooney, two men searching for O’Kane, say that O’Kane has returned to Cloosh Wood “To hurt the father ... there

is nothing more and nothing less” (O’Brien *Forest* 91). His father, on the other hand, is working for himself and trying to avoid getting hurt by O’Kane. Though O’Kane is an instigator, he is completely on his own as an adult, which is merely an extension of the loneliness experienced as a child. Throughout the novel, he has a couple of interactions with his sister, but none that can help him deal with the loss of his mother – only his interactions with Eily Ryan begin to remedy that relationship. This isolation, the beginnings of the society versus individual mentality, perpetuate O’Kane’s role as the scapegoat.

Eily’s association as O’Kane’s mother becomes evident after he abducts her from Cloosh Wood. In the woods, O’Kane begins to complain about the voices he is hearing, and Eily attempts to soothe O’Kane (and protect herself and Maddie in the process), saying “You’re all right ... you’re all right ... they’re just voices ... they’re just in your head” (O’Brien *Forest* 127). Furthermore, Eily reveals to O’Kane that she “worked with disabled children up in Dublin” and that she thinks of herself as “a mother first and foremost” (O’Brien *Forest* 126). This identification with the mother aids O’Kane in *his* identification of his perceived “new” mother. After O’Kane mentioned the force he feels between himself and Eily, he recenters the Oedipal relationship, which Eily affirms when she tells him “I do, because I’m the boss ... I’m the mother” (O’Brien *Forest* 125). His role as the Oedipal son and father is finally reaffirmed when he rapes her upon her attempted escape, as he feels the need to keep her secluded and keep himself satisfied (O’Brien *Forest* 136).

In the Forest, though based on a true story, emulates a mythic story. Written in different points of view, in a vignette style that changes the protagonist of the story, as well as splicing present time and past without any indication, the story mimics mythological tales. Like McGreevy, O’Kane is likened to a fox, except that his identification with the creature is a lot

more deliberate. Firstly, O’Kane claims that he has a “pet fox” that he did not have a chance to say goodbye to before he was taken to The Castle (O’Brien *Forest* 11). He shares this information with Eily and Maddie after capturing them, to which Maddie comments “He hasn’t a pet fox” (O’Brien *Forest* 132). Instead, it is that O’Kane sees himself as the fox; he “didn’t get to say goodbye” to the life he knew, or his mother, before being sent to The Castle and being abruptly taken away. O’Kane as the fox is reaffirmed in the chapter called “Capture,” which starts with O’Kane yelling to himself “‘The fox is invisible ... *The fox is flying it*’” as he knew guards were searching for him (O’Brien *Forest* 185). This nickname is adopted by the guards, particularly Superintendent McBride, which he uses when he relinquishes in finding O’Kane; “The ‘Fox’ has arrived” (O’Brien *Forest* 198). Solon, a member of the investigative team, who is given little to no lines in the novel, only describes O’Kane as “A fucking animal” (O’Brien *Forest* 221). The bestialization of O’Kane, much like McGreevy, starts to misconstrue the type of scapegoat that he is. O’Kane being a victim, a sacrifice, a scapegoat, is made easier when he is an animal. Dehumanizing O’Kane also occurs when he is given the name “Kinderschreck,” which translates to “child monster.” This term infantilizes O’Kane and dehumanizes him because, as with any method of dehumanization, the first step is removing the association between a person and their name, and deeming them something inhuman. Because of his pursuit of Eily, the “child” in child monster does not refer to who he is seeking; rather, it refers to who he is. O’Kane, emotionally stunted because of his mother’s early death, is a child himself. The “monster” in child monster allows the state to view him as inhuman. If he is an inhuman sacrifice, it makes the killing easier and, according to Girard, “men can dispose of their violence more efficiently if they regard the process not as something emanating from within themselves”

but rather, as responsibility for whatever collective is insisting the violence ends (Girard *Violence* 14). Dehumanizing O’Kane reinforces his role as a scapegoat for the state.

After evaluating these characters’ actions and dialogue, we can see how their roles in society may change from simply “man” or “criminal,” to scapegoat”; and “woman” or “loner” to “abject.” Another point I’d like to present is the possibility of these symbolic roles switching: Eily and Josie as scapegoats, and O’Kane and McGreevy as abject. Because of the connections between these characters, as well as the connections between the theories, it makes sense that the portrayal of the characters as either abject or a scapegoat can be interchangeable.

Josie and Eily, who are primarily settled in an abject state because of their womanhood, can also find themselves as scapegoats for the same reason. Girard explains menstrual blood’s place in the scapegoating process and reminds us that history suggests that “Menstrual blood is regarded as impure; menstruating women are segregated from the community” (Girard *Violence* 34). However, the reason why menstruation is still regarded as “impure” is because

Spilt blood of any origin, unless it has been associated with a sacrificial act, is considered impure ... to understand the impurity of menstrual blood we must trace its relationship to blood spilt by violence, as well as to sexuality. The fact that the sexual organs of women periodically emit a flow of blood has always made a great impression on men; it seems to confirm an affinity between sexuality and those diverse forms of violence that invariably lead to bloodshed” (Girard 36).

If menstrual blood is likened to violence, and Josie and Eily are women who have experienced menstruation, that means both women are, too, viewed as forms of violence. While spying on Eily, O’Kane describes her menstruating in the bath: “The next night, she was standing up in the

aluminum bath, blood running down her thighs, blood the bright red of fuchsia, blood like he had seen on his mother once and cried thinking she was going to die” (O’Brien *Forest* 73-74).

Menstruation and its association with violence make Josie and Eily’s scapegoats because, as we have seen, the perpetrator of violence fully believes that the *victim* causes the violence; furthermore, to seek out a person on the margins of society but is not too disconnected from it, those victimizing the scapegoat can turn others against the victim. This is the case with the men, the perpetrators of violence, and the women, the victim, in *In the Forest* and *House of Splendid Isolation*.

Both women are scapegoated to the greatest extent in their deaths, too. Eily is O’Kane’s scapegoat when he murders her. Despite having been searching for the mother and finding it in Eily, O’Kane chooses to kill Eily and leaves her in the forest. O’Kane’s mother is personified through the forest (as he is her son), and Eily’s death in the forest would mythically speaking, leave her soul there forever. Being that O’Kane is “a true son of the forest,” I interpret Eily’s death in the forest as both “a meeting of the mothers” and O’Kane’s attempt to gain control over Eily. O’Kane thus introduces Eily to his mother in the afterlife, and he, having killed Eily, can control that meeting. Eily, then, is the scapegoat for O’Kane’s violence and his need for control when the world is against him. Josie, on the other hand, is scapegoated on purpose. Opposing Hatheway’s point of view that McGreevy “inadvertently brings Josie to her death,” I read Josie’s chopping off her hair as a knowledge that she will die for McGreevy, inevitably (132). At the end of the novel, Josie cuts her hair when she learns that the Guards are posted outside of her house: “Were she to ask herself why she is doing this she would know. At first, she does not ask herself, then does. Something he said. How when the fight was over and the country one, he would like children, wains ... “That’s why I’m cutting my hair,’ she says to the dying light

insider her ... Defiance. Chastisement. Or was it a farewell?" (O'Brien *House* 210). As Hatheway mentions, the life that Josie sees for McGreevy, why he is worth saving, "carries Josie's mythological overtones even further" (132). After breaking into her home, the Guards mistake Josie for McGreevy and she is shot and killed. Josie is not scapegoated because of McGreevy's violence, but because of the state's violence meant for McGreevy. By cutting her hair, she offers to become the scapegoat for him. Even as the scapegoat, though, she becomes a representation of the harm that is caused by the war on both sides and the potential for an innocent life to be taken suddenly.

Like the two female protagonists, McGreevy and O'Kane can also have a role reversal, and both be considered abject. O'Kane is the more obvious example of these two, as, from a very young age, he was getting into trouble and was not trusted by the adults around him. At the outset of the novel, O'Kane recalls being blamed for bicycling through a neighbor's newly laid concrete, to which he complains "It was not him that cycled over it, it was Joe Mangan's own son Paud, but they blamed him. No matter what was done wrong, they blamed him, and there was no one to stand up for him, because his mother was dead" (O'Brien *Forest* 4). Because of his constant scapegoating, O'Kane was then sent to The Castle, a remote detention school, where he was physically abject from Cloosh Wood. Being forced into the school ensured that O'Kane was on the margins of society, and after an attempted escape, Sergeant Wiley said he would "hunt you down like a dog," thus dehumanizing O'Kane and positioning him further from the rest of human society (O'Brien *Forest* 8). Slivka notes that his description as "'a local ... a wild man' ... O'Brien underscores that O'Kane is a homegrown produce of Ireland itself – the horror within" (127). Kristeva uses this exact wording for the subheading, "The Horror Within, where she discusses the body as a "fragile container" for "urine, blood, sperm, excrement" (53). This

“container ... gave way before the dejection of its contents” for O’Kane when “his piss against the green lichen of the tree rises in a prolonged and steaming arc, and he breathes deep ... allowing not even a chink of a thought, saying Time to move on” (Kristeva 53; O’Brien 137). Though the action of urinating would not portray the abject person, it is the “dejection” of contents that would align O’Kane with the abject, as he does not take the time to acknowledge his bodily function.

Other than his abjection as a child that was caused by the adults in his life, O’Kane also self-objects and takes all of his victims to a remote location that he has felt connected to since he was a child. Forcing Eily and Maddie to drive on a dirt road out of Cloosh Wood, O’Kane eventually reveals their location as “God’s country,” which is described as “woodland, a sombre-green gloom stretching as far as the eye can see, the village, the showery apple orchards of home far behind them, an emptiness that is ghastly” (O’Brien *Forest* 114). The forest that O’Kane sees himself as a son of, as well as the resting places of Eily, Maddie, and Father John is “sombre,” as per the narrator’s description, as well as far away from Cloosh Wood. Whereas O’Kane’s early life was a combination of abjection by others and abjection of self, to seek his mother in the forest adds an experience of self-abjection, which pushes away others while isolating himself. In this case, the self-abjection is so O’Kane can carry out killing Eily and Maddie.

McGreevy, as he is representative of the political scapegoat, also becomes representative of the political abject. Starting on a more personal level, it is revealed early in the novel that he is alone in the world much like Josie. He recalls experiencing “A child’s coffin, a wife’s coffin, he’s seen one but not the other. He’s seen the child’s” and follows this experience by meeting a mother and child; a calf and her newborn that he helped deliver (O’Brien *House* 14). McGreevy’s abjection begins with the fact that, even if he was not captured by the guards, he

would not have anyone to return home to. Politically speaking, his role as an IRA member would have too caused him to be abject. Kristeva details that

One must keep open the wound where he or she who enters into the analytic adventure is located – a wound that the professional establishment, along with the cynicism of the times and of institutions, will soon manage to close up ... For the unstabilized subject who comes out of that ... any signifying or human phenomenon, insofar as it *is*, appears in its being as abjection (27).

By surviving the Troubles itself as well as the social and political tensions caused by them, McGreevy would have no choice except to be abject. As the “unstabilized subject” that endures these tensions, he is marginalized by the state, too.

While Edna O’Brien’s early trilogy *The Country Girls* trilogy was banned by the Irish Censorship Board, she has since become a well-loved author in and out of Ireland. She received criticism for her 1990s trilogy for its brutal imagery and application of history, however, this is what O’Brien has been doing all along. Regardless of the mythic and natural imagery that is employed, O’Brien’s stories are reflective of life. Applying theories such as abjection and the scapegoat can help bring a deeper understanding on a mythological and psychological level of texts that are deliberately realistic and historical. Furthermore, the events in these texts are not more or less tragic because of having been published under the guise of fiction; the novels, if nothing else, serve as an encyclopedic history of Ireland, combing ancient, mythic elements with contemporary problems and events. O’Brien is a historian, in this way, not just an author. As *House of Splendid Isolation* and *In the Forest* are viewed from more critical approaches, these novels will continue to inform and ameliorate Irish life.

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