IN THE NAME OF THE MOTHER:
A POST-COLONIAL READING OF PORTRAYALS OF GENDER IN IRISH FICTION

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I dedicate this to my family, who has challenged me when I needed a push, supported me when I needed comforting, and believed in me no matter what.

I also dedicate this to my friends, who listened to me vent and brainstormed with me until I had a solid idea for this project.
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INTRODUCTION

Although women in Ireland played various roles in the rebellions in the early twentieth century, they quickly found that the new Irish Republic began taking away legal rights once the government was established. The government began by restricting the jobs women could have in civil service in 1925, and in 1927 took away the right of women to be on a jury, thus limiting the rights of women to participate in the public sphere. This culminated in the creation of Eamon de Valera’s 1937 Constitution, which emphasized the importance of the family unit and, in Article 41.2, stated:

In particular the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

The State shall therefore endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home (qtd. in Ingman, p 12).

This, in addition to the role played by the Catholic church has led many feminist theorists, including Maryann Valiulis and Heather Ingman, to argue that the ideal Irish woman during much of the twentieth century was a woman who stayed home, stayed pure, and, most importantly, raised the children who were the future of Ireland.

Yet many current Irish novels portray problematic relationships between mothers and children; failed motherhood seems to be a constant theme, as women either have children and abandon or hurt them, or women choose to not have children at all,
thereby rejecting the role Irish culture is trying to place them in. Within this paper, I will be looking at eight such texts in which the main characters have unhealthy relationships with their mothers. What exactly is a portrayal of failed motherhood? Throughout the texts I discuss, the main character’s mother frequently abandons the children or abuses them emotionally, frequently a combination of first emotional abuse followed by abandonment. When the main character is a female, the early emotional abuse of a mother leads to an inability or disinclination for the main character to reproduce.

**Background**

The portrayal of women in fiction is not only linked to patriarchy and cultural normatives, but also to colonialism, as gender plays an important role in nationalism; Ireland itself is frequently gendered female and as a mother, something true for many post-colonial countries. Anne McClintock states of post-colonial countries that “Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic ‘body’ of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural) embodying nationalism’s conservative principle of continuity” (qtd. in Jeffers, 13). Her statement not only connects women to the traditional way of life, but also fixes that tradition in a static female physical body. Many post-colonial theorists also note that newly freed countries seem to need clearly
delineated gender roles.¹ This in part seems connected to the colonial gendering of the country as female; in order to be seen as worthy of taking control of the female nation, the male leaders must prove themselves manly, while the women become trapped by the cultural mythologies surrounding the female body.

The coding of Ireland as female, though, is complicated. Britain, as colonizer, imagined Ireland first as a sister and then wife, and used these terms in order to justify Ireland’s colonization; Joseph Valente states that these discourses “played into that modern, markedly gendered schism of mind and body, thought and feeling, reason and fancy, in order to suggest that the Irish, like women in general, were constitutionally ill-equipped for the dispassionate pursuit of state and social policy” (190). The female body becomes representative of a contested area, and women are forced to support the hegemonies suppressing them and controlling their bodies or risk being seen as unpatriotic. Ingman claims that “[n]ational symbols obscured the reality” of the lives of Irish women and “provided standards to live by” (7). She also discusses other feminist theoretical arguments, such as Taya Mayer; Ingman condenses Mayer’s argument, stating “nationalism becomes the language through which sexual control and repression… is justified and masculine prowess is expressed and exercised (3). Looking at Valente, Ingman, and McClintock’s statements raises the question of what role this nationalizing of the female body plays in the failed motherhoods described within the

¹ C. L. Innes discusses the differences between newly freed Ireland and African colonies; while both did have the enforcing of strict gender roles, the definition of these roles were strongly influenced by each colony’s view of women prior to colonization. This shows that while the ideals of the colonizer may play a part in defining gender roles, the most important part the colonizer plays is in defining the dialogue in terms of gender.
novels I discuss and suggests that perhaps the mothers represented in the novels may in fact represent Ireland itself. Valente also says in his argument:

To state, as I have, that the gendered allegory of ethno-racial supremacism serves to naturalize both colonial subjugation and the continued subordination of women is to say that it is specifically invoked to override the avowed political ethos, democracy, in favor of political economy, which is after all the most comprehensive liberal theory of nature: nature as that which is split off from, adversarial to, and exploitable by man (192).

While Ireland may have had the opportunity to provide more rights for all inhabitants upon achieving freedom from England, the men in charge chose to use the politically expedient route of continuing in the same terms England used, leading the government to take away rights of women rather than expanding them.

Also connecting post-colonialism and gender roles is the fact that the ideal Irish woman after the formation of the Irish state seems to be very similar to the Victorian ideal of England in the late nineteenth century. Are then the negative portrayals within the novels reacting against the Victorian ideal and working to recreate a new Irish woman, or are they instead supporting the British hegemony that purports that women and all of society are better off when women remain in the home? Yet the relationship between ideals of British and Irish femininity is complicated by the role that Catholicism has played a role in shaping the concept of Irish femininity. It could be argued that by returning to a vision of the Virgin Mary as an ideal woman, Irish society
was in fact rebelling against the Protestant religion of England. But Catholicism in Ireland is never a simple subject, particularly for the women forced to live up to the unrealistic ideal of the Virgin Mary. The impact and staying power of the Victorian ideal can in part be connected to the similarity between it and the teachings of the Catholic Church. As the Victorian ideal began to spread, the Catholic Church supported it and policed it. Many schools in Ireland were Catholic-run, giving the Church early access to children, access they could use to teach their ideals. Women became a part of the policing system as well; in order to fulfill their cultural role, they had to be good mothers and supporting the system and policing their daughters’ sexualities was a part of being a good mother.

Class seems to have played a large role, as Tom Inglis argues. As sexuality became associated with lower classes, “through self-restraint a member of the middle classes distinguished himself or herself from the lazy, arrogant, corrupt aristocracy at one end of the social scale and from the peasant and working class at the other” (15). Thus if the Irish could control their sexuality more completely than the English, they could prove themselves morally superior to their colonizers. Controlling female sexuality was also a way to control population and wealth. As the Irish population grew in the nineteenth century, tenant farming became more common, and a farmer’s hard work could be destroyed by the uncontrolled sexual actions of his daughters. Thus “the inculcation of sexual purity was about maintaining a decent standard of living through the enforcement of strict norms regulating inheritance” (23). With all these pressures
supporting one ideal, it is unsurprising that that ideal had such power over an entire population.

While previously there has been very little academic interest in portrayals of motherhood in Ireland, some female authors themselves have written on the topic. Nuala O’Faolain states that “she could only begin to write after she symbolically killed off her mother” (Dougherty, 57); she could not claim the first-person voice until she had done so. Maud Gonne and Mary Colum also begin their narratives with the deaths of their mothers. Dougherty argues, “The loss of rejection of the mother represents the beginning of the individuated female self that is essential to life writing, whether in fiction or memoir, but antithetical to the Irish girlhood.” This, though, raises the question of why the mother has to die for an author to be able to write. Dougherty shows that this in part is due to the identification of women with their mothers. If a woman identifies strongly with her mother, a mother who has been silenced by society, perhaps that silencing continues in the daughter until the daughter can somehow free herself. This killing represents a murder not necessarily of the actual mother, but of the ideals the mother represents. Yet this too is problematic; the female body again becomes the center of a politically controlled discussion, one which the individual female has little control over.
Motherhood and Feminism

While writing on Irish motherhood in fiction has been scarce, motherhood in general has been a topic of concern for feminist scholars for the past few decades, beginning with first wave feminists. As women strove for equality, scholars came to realize that motherhood is a loaded topic; the ability to bear children is one of the most obvious factors that differentiate women from men and the cultural necessity of caring for the children is recognized as one of the ways patriarchy controls women. Mothers are forced to remain inside the house caring for the young, raising the next generation properly. Early feminist writing rebelled against motherhood, and in fact the term itself has come to connote the negative patriarchal power structures. Yet feminists, recognizing that being a mother can be a positive, have begun to look at mothering, the current positive term, in a new light: as a source of power. After all, if women are in charge of educating the children, they have power over the ideas which influence the next generation and can use this power to subvert patriarchal hegemony.

While mothering might be a form of power for some women, it is not in the Irish books I’m examining. This then raises the questions of why Irish women don’t seem to be empowered by becoming mothers and why so many authors feel the need to portray

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2 Joyce Shaw Peterson discusses the differences between first and second wave feminism in her essay “What To Do About Motherhood: Feminist Theory and Feminist Fiction Negotiate Motherhood’s Dilemmas.” Her reading of Shulamith Firestone’s theories against Marge Piercy’s novel Women on the Edge of Time shows clearly how first wave feminism believed that the way to destroy patriarchy was by destroying all differences between men and women. As motherhood is one of the main differences, women must choose to give up the ability to have children while scientific advances allow humanity to continue to reproduce.
motherhood negatively. Few of the texts actually include the viewpoint of a mother; most are focalized through a childless daughter or son. This could be symptomatic of what some feminist scholars have argued is an epidemic of mother-blaming. As mothers are seen to be responsible for the education and care of their children, they come to be the ones at fault if anything goes wrong in the child’s life, no matter whether the problem is related to them or not. Society, accepting the idea of the mother’s responsibility for the child, allows children to deflect any responsibility for errors in their lives onto the mothers. Anne Morris takes the concept of mother-blaming further, as she argues that the pervasiveness of mother-blaming has given men a new tool: maternal alienation. Maternal alienation is when “the perpetrator deliberately creates wedges in the relationship between children and their mother” (223). Clearly this doesn’t hold true for all familial relationships, and this is not what Morris argues. Instead she shows how some males may choose to degrade the mother and elevate the father, causing the children to value their father over their mother, and that this tactic replicates “within families, societal discourses that hold women responsible for others’ behaviors while denying them credibility and status” (226).

Symptoms of mother-blaming and maternal alienation are present in the texts I examine. Is the portrayal of mothers this simple? It could also be argued that the female authors are suffering from what Freud called the Electra complex, in which the daughter comes to resent the mother for the daughter’s lack of a penis. Yet it seems unlikely that all the female authors are suffering from the same psychological difficulties, and it
leaves the male hostility towards mothers unaccounted for. Andrea O’Reilly offers a more interesting possibility in her analysis of Toni Morrison’s work in *The Bluest Eye* and *Paradise*. In examining these books, O’Reilly considers the portrayals of failed mothers, rather than empowered ones. Her discussion is based on African American culture, as “Morrison takes traditional conceptions of black womanhood—what Morrison terms ‘the ancient properties’—and traditional black values—what she calls the funk—and makes them central to her definition of motherhood as a site of power for black women” (126). O’Reilly argues that the mothers in these two books fail not because of psychological issues, but rather because the characters and communities portrayed have “become disconnected from the ancient properties because of identification with values of the dominant culture” (129).

Clearly the cultural pressure facing an African American community is different than the pressure on an Irish community; for starters, how does one define the dominant culture in Ireland? While in America, the African American mothers must deal with hegemony telling them they should be white, this is not the problem facing all mothers in Ireland. Yet the issue of failed motherhood remains. Can this similarity be explained by considering Ireland’s post-colonial status? As a colony, Irish culture was not the dominant culture; instead, Ireland was forced to submit to English concepts and ideology. Although Ireland became its own nation in the early twentieth century and was supposedly freed from English hegemony, the population is still dealing with the after-effects discussed earlier as Ireland redefines itself. What though are these ancient
properties which allow for a community to foster supportive motherhood? O'Reilly seems to point to a community of women who understand their own cultural heritage and bring that heritage into the present. This seems a rewriting of the concept of women as responsible for maintaining cultural purity; rather than this image being used to repress women, O'Reilly sees it as a way for women to empower themselves. Again, this can be tied to Ireland’s post-colonial status. Being colonized will have broken the connection Irish women had to their own past. Yet this seems problematic. Not only does it reinforce an image used to repress women, it is also raises the question of heritage. What is this mythical past in which women were empowered? Did it really exist, or is Morrison, as O'Reilly portrays her, merely imagining a past which allows for a better present and possible future? No matter the answers, though, the reading of the importance of community can be useful in examining the texts.

In order to further examine the implications of portrayals of motherhood, it is necessary to look at the texts closely. The chapters are divided by the gender of the authors, which each text separately analyzed within the chapter. There are few references to outside theorists directly discussing these texts; this is not due to my unwillingness to include them but rather due to the fact that many of these texts have received very little academic attention and what writing there is is not about this subject. In the final chapter, I examine the texts together, using the similarities and differences among them to analyze what these portrayals might be saying about Ireland today.
A Singular Attraction by Ida Daly exemplifies the idea that the mother must die for the daughter to live, and shows the effects of mother-blaming, as Daly seems to argue that blaming the mother for everything only stunts the children’s growth. Yet this is complicated by the actions of the mother, who controls her daughter throughout her life, and by the cultural pressures that deeply impact Pauline. The book begins after the mother’s funeral and with Pauline, the daughter, realizing her freedom. Pauline uses this freedom to escape the life she lived with her mother; she immediately moves from her mother’s house into a new condo. Daly connects the move from the house with the pressure the family puts on Pauline. When Pauline’s brothers discover that she has moved, they are upset, particularly Raymond. The explanation he provides for why he is upset shows the ways women are tasked with the duty of maintaining history, as in McClintock’s argument discussed earlier. Despite the fact that the house is from the 1930’s and only contains the history of a few generations of Pauline’s family, Pauline is letting down the family and her duty to that history by not remaining in a house too big for her. Daly uses the obvious flaws in Raymond's argument to show the gender bias inherent within Irish culture; he never questions why she should be the one to care for

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3 Pelan very briefly discusses A Singular Attraction, as she uses the text as an example of an escape from mothers in Irish literature. Yet neither A Singular Attraction nor motherhood receives any real analysis from Pelan, as she quickly moves on to other topics.
the house, as he assumedly never questioned why she should have been the one to care for their aging mother before her death, and he describes her as selfish because she refuses to put his desires first. He also connects her selfishness to her failure to fulfill another of her societal roles, that of a mother:

    I'm sorry to say it. You only think of yourself. Or perhaps it's because you don't have children that you're lacking in any sort of --proper feeling. Perhaps I shouldn't be angry with you, Pauline, but do try to look at from someone else's point of view. I want my son, my children to be able to come over to Dublin and stay with their aunt, to sleep in the bed that I used to sleep in as a boy, to feel the presence of their dead grandparents (52).

Yet it is her very fulfillment of one of her roles, the dutiful daughter, that has led to her failure to fulfill the other, the mother. Pauline blames her earlier dependence on her mother for the fact that she not only does not have children, but has never had sex. Thus her mother has fulfilled the motherly role of keeping her daughter pure all too well; Pauline feels incomplete and describes herself as a freak because of her intact virginity. It seems that Daly is arguing that it is not only the societal concepts of femininity that create difficulties for individual women, it is also the fact that women support these roles, sometimes more stringently than men.

    The concept of women policing other women and therefore upholding repressive cultural ideals can be seen in the fact that Raymond is not the only person in the text to describe Pauline as unnatural or lacking in proper emotions; her friend Una does as
well. Una throughout the text not only critiques Pauline, but also actively pushes her towards becoming a “good” Irish woman. Again Daly connects the description of Pauline by others as selfish or lacking in feelings to her refusal or inability to perform conventional societal roles. Una, angry at Pauline’s sarcastic comment connecting Una’s pregnancy with Marie Gunning, a young student at their school, thinks: “It must be true what they said about old maids, sour as last week’s milk. Jealous all the time, wishing it was her own belly that was swelling out” (36). Yet there is no suggestion in the text that Pauline is at all jealous. Instead Una seems to be projecting onto Pauline the desires that she should have and using those desires to explain behaviors which Una doesn’t approve of. This is not the only time in the text Una insults her friend based on Pauline’s marital and motherhood status. Pauline again comments about Una’s pregnancy, and Una “stared at her friend and wondered, not for the first time, if spinsterhood did not make one a bit unnatural” (57). Una could just be simply annoyed at an inopportune comment. Yet she later reveals that some of her emotionality is connected to a feeling of jealousy of Pauline, as Pauline is free from the responsibilities that weigh on Una. Pauline, rather than being limited to the usual summer vacation by pregnancy and familial responsibilities, has shaken off any outside pressure and is able to go to France to paint. Una, on the other hand, is trapped by her circumstances; she cannot leave her children, and is literally trapped by her body, as her pregnancy increasingly makes movement difficult and eventually necessitates bed rest and hospitalization. Una’s jealousy, however, leads Una at least subconsciously to try to
push Pauline into the typical female life. Una quickly assumes that Pauline and Jens are getting married long before they’ve even officially gone on a date.

Yet Daly does not always portray mothers and motherhood as repressive, and complicates the issue through Pauline’s crisis of identity. Pauline, finally free of her mother’s demands, spends much of the text searching for what would allow her to have a full and happy life. Daly uses this questioning to undercut the potential dichotomy of motherhood as bad and freedom from responsibility as good. Pauline in many ways longs for the things she doesn’t have. She yearns for the unconditional love of another: “[S]he knew suddenly what was missing from her life—not hobbies or fancy holidays or sophisticated apartments. It was much simpler than that—it was love” (85). This missing love at first glance seems to be connected to being a mother. She has her epiphany while looking into the faces of Una’s children, and after thinking about her own mother. Yet Daly carefully avoids arguing that motherhood is the only way to happiness. While the text around Pauline’s revelation deals with children, the text itself deals with a more romantic love. Pauline doesn’t seem to necessarily want children of her own, as she claims earlier in the text that she “had no desire for a baby, although she knew that according to her biological clock she should by now be filling up with anxiety” (25). Instead she wants “no grand passion but something that was hers of right, where she had first claim and which she could announce to the world… Rory’s behaviour now seemed as nothing when set against the sturdiness of love” (85). Rather
than supporting the traditional roles for women, Daly instead supports acceptance of
difference; Pauline just wants someone wholeheartedly to love her for her.

Even the argument for the necessity of love, though, is complicated by the fact
that Rory, Una’s husband, is cheating on Una. While Pauline sees the connection and
support between Rory and Una, she does not see many of the problems. Rory is hardly
portrayed in the story; even Una seems to concentrate on him mainly as someone to
provide physical, rather than emotional, support. It is unclear whether or not Una is
aware that Rory cheats on her, and it is equally unclear whether or not Una would be
truly upset if she found out. Even Pauline eventually comes to question Una’s and
Rory’s relationship, as she begins her infatuation with Jens and thus has her own
relationship to compare with theirs. While one cannot take Pauline’s description of her
and Jens at face value, particularly as Daly includes Jens’ thoughts portraying the whole
relationship as mere friendship, it does provide an alternate view of Una and Rory’s
relationship. No longer feeling unloved, Pauline “now pitied Una and Rory, trapped in a
marriage contracted when they were mere babes; now she was the luck of her own life,
a heart intact except for some surface scratches, a whole new world to be explored as
she stood at the mouth of middle age” (94). This clearly reads as a woman in the midst
of infatuation. Yet the point Pauline raises is a valid one, particularly given the lack of
connection within Una and Rory’s marriage. There seem to be no happy relationships
within the text, as even Jens is divorced, calling into question Pauline’s desire to depend
on others for her own happiness.
The ending of the text seems to support this reading as Pauline is alone, yet finally happy. She has managed to rid herself of her mother’s ghost and the blame she’s placed on her mother’s behavior. She also finally has managed to become a woman, as she loses her virginity to Jens, and in some ways, this seems to be the act that allows her to free herself of all of the outside expectations that are placing pressure on her. She can eat at a café, she can behave how she wants and not worry about how others feel. But if losing her virginity frees her, that in and of itself is problematic, as clearly this freedom remains dependent on the actions of a man. This also suggests that freedom is based on fulfilling cultural expectations. By losing her virginity, Pauline is acting according to societal norms; no one expects a woman of 39 to still be a virgin. In sleeping with Jens, she leaves open the possibility of pregnancy, allowing the hope of fulfilling her “motherly” role. Both actions would seem to point towards Pauline acting as a proper Irish woman. Yet the fact that she loses her virginity while unmarried cannot be ignored, and thus shows a type of rebellion at least against the idea of purity.

Pauline may be susceptible to societal pressures, but she does in the end manage to complete her rebellion against her mother. While her mother dies at the beginning of the text, allowing Pauline her chance to grow, her mother maintains an audible and occasionally physical presence throughout much of the text. Daly shows that in some ways Pauline needs this; her mother seems to give Pauline a tangible presence which she can act against. When Pauline’s mother first dies, Pauline realizes that all the emotional turmoil between her and her mother “was gone. There was nothing there,
nothing left to hate, nobody to blame. Mammy would never again disturb her nights or cause her to shake with rage at a throwaway remark. And her daughter was left, empty and dinged, and thirty-eight years of age” (15). Pauline seems to need this person to hate; the text describes her as “empty,” suggesting that Pauline had been filled by her negative feelings towards her mother. Pauline must then figure out how to replace the personality she had formed against her mother with one that is self-supporting. With her mother physically out of the picture, Pauline has to “stand up straight and face the world” (16). Thus it seems Pauline’s mother had to die in order for Pauline to become an adult and her own person.

Yet the reappearance of the ghost of Pauline’s mother throughout the text shows the difficulty Pauline has in letting go of her anger and blame. It is only after she loses her virginity to Jens that her mother’s ghost vanishes. Thus her mother seems to be vanquished when Pauline becomes a “real woman.” As discussed earlier, Pauline becoming a real woman through losing her virginity is problematic, particularly if one of the main pressures it frees her from is her mother. After all, the mother is being vanquished by the man, not by Pauline’s growth as an individual. Yet somehow losing her virginity helps Pauline take responsibility for her own life: “Since that night, Pauline has stopped blaming Mammy, and now the cry ‘it’s all your fault’ is as much a thing of the past as a pair of perpetually grazed knees” (143). What then is Daly suggesting about gender roles? Did Pauline actually need to lose her virginity to become herself, or did losing her virginity allow her to realize that she actually didn’t
need to? Perhaps the answer to this is simply that Pauline no longer felt like a freak, and thus has less for which she can blame her mother.

Pauline’s mother also is associated with the idea of an Irish identity: “Mammy had been a great and querulous supporter of our National Heritage” (143). The only time the word “Mother” is used as a title, as opposed to a mere relationship descriptor, is in the context of Mother Ireland and Mother Church. This connects the role of motherhood to the role of the church and of nationalism. Thus the fact that Jens, a Dutchman, is the one who frees Pauline from the clutches of mothers, her own, Mother Ireland, and Mother Church seemingly all in one, is telling. What role then does nationalism play in Pauline’s life? It is exploring Ireland with Jens, showing him her own countryside, that allows their relationship to grow from mere friendship to a more romantic one, although nothing is consummated until they return home. Thus the landscape of Ireland is a key component in their romance. Even the book she gives him for his birthday, the day their relationship actually is consummated, is related to Ireland, as it’s a book on Viking Ireland. It seems as though Daly is arguing that while the restrictive traditional gender roles in Ireland must be vanquished, Ireland itself as a concept should be supported. Is then Mother Ireland a positive thing? Clearly the concept of a Mother Ireland is in part what has led to the restrictive gender roles. But if the countryside is what has nurtured Pauline and allowed her to grow, is it not acting in a motherly role? Perhaps Mother Ireland is the true motherly relationship in the text.

What role, though, does interaction with other countries play? Why is Jens from another
country? Given his importance in Pauline being freed from the ghost of her mother, his nationality has to be important. It seems as though Daly is suggesting that while Ireland itself might be supportive, it is necessary for the Irish to interact with foreigners in order to become whole. Jens had to be foreign in order to allow Pauline to escape from the Irish ideas of gender that were strangling her.

**My Dream of You**

As discussed earlier, Nuala O’Faolain states in her memoir that she had to kill off her mother in order to write; thus it is unsurprising that the mother of Kathleen de Burca, the main character of *My Dream of You* and also a writer, is dead long before the start of the narration. Yet as with *A Singular Attraction*, Kathleen’s mother is interwoven throughout the text, as Kathleen returns to her childhood as she attempts to find meaning in her life. Kathleen connects the beginning of her unusual views towards herself and her sexuality to her mother:

> I was interested, always, in any story about passion… I believed in passion the way other people believed in God: everything fell into place around it. Even before I started mooching around after boys when I was fourteen, I’d understood, watching my mother, that passion was the name of the thing she was pursuing, ash she trawled through novel after novel (5).
O’Faolain shows Kathleen as a woman deeply troubled about her sexuality; Kathleen is unable to turn down any man who asks her for sex, a problem which leads not only to the dissolution of her one romantic relationship, as she eventually cheats on her boyfriend, but also to a type of emptiness. Kathleen is desperately searching for something, something she believes she can find in physical contact, “some memory of some wholeness, or the hope of some regeneration” (10). Yet the text shows that this wholeness cannot be found by sleeping with men. As Kathleen has no companionship outside of her few male colleagues and one college friend, perhaps O’Faolain is supporting O’Reilly’s concept of female community. Kathleen has none, causing a lack in her life. Later, as she develops a community which includes females in Ireland, Kathleen grows happier and seems to need sex less. Without this community, though, in England, she is more susceptible to dominant English ideology, a situation O’Reilly argues is dangerous. This situation is particularly negative given the English stereotypes about the Irish.

O’Faolain portrays the reason for Kathleen’s rampant sexuality as seemingly due in part to her nationality and her status as an Irish woman in England. Kathleen, moving to London after college, suffers discrimination in almost every way. When she goes to the psychiatrist after the death of her best friend Jimmy, the psychiatrist hides a trainee and allows him to monitor the first session, claiming, “They do it in your country, too… I can assure you!” (20). This statement made by the doctor as he tries to prove his lack of guilt is what convinces Kathleen that he allows the trainee to listen in
only because of her nationality, seemingly believing that if she notices, she won’t know better. Earlier, when she first moves to London, she is unable to find a landlord who will rent to an Irish person. When she moves out of the place she finally found, the landlord, Mr. Vestey, threatens to charge her for damages to the apartment unless she sleeps with him. Mr. Vestey directly connects his willingness to rent to her to her attractiveness, and his willingness to assume she’ll sleep with him to her nationality:

I usually never let to Irish, he went on. I’ve had very bad experiences with your compatriots. To put it mildly. But you were different. I had a nice little look at you when you came in to see me the first time… I wouldn’t be interested in the money you owe me if you were nice to me (37).

While Kathleen is shocked, she still sleeps with the man not because she couldn’t pay but because she couldn’t think of any reason to say no, and it “was quite a good way, now that it was happening, of saying goodbye to England” (38). Why, though, is being forced into sex with a man the perfect way to say goodbye to England? It seems as though O’Faolain through Kathleen is suggesting that this act basically is what has happened to Kathleen in England all along, and perhaps that it is what England has done to Ireland all along.

Yet this reading also implicates Kathleen and, through Kathleen, Ireland in their treatment. Mr. Vestey has trouble completing the act, and Kathleen must become active, rather than merely lying there, taking part in her own humiliation. Thus Kathleen not only agrees to the act, she plays an active role in it. Afterwards, she “made an attempt,
holding him to me for a moment, to feel generous and motherly” (39). This statement shows a disturbing view of motherhood, given that she has just given Mr. Vestey a hand job. Thus she again connects rampant sexuality, this time Mr. Vestey’s, with motherhood. This passage also shows Kathleen trying to rewrite what just happened in order to give herself more agency. Rather than just lying there and allowing this to happen, she instead wants to believe that she chose to do this as a gift, a way to be generous towards this lonely man. Does this rewriting of history then suggest that Kathleen truly didn’t have any power to say no to Mr. Vestey? She questions how much Mr. Vestey would have charged her and, while she does seem to have a good amount of money saved up, he might have gone beyond what she could reasonably pay. If Kathleen and Mr. Vestey are indeed representative of Ireland and England respectively, what does this say about the political relationship between the two countries? O’Faolain seems to suggest that England can exercise some forms of control over Ireland, primarily through economic transactions, despite having given Ireland its freedom nearly 90 years prior to the period of the text.

After the experiences Kathleen undergoes, it is unsurprising that Kathleen feels the need to return home. Yet she doesn’t seem to need to return to Ireland because of the discrimination, and in fact has no desire to remain long-term in Ireland. Instead, she wants to reexamine her own family:

I have never looked at my family the way I look at animals. I have never taken an unhurried look at the people by whom I was formed, wanting nothing but to
see clearly, the way I look at animals or birds—appreciating them without
having designs on them. My family has been the same size and shape in my
head since I ran out of Ireland. Mother? Victim. Nora and me and Danny and
poor little Sean? Neglected victims of her victimhood. Villain? Father. Old-style
Irish Catholic patriarch; unkind to wife, unloving to children, harsh to youth
Kathleen when she tried to talk to him (21).

Within this passage, Kathleen shows the ways in which her family fit the ideal
tereotype and the ways in which that stereotype failed her and her siblings. O'Faolain
shows Kathleen’s father as a representative of an older Ireland, one in which gender
roles are strictly enforced: the men must protect the nation and the women must stay
home. He is a nationalist, supporting the state; he tells a young Kathleen: “I am a
member of the civil service of the Republic of Ireland—a servant, you might say,
enrolled in the defense of the state on the civil side, just as an army man is on the
military side” (129). Her mother does in fact stay home, spending much of her time in
bed to the neglect of the children. Her father abuses her mother; when he takes her out,
she goes “with him silently, in her good black jumper, with a lot of lipstick on and her
hands trembling a bit on the strap of her big bag” (153), and she never has any money
as “he kept her short on purpose to dominate her” (154). She has a bad relationship with
her own mother, as she states that her mother was not proud of her, in response to
Kathleen’s questioning, and suggests that she and her own family no longer speak. She
clearly is unhappy, spending most of her time lost in the fantasy of books. As Kathleen
states, her mother might have victimized the children, but she too was a victim. Much of
the money she does get, she takes from the children, as when her father gives them too
much or when Kathleen wins a prize for an essay she wrote. Thus in some ways,
O’Faolain shows the ways in which abuse can be passed on. Kathleen’s mother, abused
by her husband and possibly her own mother, cannot help but abuse her own children.

While O’Faolain shows the ways in which Kathleen’s mother neglected her
children, she also shows the positive traits her mother passed on, such as a love for
books. Kathleen, in researching the Talbott affair, rediscovers her appreciation for
libraries, as “a library was the one place where my mother was always confident… It
was a pleasure to me, to remember her like that” (31). This in some ways shows
Kathleen’s mother as empowered; she can fight the ideology that a woman should stay
at home by providing her daughter with an alternate path, a path made viable through
education and books. Kathleen recognizes that her mother seems to have tried her best,
dealing with depression, children, illness, and an abusive husband.

But that seemingly is not enough to excuse her treatment of Kathleen. As
Kathleen questions her relationship with her mother, reliving positive moments, she
also blames her mother for her own inability to find a healthy relationship, asking:

[I]f a person’s mother does not love him or her, then, so everyone says, they
spend their lives looking for love. But do they mean it? Do they really want to
be loved? Or are they forced to do almost anything to manipulate those who love
them into *not* loving them? So that they can return to the first state—the state of not being loved? (229)

It seems as though Kathleen’s treatment by her mother is worse and far more damaging than her father’s treatment of Kathleen, or her father’s treatment of her mother. While her mother may have only neglected Kathleen because of her own abuse by her husband, the final blame still rests on the mother, and this neglect has physical consequences on the children. Kathleen tells her niece Lilian a story of fighting over control of the pram, and causing it to tip over, injuring Danny, her young brother, Lilian’s father, and leaving him with a scar on his head. Yet she leaves out key details of the story, protecting the young girl from more disturbing parts of the story, such as the fact that Kathleen and her sister “fought to take Danny out just to get Mam’s attention” (223). Through the physical and emotional scars from the mother’s bad parenting, O’Faolain seems to support the traditional view that the mother is in charge of the children, and failing to care for the children is something unforgivable. O’Faolain does portray Kathleen’s father as abusive, with her mother taking the worst abuse. Somehow, though, his abuse is less scarring than her negligence, even if her negligence is caused in part by his abuse. This could be due to maternal alienation, as he acts to abuse and denigrate the mother at every opportunity, forcing the children to lose respect and love for her. Perhaps Kathleen’s forgiveness of her mother at the end of the text is in part her recognition of the unfair blame she has placed upon her mother.
Although Kathleen has suffered because of her parents, returning to Ireland allows her to forgive them and heal herself through the act of writing her interpretation of the Talbott affair, through her participation in her own affair with Shay, a married man who allows her to feel loved, and through the calming landscape and interaction with other Irish people. It is only in leaving Ireland, though, that Kathleen truly forgives her mother, as she returns to England to help a friend dealing with the loss of his mother. Seeing his grief over his mother allows Kathleen to understand a different process of grief and to see how holding on to her anger has hurt her. Kathleen connects her forgiveness to getting old; it is only through forgiveness that she can rid herself of the specter of her mother: “I forgive you. See, we have to part company, now, I have to get old, which you never had to” (526). She has this moment of forgiveness while in the plane, flying between Ireland and England, suggesting that as she leaves Ireland, she is also leaving her youth and her youthful guilts and emotions. Thus England seems to represent an aging and maturing. Both are necessary for Kathleen’s emotional health, yet Ireland can no longer be her home as she has outgrown it.

**Down by the River**

Although *A Singular Attraction* and *My Dream of You* both deal with female bodies, sexuality, and control, it is Edna O’Brien’s *Down by the River* which shows how women support cultural hegemony, as numerous women throughout the text
support the state’s right to control a woman’s body.\textsuperscript{4} She also shows how the nation can come to be represented by the female body, and the ways in which this can put pressure upon individuals. The female body features prominently not only in the plot, not only as Mary’s pregnancy becomes a national concern, but also as Tara, her friend, explores her sexuality, and as Mary’s mother dies of cancer. O’Brien explores the concept of protection, as Mary goes from person to person and institution to institution, beginning with her mother, moving to the church, and eventually depending on the government and its representatives to protect her. This movement is notable, as Mary’s own mother, the Mother Church and the Mother Mary, and Mother Ireland all attempt and fail at keeping Mary’s father from abusing her.

O’Brien seems to argue that Mary’s mother Bridget should be the first line of defense against James, yet Bridget is clearly unable to do so, in part due to James abuse of her. More than in My Dream of You, the relationship between Bridget and Mary seems to exemplify maternal alienation. Bridget nearly from the first moment she enters the text is coded as an abused woman, in particular a woman abused for attempting to protect her daughter. Yet O’Brien complicates that portrayal; Mary believes that the noise she hears is:

\begin{quote}
[h]er father…taking it out on her mother on account of her being let stay in bed… She cannot hear the exact words but that is of no matter, she waits only
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{4} The plot of this text is based on an actual court case that took place in 1992 known as the ‘X’ Case. In this case, a young girl was raped, traveled to England for an abortion and was caught. This led to the Supreme Court’s decision to allow abortion when there is a substantial threat to the mother. This decision, however, was overturned through a referendum that fall. (Ingman, 23).
for the sound of things crashing and then the silence which always follows when her mother has fallen to the floor or onto a chair (9).

Instead, the noise is James yelling not at her mother but at some young boys stealing pears, while Bridget watches and laughs. While the fact that Mary anticipates not only Bridget’s abuse but the order the scene would take shows that James has beaten Bridget in the past, the fact that this time Mary misreads what she is hearing raises questions about Mary’s reliability as a narrator and about Bridget’s role as a mother. Why does O’Brien show Mary being deceived, in particular being deceived about her mother being abused for standing up for her? Has Bridget in fact been beaten for protecting Mary, or does Mary just wish that Bridget would try? Bridget here doesn’t seem to do so, as she comes up to Mary’s room in order to tell her that her father wants her to deliver a message, despite Mary’s being ill. Rather than protecting Mary, Bridget instead merely supports James’ power over the family.

Although Bridget, Mary’s actual mother, can’t or won’t protect Mary from James, for a while the Mother Church succeeds in doing so, primarily by allowing Mary to be schooled away from James. Yet again O’Brien complicates the issue by showing how Mary, thanks to the Church’s schooling, seems to believe that James’ abuse is her own sin. “She would become pure” in the convent (32), as no one touches her, and she can begin to pretend like her body doesn’t exist, a teaching the Church in large part seems to support. Yet although Mary is attempting to erase her body, this is not entirely possible, as O’Brien also raises the possibility of an inappropriate relationship between
Mary and Sister Aquinas. The text hints at this relationship, as “[b]etween Sister Aquinas and herself [Mary] there are trysts, holy pictures exchanged and sometimes in the convent grounds Sister takes from her pocket a pear or a plum” (47). The use of the word “tryst” seems particularly charged, as does the gift of fruit. Why, though, does O’Brien pair these sexually-infused terms with holy pictures? It seems as though O’Brien is suggesting that the Church in some ways fosters lesbian tendencies. Yet these tendencies don’t seem to be portrayed negatively, as Mary’s relationship with Sister Aquinas seems to be one of the few that provide Mary with any emotional support. At the same time, Mary is a young girl who has been abused, and any type of relationship which includes sexually charged touching, as theirs does, must be seen as problematic. Is Mary truly gay and is this situation allowing her to explore her sexuality, or is she merely responding to kindness and affection in the way in which it presents itself? Sister Aquinas is associated with the Virgin Mary, as the text describes her as Mary’s idol. This also raises questions about the role of the Virgin Mary. The connection between the religious saint and the nun shows that the Virgin Mary be both a source of comfort and a possible threat to normal female sexuality. But is the Virgin Mary actually a threat, as Sister Aquinas seems to be, or is the Virgin merely once again unable to protect a young girl from sexual abuse, this time within Her own walls?

Mother Ireland also allows Mary a chance of respite from her father’s abuse, although this too is complicated. Both James and Mother Ireland enter the novel from the beginning, as the text begins with a scene of a father abusing a daughter in the Irish
countryside. Neither character is even named until halfway down page two, suggesting that this could be any father and any daughter in Ireland. O’Brien also shows the monetary issues that bring the two out into the Irish landscape, as they are trying to sell portions of bog to foreigners, as:

[p]ounds, shillings and pence danced before his [the father’s] eyes, carpets for her mother, her poor moiling mother, a bicycle for her and then getting carried away with his estimations he spun the metal tape in a wide and apostolic arc, a wand, pronouncing his claim over the deserted but fabled landscape (2).

Thus from the beginning, O’Brien raises the question of the role of the landscape. Throughout the text, the landscape plays a varied role. In the beginning, as in this opening scene, it allows for the abuse of Mary, as it is a safe, open space away from potential viewers. Here her father clearly stakes a claim on the landscape, declaring that he owns it, as he does in a strictly legal sense. This followed by the rape of his daughter shows that “he has both land and female bodies under his control” (Ingman, 85).

Yet the land also is a place of hiding and potential cleansing for Mary, a place where she can escape her father in a way she can’t in the house, with O’Brien in particular emphasizing the power of water. Mary escapes into the countryside to visit a shrine of the Virgin Mary in order to cure James, a shrine consisting of a well inside a cave. Here not only do she and the servant Lizzie pray for James, they also touched “the

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5 Ingman claims that the concept of the Virgin Mary silences women within the text, as she provides an example no one can live up to. While the impossibility of living up to the Virgin Mary’s example is undeniable, Ingman’s statement that Mary cannot tell the Virgin Mary her rape seems denied by this scene. Mary does put the rape into other terms; her obfuscation seems more connected to her worry that other visitors of the shrine might read her request than her fear of voicing her rape to Virgin Mary.
private part of their bodies with water to banish all stain of past or future sin” (68).

After the trip to the shrine, Mary is supposed to be safe, yet clearly she isn’t. Praying to the Virgin Mary and using holy water cannot stop James from sexually molesting his daughter, leaving Mary with seemingly one other option, again using water. She goes to the river to drown herself. O’Brien uses Mary’s near-drowning to emphasize some of the misconceptions of the anti-abortion women; earlier in the text at their meeting, one of the women asks, “Suppose a girl in that state walked in here now and said ‘I’m going to throw myself in the river,’ what would we do?” The leader of the meeting, Roisin, replies “She wouldn’t… They have a hormone which stops them” (23). By showing Mary not only attempting to commit suicide, but attempting in the very way discussed earlier by these women, O’Brien shows how these women try to use science and facts in a way which will support their argument, facts which are proven false by the actions in the novel.

The theme of water continues throughout the text, as O’Brien connects Mary’s miscarriage with her mother’s death, describing in similar terms. Bridget is dying from ovarian cancer, and as she nears death, only wants to see her daughter again. Yet before Mary returns, Bridget dies: “Suddenly water begins to issue from her, a great cataractic gush, as if the placenta has broken and a child is coming out but they know that it augurs death, something in her colouring, the sudden cancellation of her voice” (51). This scene is repeated as Mary miscarries: “It’s… It’s… It’s coming out. Pouring out. The leather of the chair all ooze now and sticky like warm puree” (257). As both
women feel liquid pouring out of them, both undergo a type of death: Bridget her own, and Mary the death of her child. What does this connection mean? Is the death of Mary’s child somehow related to Bridget’s? The fact that ovarian cancer kills Bridget suggests that female reproduction can be a threat to women; it is her own reproductive system that kills her. The similarity between the scenes could just be because both mother and daughter have a failure of the reproductive system, and those failures would have similar physical consequences. Yet it also could be that both fail as a mother. Bridget cannot live to protect her daughter from her husband. While she cannot manage to protect her while she is alive, her life at least allows Mary to remain at the convent, while her death requires Mary to return to her father’s dangerous household. Mary clearly fails to be a mother as she does everything in her power to end her baby’s life, and in the end miscarries. The water imagery here seems to echo O'Reilly’s reading of water imagery in Morrison’s text, as “the water is cold and terrifying, signifying not maternal trust or love, but it’s opposite: maternal deceit and abandonment” (135).

Yet given the sympathetic portrayal of Mary and her attempts to have an abortion and given the negative portrayal of the anti-abortion women and their callous treatment of Mary, it seems as though O’Brien is arguing that the failure to be a good mother is not unequivocally the fault of the mother. Clearly Mary is not at fault for getting pregnant, and O’Brien shows Mary’s fears and actions as understandable given the situation. Bridget also cannot be blamed for dying of ovarian cancer, and perhaps could not be blamed for being unable to stop James’ abuse. After all, she too was
abused. Would James have listened if she had tried to stop him? Did she ever really know about his abuse, or was it something she only guessed at? These are questions the text leaves unanswered, forcing the reader to consider who all is to blame. James, obviously, is at fault, and suffers a gruesome death when he commits suicide after his abuse is found out.

Yet O’Brien provides a more complicated portrayal of the women in the text, showing that motherhood in Ireland is a complex issue. Throughout the text, it is other women who are cruelest to Mary, with Roisin, the anti-abortion leader, being the worst. Roisin, upon discovery of Mary’s miscarriage and while Mary’s own health is still in jeopardy, screams, “May you rot in hell… You have murdered it… you wanted that baby dead… You’ll pay for it every day of your life” (259). Mary matters little as a person to Roisin, as Roisin mainly was upset because she was “deprived of her victory, shrieking, nothing else mattering, nothing of why lives have to be so hard.” Thus O’Brien shows the irony of the anti-abortion movement. The leaders, in trying to argue that fetuses are people, forget that the mothers are people, too. Roisin is not alone in her unthinking need for control over Mary, as Mary’s cousin Veronica constantly watches Mary while Mary lives with her, and is joined in this task by Veronica’s friends. It is interestingly a church service that allows Mary the freedom to run away from Veronica, as Veronica stops watching Mary long enough to take communion. Why, though, are these women so concerned with supporting cultural and legal standards that control their own bodies?
O’Brien answers this in part by showing how Mary is directly linked to Ireland. Judge Hanna claims that allowing her to leave the country in order to have an abortion will “disgrace our country,” as Ireland is “a model for the whole world” (252, 253). Her abortion attempt is a national crisis because her body represents the state. If Mary successfully aborts the fetus, it shows the country’s inability to enforce not only the laws, but also cultural and religious concepts of female purity, and challenges the current power structure. Ingman in discussing Mary’s body in the text states that the anti-abortionists believe that through Mary’s abortion, “Ireland’s alterity will be abolished and her moral integrity threatened” (85). Her abortion will sully the concept of Mother Ireland. Thus the women in the text must support the laws or prove themselves unpatriotic. Although the fact that Mary was raped by her father is known by this point in the text, the judges make no comment about his behavior; while his actions are shown as horrible and reviled, they only reflect poorly upon him. He also comes under no public condemnation for his actions, although many express it privately, and in the end he punishes himself by his suicide. While his suicide prevents a public trial which would have brought more attention to his role, he is able to prevent this and maintains control of his body throughout the text. When he does lose control of his freedom, it is not due to any person’s actions, but because a horse steps on him and breaks some bones. Through this O’Brien shows the irony of the status of the Irish law and custom; the man who abuses his daughter remains free, while his daughter is
trapped, judged, and forced to undergo further emotional trauma for attempting to undergo a medical procedure legal in many parts of the world.

Mary’s miscarriage, though, allows her to escape from the control of those around her, as her body completes her action of choice, a choice the court was deciding for her. O’Brien doesn’t even directly state the outcome of the case, an outcome we can only assume was to allow Mary the abortion given the anger of the anti-abortion women. By having Mary miscarry, O’Brien shows that the courts, laws, and religious beliefs cannot maintain control over individual women, nor should they try. By throwing off the supposed power of others over her, Mary not only survives, but gains her voice back. The young girl who spent much of the text silenced by her own fear and by others ends the text as a young woman singing, as her voice “soared and dipped and soared, a great crimson quiver of sound going up, up to the skies” (265).

**Hood**

The homosexuality hinted at in *Down by the River* comes to fruition in *Hood* by Emma Donoghue. The only mother actually shown in *Hood* is Penelope’s, and she doesn’t enter the text until the last chapter. Yet motherhood and the complicated relationships between mothers and daughters feature prominently throughout the text, and motherhood is one of the many ‘hoods’ referenced by the title. Donoghue shows the ways in which sexuality can change these relationships, and seems to argue that the best
mother-daughter relationships can survive the chaos of a different sexuality and remain supportive, as Penelope needs her mother’s support after the death of her lover. The text also shows the importance of a female community, one that can provide the emotional support O’Reilly argues is necessary for positive maternal experiences. Throughout the novel, Penelope wrestles with the idea of telling her mother that she is gay; at the same time, she keeps returning to comforting moments from her childhood, as if those memories can convince her that her mother is not going to ostracize her. The role of becoming a mother is complicated by sexuality, as a lesbian relationship challenges the ideal of marrying, having children and remaining at home. In many ways, lesbians subvert the concept of purity, as well, as Donoghue points out within the text, as Penelope remains a technical virgin despite the very erotic status of her and her girlfriend Cara’s relationship.

Donoghue uses the concept of nationality within the text to explore the role of women in Ireland; the first mention of motherhood and labor pains is in reference to a traditional Irish myth. Pen, a teenager at this point in the text, chases down her girlfriend Cara while suffering from menstrual cramps, and thinks, “What was the name of that woman in labour, who, forced to race against a horse for the men of Ulster, gave birth at the winning post and cursed them to suffer the same pains every year?” (5). The fact that she references this myth is interesting, as the myth shows the power of women, and the danger of childbirth. In the case of the story, the danger of childbirth is transferred into a punishment for men who put nationality and the importance of
winning the race above the safety of a woman and her unborn children. If motherhood, though, becomes a symbol of nationalism, what then does this myth mean? Donoghue seems to be suggesting that Ireland is using women to the detriment of individuals, as within the myth, and her use of the myth seems to be reclaiming it for a non-nationalistic purpose.

Pen is not the only one dealing with mother issues within the text, as the plot moves back in time to show her and Cara’s relationships before Cara’s death. Cara has been abandoned by her mother, as her mother and father separate and her mother moves with her sister Kate to America. Cara’s anger hasn’t faded despite the fact that years have passed since her abandonment. Yet she doesn’t seem to be angry at her mother, but rather at society for pitying her: “Everybody’s always been only saying,’ she snarls. ‘Pitying me for my ‘broken home,’ assuming all my problems can be attributed to my being a motherless waif… One guy at college asked could that be why I turned out, ahem, the way I did’” (13). It is not her mother’s actions that bother Cara; it is the reaction others have to her mother’s actions. Donoghue thus shows the importance Irish society places on having a complete family, and the stress that can place on individuals within that society. Once Cara loses her mother, she becomes essentially an orphan despite the fact that her mother is still living. All of her problems can be excused, even her sexuality explained away, by the fact that her mother wasn’t there for her. Donoghue complicates this, though, by portraying Cara’s mother in some ways as a bad
mother. Cara states that her father “didn’t think I was feeble the way Mum did” (13), and after Cara’s death, her mother doesn’t even return to Ireland for the funeral.

The coldness of Cara’s relationship with her mother is contrasted in the text by the seemingly warm one between Pen and her mother. The Catholic Church plays a role in many of these memories, as it clearly played an influential role in both Pen and Cara’s lives. Pen, missing sleeping with Cara, remembers, “sometimes on Sunday mornings when I was small she [her mother]’d let me into her bed and we’d snooze till we had to leap up and go to mass” (27). The juxtaposition of the discussion of sleeping with Cara and sleeping with her mother in the text creates a strange sexual connection between the two. The connection between mother, the Catholic Church, and sexuality continues throughout the text, as Pen tells story after story connecting the three. Pen begins going to the church she attends because Cara’s family goes there, and because she is still a teenager, she must convince her mother to go along. They go for the first time on Christmas Eve, one of the holiest nights of the Christian year. Here, Donoghue hints at the possibility that Pen’s mother knows about Pen and Cara, or at least that she suspects more than simple friendship:

I said rather feebly that it must have been the other choir, the folk one, that had such a good reputation. Mammy made no comment, but squeezed my fingers and said, ‘Look at the stars.’ The back of my hand was still burning from brushing against Cara’s as our voices peaked in the final hosanna (139).
Here again physical contact between Pen and Cara is closely followed by physical contact between Pen and her mother. Why does Donoghue connect the two? One answer could be that Pen is connecting the comfort she received from her relationship with Cara to the comfort she receives from her mother. Perhaps Cara begins to replace Pen’s mother in her life, and after Cara’s death, the reversal begins to happen. Donoghue shows that for Pen at least, the emotional support she gains from a close relationship with another female is necessary.

Pen also seems to need the emotional support of the church, which simultaneously provides solitude and community. While Cara refuses to go to Mass after she walks out “in the middle of a sermon on sexual morality” (134), Pen remains a faithful churchgoer. Through Pen, Donoghue shows how the church can be both a solace and a place which refuses to acknowledge you; Pen stops going to confession after trying to confess her sexual explorations with Cara and realizing that the only sexuality the church was prepared to deal with was heterosexuality. Yet in the same passage discussed above, Pen connects Church and sexuality, as she is excited she and Cara have managed to spend Christmas Eve together: “we could stand together, our first Christmas Eve, and carol our thanks for this body magic we had discovered between us” (139). Donoghue thus seems to argue against the idea that sexuality, in particular homosexuality, is inherently a sin. This suggests that while both the Catholic Church

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6 Jennifer Jeffers discusses the importance of language in relation to homosexuality within *Hood*, including the scene referenced here: “[T]he patriarchal representative [the priest] is not equipped to recognize that there could be sexual difference available to Pen; there seems to be no language available with which to state this kind of difference” (103). As Jeffers focuses primarily on language surrounding homosexuality and does not relate this to motherhood, I do not address her directly.
and the Irish government might officially declare that homosexuality is wrong, individual faith is more important. The organizations of power in the end do not control a person’s morality; each person must decide for her or himself what is worth praising and what is worth confessing. Pen later even suggests that the Virgin Mary either was a lesbian or wasn’t a virgin: “Our Lady… has a faint blush. ‘I’m No Saint Reveals Queen of Heaven’, or maybe ‘Only Technically a Virgin Says Lesbo Mary’” (187). Through these comments, Pen takes control of one of the women used in Ireland to subvert female sexuality, and rewrites the Virgin’s story. By subverting the image of the Virgin Mary, Pen gives herself a voice and a representative within the church.

In fact, the Church itself seems to provide a safe space for at least mental exploration, as Pen states, “I used to spend the greater part of each mass in this pious position when I was a youngster, face closed over the most lurid of sexual fantasies” (135). Donoghue could be showing here how ineffectual the Church is at controlling the sexualities of young adults; after all, a priest cannot control a person’s thoughts, and the quiet of a church service allows for all sorts of contemplation. Yet the fact that Pen still attends the services and now uses the services as a time “to have a really good conversation with the Lord” again shows the importance of religion. If religion can’t control the thoughts and sexualities of teens, at least it can provide a place for them to grow.

As Pen needs the comfort of both her mother and the Church, she also begins to recognize her need for female friends as the text progresses. Donoghue shows the
progression of the friendships, as Pen in particular begins spending time with the Attic, a household of lesbians with whom Cara was close. These women not only offer to provide emotional support for Pen, but seem to long to do so, as they recognize the importance of sharing their feelings. One of the women in particular, Jo, pushes Pen repeatedly to come out to her mother, yet when the women at the Attic talk about coming out, only one, a young teenager, has a positive story:

Sinéad passed round a birthday card from her mother in Wales which said on the inside. *In case you think the passage of time is softening my attitude to your lifestyle, well, it’s not.* We groaned in chorus. ‘At least she’s referring to it,’ said Ruth. ‘When I finally came out to my mother, she dropped her best sherry decanter in the sink. She hasn’t said a word about the subject since, except to beg me not to tell my great-aunt with the dicky heart (295).

If the majority of the women in the Attic have had a negative experience coming out to their mothers, why does Jo insist that Pen needs to do so? Jo throughout the text seems to argue that Pen needs the support of other women; perhaps the pressure to come out is due to her recognition that Pen needs her mother. Why would Pen and her mother be able to become closer over Pen sharing her sexuality, as opposed to the other Attic women? While the other women seem to have difficulties with their families, Pen somehow seems different. This is perhaps because her relationship with Cara is a stable one; while Cara might sleep with other women, Pen is monogamous, and they do live together. This arrangement seems to echo the heteronormative state of marriage;

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although sleeping with others is not necessarily a part of all relationships, it certainly is not unusual. Having this base would perhaps allow Pen’s mother to understand Pen’s lifestyle more easily. Pen herself states that her mother may know: “Once when I was home for the weekend I thought Mammy was going to bring it up herself. The air went all prickly, so eventually I asked was she worried about something, and she said, ‘Well, I’ve been thinking, Pen, I don’t suppose you’re’—and then the phone rang” (147).

Donoghue portrays Jo throughout the text as motherly, and connects her to Irish history. Not only is she guiding Pen to the support that she will need to get through her bereavement, she is also an older woman who has helped to guide Ireland to the loosening of its morality laws. Jo gives Cara’s sister Kate “an update on Irish politics for the last fifteen years,” and tells Pen, “you’re only a young thing; you can’t help being pig-ignorant about your country’s history” (65). The only history, though, that Jo discusses is the history of sexuality and female power in Ireland. This is perhaps unsurprising in a text so concerned with women and their sexuality. Yet by not providing any other history, Donoghue seems to be arguing that the battle over equal rights and sexual freedom is the only battle in Ireland that matters. Yet Pen, whom one might think would also care about such history, doesn’t seem to think it’s important.

When Jo brings up the Pill train, Pen replies, “Ah, go on. That was centuries back” (66), implying not only that Jo is old, but also that such history has little bearing on current Ireland. Jo must educate Pen not only on how to be a lesbian in her own time, but also
on key events of her own country’s history, events which have opened space in society for her lifestyle to be both legally allowed and culturally acceptable.

Jo’s knowledge and wisdom is never questioned in the text; she is proven right about Pen coming out to her mother. Pen, unable to cry despite trying throughout the text, finally does at the end of the novel, but only when she begins to come out to her mother. Thus Donoghue seems to suggest that while mother-daughter relationships might be problematic, they are also necessary to the emotional health of the daughters. It takes Jo, a mother figure, to lead Pen back to openness with her own mother, an openness which allows Pen to begin physically mourning the loss of her lover.
CHAPTER II
“I Want My Mommy”: Motherhood in Male-Authored Texts

The Blackwater Lightship

The plot of *The Blackwater Lightship* by Colm Toibin revolves around the relationships between three women, a grandmother, a mother, and a daughter, forced back together by the impending death of another relative, Declan, a gay man dying of AIDS. Here the community of women seems to play a negative role. The three women spend much of their time together, at least until Helen, the daughter, breaks away. Helen has refused to allow her mother Lily and her grandmother Dora to play a role in her life; Lily has never even met Helen’s husband and children, although Lily plays some role in this as she missed a reunion attempt the summer before. As Declan’s health deteriorates and as the friends he has brought to help him ask questions of the family, Helen and her mother are forced to reexamine their relationship and why it deteriorated. Similarly to Daly in *A Singular Attraction*, Toibin portrays the damage the stress of family places on individual Irish women; Helen is called selfish for not putting her mother and grandmother first, and their attempts to force her to rearrange her priorities lead to the break in their relationships. Yet while Toibin shows Helen as a strong woman in charge of her own fate, he doesn’t examine the pressures beyond familial. Helen seems to support the concept of femininity which pressures women to be mothers in the home. While Helen does work, she works as a principal, an occupation which follows the
traditionally allowed female position of educator, and throughout the text, she is seen primarily in the home.

Both the original strain on the relationship between Helen and Lily and the eventual healing of that relationship are caused by events surrounding the men in the family. As mentioned, Helen and Lily only reconnect because Declan, Lily’s son and Helen’s brother, is dying and wants them both there. The original strain, though, comes from the death of Helen’s father. His death causes an emotional separation, as his illness causes a physical one. Helen and Declan are left behind to live with their grandparents as their parents go to Dublin so the father can undergo tests. This leads the young children to feel abandoned and unloved, a feeling Lily is incapable of overcoming on her return after the father’s death. Lily’s seeming abandonment of her children forces Helen to grow up quickly, as Helen’s grandparents seem more comfortable treating Helen as an adult:

Slowly their grandmother began to treat Helen as an adult and Declan as a child, although Helen and Declan continued to treat each other as equals, even if Helen remained in the role of protector. In the first week or so, Helen had an argument with her grandfather; it was the only time he said much during their entire stay in the house. He was reading something in the newspaper about Fianna Fáil—he himself was a member of Fine Gael, which was strong in Blackwater—and he turned to Helen and her grandmother and said, ‘They’re only a shower of gangsters, blood gun-runners. Liam Cosgrave will put manners on the whole lot
of them’ Jack Lynch is not a gangster or a gun-runner,’ Helen said… And the
Irish Independent is only Fine Gael propaganda…” From then on, her
grandfather let her watch the news on television and, after a few weeks, one
Saturday night Helen realized that she was going to be allowed to watch The
Late Late Show (62-62).

Helen’s adult status in her grandparents’ house allows her additional freedom, as she
gains access to shows which her parents felt she was too young for. This freedom,
however, is not only connected to her grandparents seeing her as more of an adult; it is
also connected to her awareness and ability to argue politics. By showing she
understands the complicated nationalistic politics in Ireland, Helen proves that she can
understand what is on late night television and is responsible enough to leave if
something is too mature for her.

Although the young Helen seems to feel that the privileges that come from being
treated as an adult are worth any inconvenience, Toibin makes it clear that the pressure
to be an adult is too much for a child to bear. Helen is responsible for caring for Declan
and ensuring he eats enough at their grandparent’s house; Declan is a very picky eater
and his grandmother refuses to take that into account while feeding the children. Helen
also bears the most stress when her mother returns, as Lily “couldn’t get over losing”
her father (88), and has an emotional breakdown. Here Helen is forced to become a type
of mother to both her own mother and Declan. Helen directly connects her withdrawal
from her mother with Lily’s behavior after her father’s death, as Lily on the one hand
needs her children’s love and on the other must push them away while she deals with her pain: “My mother taught me never to trust anyone’s love because she was always on the verge of withdrawing her own. I associated love with loss, that’s what I did. And the only way that I could live with Hugh and bring up my children was to keep my mother and my grandmother away from me” (188). Helen, feeling ignored by her family, feels no need to include them in her life. But not to include them in any of the major events of her life seems extreme. Helen tells her mother: “I didn’t want you at my wedding. It was important for me that you would not sponsor me, or take credit for me, when it had nothing to do with you. You had all my life to see me smiling and happy, and since you took no notice of me in private, I wasn’t going to have you make a big play of me in public” (209). Did Lily really ignore Helen that much? Was she such a horrible mother that Helen is justified in not having her at her own wedding? Toibin doesn’t provide an answer for these questions; while he portrays Lily as manipulative and needy, he doesn’t show her doing anything truly horrible or abusive. He does, however, hint at Lily’s own blame in the separation, as Lily doesn’t show up to a family get-together the previous summer and thus misses her first chance to meet Helen’s husband and children.

While Lily’s breakdown began the separation, it is Lily and Dora’s treatment of Helen as Helen reaches adulthood that causes the true lack of connection and even basic communication between mother and daughter. Toibin shows in particular how the differences in the way Helen and Declan were treated causes problems; Declan as a boy
was allowed the freedom to do what he wanted, while Helen was expected to stay at home and care for the family. These familial expectations lead to Lily and Dora to demand that Helen return home, take the job they had found for her, and help them:

You should have heard them both, and all they wanted, of course, was to be driven here and driven there, and have messages collected and dinners cooked.

And where was Declan during all of this? He was on his first summer holidays after his first year doing Pharmacy in college and what was he doing? Was he washing out the floor of his grandmother’s so-called guess-house? No, he was working as a ticket seller in a cinema in Leicester Square in London, and he was, as he will tell you himself, having the time of his life (182).

Thus it is the difference in treatment and perhaps a difference in generational expectations that leads to the break in the family. Helen is determined to live her own life in the same way that she sees her brother doing. Declan’s horrible health, though, raises the question of if this freedom is such a good thing. Declan’s friends describe Declan’s sexual behavior, showing it to be both promiscuous and unsafe. If his behavior leads to his contracting AIDS, is the freedom that he had as a young man that indubitably led at least in part to his behavior such a good thing? Perhaps Helen also is misinterpreting Lily and Dora’s actions; perhaps they only wanted her to live close to them so that they could protect her. This reading would still be hard on a young girl who only wants to figure out who she is and needs some freedom to do so, but would soften the portrayal of the older women. Yet Toibin only gives Helen’s interpretation;
as readers we can ask if Helen can be trusted, but her perspective is all we have. Thus Toibin shows that it is not necessarily the reasons behind a parent’s actions that matter, but the impact those actions have on the children.

**A Star Called Henry**

Jennifer Jeffers argues that Roddy Doyle in *A Star Called Henry* rewrites the role of women during the 1917 rebellion, using strong female characters such as Miss O’Shea to show the impact women had\(^7\). Miss O’Shea in particular does exemplify the strong women history suggests played a part in the rebellion; she begins as a cook for the men and winds up an equal partner for Henry, participating in just as many as if not more acts of violence than he does. Yet can this one example of a strong woman really be said to rewrite the roles women played? Is Miss O’Shea really portrayed as exemplary? What impact does the class of the women in the novel play in their ability to act in ways not usually sanctioned by society? Given the importance of nationalism in the text, what impact does the concept of Mother Ireland have and does this concept create pressures on the mothers in the text?

Doyle includes several complicated portrayals of mothers in the text, beginning with Henry’s mother, who enters the text in the first line. Within the first page, Doyle brings up the negative impact Henry’s mother, Melody, has had on Henry, the impact

\(^7\) Jeffers, 12
their class has had on her, and the impact her own mother has had on Melody. Melody sits on the porch and points at the star representing the first Henry, a baby who had died, while Henry “looked up and hated him… a shocking substitute for the little Henry who’d been too good for this world, the Henry God had wanted for himself” (3). It seems as though being named after an earlier child, one whom his mother had loved deeply, has scarred this Henry, as Melody is unable to hide her sadness over the loss of that other baby. Yet this trauma is not truly Melody’s fault, a fact Doyle doesn’t reveal until several pages later in the text, as Henry is named Henry after his father, who was determined to have a namesake. By not showing that Henry’s father is to blame until later, Doyle allows the reader to focus on Melody, showing the ways in which the women both become associated with the children and are blamed for any problems the children might have. This reading is mitigated, though, by the sympathetic portrayal of Melody’s own struggles, as she loses baby after baby while being unable to feed the survivors: “She wasn’t much more than twenty when she gazed up at little twinkling Henry but she was already old, already decomposing, ruined beyond repair, good for some more babies, then finished” (3). Thus O’Doyle seems to argue that a lower class status combined with the ideas surrounding femininity, such as the importance of motherhood and the need for women to stay in the home, can in fact destroy the women these concepts are supposed to protect.

The narrative quickly moves on to Melody’s own mother, called only by her last name and relation to Henry, Granny Nash, throughout the text. Granny Nash is a
particularly complicated character who seems to break all the societal rules about women. She is always “with a book under the shawl” and has an apparently rampant sexuality as her “heart cried for Leitrim but her tits sang for Dublin. She got down on her back and yelled at the sailors to form a queue” (4). While her sexuality seems out of control, it is impossible to know, as everything portrayed is focalized through Henry who admits he doesn’t know that anything that he says is true. Her origin is unknown; Henry doesn’t know whether she’s Irish or possibly foreign. This complicates her sexuality and her rebellion against society. If she is from another country, her upbringing and cultural expectations might be different than those in Ireland. Either way, her rebellion against society is not portrayed positively in the text. Henry describes her as a witch, always “with her head in a book, looking for spells. She shoved her face forward with ancient certainty, knew every thought behind my eyes… She stared at me with her cannibal’s eyes” (4). Thus her reading becomes threatening, as she uses her knowledge as a type of weapon, and her appetites become associated with cannibalism. She is the only mother character to continue throughout the entire text, and she becomes Henry’s only means to gain knowledge about his family. Rather than telling him information, though, she forces Henry to find books by female authors and then will only tell him something if the book is one she hasn’t read. She also is connected with the only time Henry is caught by British troops; although it is unclear in the text whether or not Granny Nash betrays him, it is clear that visiting her put him at risk. Thus while she is a highly rebellious character, she also seems to be a negative one.
Doyle portrays her throughout the narrative as a woman who uses the small amount of power she has from her knowledge of her son-in-law’s past to force her grandson to provide her with books written only by women. Even her feminist reading habits are shown as slightly ridiculous, as Henry is forced again and again to search through old book stores to find a new book and as she rejects his offerings off-hand if they don’t please her.

The negative portrayal of Granny Nash, however, can be contrasted with the positive portrayal of Miss O’Shea, a woman equally as rebellious. Miss O’Shea is first associated in the text with the Catholic Church, as she works at a school run by nuns. She too is connected to books and reading, as she teaches Henry to read early in the text. Yet Doyle portrays Miss O’Shea’s act of teaching Henry to read positively; her rebellion in this case is not so much against the societal roles outlined for her, since teaching in fact supports those societal roles, but against the rules of the Church-run school, and the nun in charge. The nun, angry at Miss O’Shea’s audacity in allowing Henry and his brother Vincent in the classroom, declares the boys to be pagans and threatens to send them to an orphanage. Thus the one organization that should be supporting and educating the children of the poor, the Church, fails to do so. Miss O’Shea’s rebellion against that indifference actually leads her to support the tenants of the Church itself.

Miss O’Shea’s rebellion continues as she leaves the school and joins the rebellion, where she again comes into contact with Henry. She has been relegated to a
support role, as she cooks and delivers food to the men fighting the battles. Yet this does not satisfy her need to be a part of the rebellion, and she later goes out and becomes an actual fighter. Here Doyle seems to be showing the act of allowing women to fight as simultaneously a threat and a positive thing. Miss O’Shea becomes one of the best rebels; she seems to have very little fear and will undertake nearly any mission. Yet at the same time, the rebellious spirit which leads her to be such a good fighter also makes her hard to control. She marries Henry after again meeting him in the midst of fighting, and together they move around the countryside killing British soldiers. They are successful to the point that they begin to create problems for the hierarchy of leadership, who are beginning to negotiate for peace. Henry, also portrayed as the consummate rebel, agrees, and in fact has carried out most of his killings on orders. But he cannot guarantee his wife’s behavior, as she refuses to be controlled by anyone.

Miss O’Shea’s unwillingness to be controlled by anyone, though, seems to be a positive trait. Doyle portrays disrupting the peace talks as a noble action; both Henry and Miss O’Shea seem to be aware that the new Ireland will only be new for those with money and power, while the lower class citizens will continue to live in much the same lifestyle as before. This then turns the rebellion from an international conflict between the Irish and the English to an internal civil war, based on class. While Miss O’Shea and Henry struggle to survive as their former allies seek to kill them, Miss O’Shea gets pregnant, eventually giving birth to a daughter named Saoirse, an Irish name meaning “freedom.” Thus while Doyle shows the rebellion as failing to truly overthrow the
current power structures in Ireland, he also provides hope for the future. Character such as Miss O’Shea and Henry not only continue the struggle, but also procreate, creating a new generation of Irish who might be able to actually change the culture in ways in which the rebellion failed to. Yet this too problematizes the role of mothers. Miss O’Shea refuses to pause in her violent actions while pregnant, putting her unborn child at risk. After the child’s birth, both Miss O’Shea and Henry abandon the child to be raised by Miss O’Shea’s mother. These actions are not questioned in the text; in fact, Miss O’Shea’s continuation of violence is portrayed as a positive. Thus Doyle seems to be arguing that a woman’s duty to the country can be more important than her duty to her children and the idea of Irish motherhood, and that women should not be left out of the battle because of potential conflicts of interest.

Annie Dunne

While motherhood might not seem to feature in *Annie Dunne*, it is an issue with which Annie Dunne struggles, as she faces her own failure to marry and reproduce. Her grandniece and grandnephew’s visit is a chance for her to once again return to the role of surrogate mother, a role she played with her nephews. As Annie Dunne deals with the problems taking care of children can raise, her cousin, Sarah, has the opportunity to marry, although too late in life for her to have children. While Sarah can complete the role of wife if she accepts Billy Kerr’s offer, she can never be a mother. This is not just
due to her age, but also to her personality as she seems unable to interact with the children in her and Annie’s care. Annie, on the other hand, seems to interact quite naturally with the children, suggesting that perhaps Annie and Sarah together would be the ideal Irish woman. Annie has very little chance of ever marrying, in part because of the hump in her back and in part because of where she lives. Annie seems to represent the old ways, and in many ways longs to return to them as her family was well off and well-regarded. In the modern Ireland, she is looked down upon; the people feel that her family looked down upon them, and so her fall to them seems deserved.

Annie spends a fair amount of the text discussing her past, yet only mentions her own mother a couple of times. Barry provides no background; he discusses Annie’s father’s cultural status, but ignores Annie’s mother. This then suggests that the mother’s status is not important. Annie’s mother’s status is derived not from her own family, but from her husband, and from her state as a mother. Annie describes her mother as happy, yet this description carries a haunting suggestion of infertility and control:

I see my father there, the policeman, and my mother in her youth, when she loved to be with us, and counted herself the most blessed of women to have three girls and a little boy. We were her dry kingdom and her fallow field, where she let nothing grow, only the dallying sun was allowed there, to dance for us, to sing its dry song for us (44).

Annie herself seems to see this description as a positive thing; after all her, her mother is “calm and smiling… precisely living, even-handed and serenely just.” Yet is this
even-handedness merely Annie’s attempt to rewrite her own history? Why are her children “dry” and “fallow”? The repetition of the word “dry” shows the lack of nutrition and support, while fallow clearly shows that nothing is allowed to grow in the children. Given Annie’s own adult reality and her lack of children and societal support, this fallowness seems to have continued throughout her life. Is then Barry suggesting that Annie’s mother is to blame for the reality of her children’s lives? If so, this seems unfair, given her early death and thus her inability to influence her children later in life, and given that her social ostracization is due more to her father’s status than to her mother’s. This then again echoes back to the concept of mother blaming and possible maternal alienation. Yet as her mother died at a young age, it seems natural that the children would be alienated from her and closer to the father.

Although Annie seems to have a natural talent for mothering the children, the text calls into question how fit she truly is to be a mother-figure. Annie sees the little girl and little boy engaged in sexual exploration with each other, as the little girl “lies with her face towards the window… The boy is huddled between her legs, his face down near where her body joins at the centre, near that special place that should be foreign to all eyes. ‘Do lick it,’ she says, in her sweet calm voice, innocent as a rose” (88). This throws Annie into confusion, as she struggles to know if this exploration is natural or not. Annie blames her confusion on her lack of experience as a mother, as she tries to remember her own childhood. Yet Annie does have experience as a mother; while living with her sister and her sister’s husband, Annie spends much of her time
taking care of the children, one of whom is the father of the children whom she is
currently caring for. Given the earlier description of her own childhood as dry and
fallow, it is notable that the description of the children’s activities is full of water. The
little boy states, “rain it smells of,” Annie says of her fear that it “engulfs me, it is like a
group of men charging me, knocking me down, stamping on me in the mud,” and “the
bare little room, this niche of Wicklow, this nowhere place, swims about” (88). This
contrast suggests one reason why Annie might not understand the children’s behaviors,
as it is so antithetical to her own upbringing. This then raises the question of why the
upbringings are so different, a question the text raises but provides no real answer to.
One possibility could be a generational difference; Barry shows how much Ireland has
changed culturally since Annie’s childhood, perhaps the children’s comfort with their
bodies is due to a more open society. Yet the text hints at possible abuse, as the girl
seems afraid of her father when he arrives to pick her up, and Annie connects the girl’s
earlier behavior to this possible abuse. Is this, though, Annie’s own discomfort with
sexuality coming to the foreground, as Annie seeks for a reason for the children’s
behavior? After all, the girl’s hesitation only lasts a moment, and then she seems
ecstatic to see her father.

As further proof of Annie’s inability to deal with children, she begins to punish
the children for what she saw. While Annie seems to hold the girl as more accountable,
as she is the oldest and the apparent instigator, Annie acts out her anger instead on the
boy. Rather than talk to them about it, she throws a candy she had been given for them
into the woods, refusing to give it to them. Her anger is taken to such an extreme that on finding the boy playing with his birthday toy early, she takes the truck and shoves it into the manure pile, ruining the boy’s present because he has ruined her pleasure in his surprise. When she discovers Red Dandy, her favorite hen, under the bucket after having been there for several days, she immediately blames the boy:

The little boy is cowering in the barn… It is as sure a proof of guilt as I could ask for. God forgive me, but I pull him to me by the arm, and give his backside a firm slap… I have never hit him before in my life. Suddenly it is like a dream, a nightmare. I am so horrified at myself that my anger redoubles and kindles and flares. I am thinking, but he deserves it. He has been ugly and filthy with his sister! Licking, licking, and kneeling! I am afraid now I will kill him, so I step back (201).

Annie connects her anger not to the boy’s supposed crime, that of putting Red Dandy under a bucket, but instead his previous actions with his sister. Barry shows the danger in this type of anger; while Annie doesn’t truly harm the boy, she does scare him so much that he runs away. Barry also seems to suggest that Annie’s main deficiency as a parental figure is her lack of physical experience, as her whole life seems to be dry and fallow and therefore she cannot or will not understand the actions of the children. Her anger seems based in this lack of understanding, and perhaps a jealousy that she has never experienced anything like that.
If the text is allegorical, as some theorists have argued, what then is Barry saying about motherhood? Annie, as stated earlier, seems to represent an earlier way of life, one that can no longer continue unchanged. Is this then the reason for her inability to procreate, and for her failed sexuality? Yet her barrenness is connected to her own mother, a mother described in terms which could describe the Virgin Mary, “even-handed and serenely just” (44). Perhaps Annie’s mother represents the Catholic Church, a church which both comforts her Irish daughters and passes on a repressed sexuality, one which cannot deal with events such as Annie coming across the children exploring their own sexuality.

**Breakfast on Pluto**

*Breakfast on Pluto* by Patrick McCabe begins and ends with motherhood. Pussy, or Patrick Braden, is a gay transvestite who longs to be a mother. In the preface to the text, Pussy reveals that the boys who live in her apartment refer to her as “Old Mother Riley” (1). This seems to be the closest Pussy ever comes to being a mother; yet this motherhood is associated with Pussy’s own sexuality, as she finds herself “on the verge of calling back: ‘Why yes! But of course, boys! I’ll leave the door open tonight and you can all troop in and give me a jab’” (1). The chapter is called “I Was a High-Class Escort Girl.” Does McCabe associate Pussy’s motherhood with sexuality because of Pussy’s sexual orientation? While it could be argued that Pussy’s statement is just a
joke, the text suggests that in fact what prevents Pussy from acting on it is her age.

Pussy’s true sex is not revealed until the next page, leading the reader to believe that Pussy is a woman. Both the revelation of Pussy’s maleness and the juxtaposition of motherhood and sexuality serve to shock the reader. This then suggests that McCabe is questioning societal concepts such as motherhood and gender by forcing his readers to reexamine what they thought they knew.

McCabe opens the first chapter of the text with an example of neglectful motherhood. The opening scene is idyllic, a “scene that any seasonal greeting card would be more than proud to play host to” (7). McCabe quickly shows, however, that the scene is not as idyllic as it might seem, and Father Bernard McIvor is introduced and revealed to be the father of Pussy within the first page. The text only grows more negative from there; Pussy describes his conception as “the morning he [Father McIvor] inserted his excitable pee pee into the vagina of a woman who was so beautiful she looked not unlike Mitzi Gaynor the well-known film star. And then arranged for her to go to London so there would be no dreadful scandal” (8). This description is interesting in that it introduces Pussy’s mother into the text not by her personality, but by her female genitalia. Father McIvor is described by his job first, thus suggesting that being a mother was Pussy’s mother’s job. The description also sets up London as a place of escape from the close-mindedness of Ireland, where Pussy’s mother would be judged for having had a child.
Yet this doesn’t quite make sense, as Pussy’s mother successfully manages to hide both her pregnancy and Pussy’s birth while living at home with her parents. Why could she not have remained in Ireland? The fact that she must leave suggests that the threat she represents is not her actual rape and pregnancy, but her talking about it. If she should talk about it, Father McIvor could lose his position and the respect of the town. Thus her exile to London is less an escape from Ireland, but a method to silence her. As Father McIvor silences Pussy’s mother, he deprives Pussy not only of his mother, but of the potential for a healthy family life. McCabe includes a description of the Christmas celebration Pussy has access to: “Yuletide celebrations in that particular establishment consisted of one plate of Brussels sprouts, a midget of a turkey and God knows how many half-human children growling and tearing at it like wild animals” (9). The woman caring for him and the other “half-human children” is “Hairy Ma,” a woman who is shown smoking, drinking, and yelling at the children, until the happy moment of the evening:

“she’s suitably drunk she decides to pull the only cracker available… as, happy family that we are, like a snapshot from the past, we all come crowding around … who for such a magnificent display of domestic harmony are presented unopposed with the Patrick Braden ALL-IRELAND FUNCTIONAL FAMILY OF THE CENTURY AWARD! (9).

The fact that Pussy describes her family as the functional family of the year clearly is sarcastic. By including Ireland, though, in the title of the award, Pussy suggests that
perhaps no family in Ireland is truly functional. Perhaps the most functional family is this family made up of abandoned out-of-wedlock children.

Pussy continues to dream about having a truly functional family, as she enters into a sort of domestic life with a married politician. She not only wants a functional family, but longs to be a physical mother: “[I]f I did somehow manage to get a vagina, one thing I was certain of, and I didn’t even care who it was with, was that I wanted at least ten of a family” (40). Unlike Pussy’s first connection to motherhood, this motherhood lacks any eroticism. The vagina she wants is only for reproductive purposes. Yet her vision quickly moves from having children to being near death, surrounded by those children:

as my eyelids slowly closed and the first tears pressed their way into the world,

I’d clasp each hand and say goodbye, to each one adieu bid, safe in the

knowledge that baby one and baby two, right up to baby ten, had all their lives been given it, and to the very end received it, that wonderful thing called love (41).

By showing Pussy’s dream of motherhood as such, McCabe also shows the ways in which motherhood can be a selfish ideal. While Pussy does acknowledge the work that would go into raising ten children, she focuses on the children’s sacrifices, on the fact that they will unequivocally love her. Children become a way for Pussy to both give and receive love safely; after all, family cannot be chosen or gotten rid of. Yet earlier in the story, family is not a constant, as both Father McIvor and Pussy’s mother abandon her.
Having children would perhaps allow Pussy to rewrite her own past and undo her abandonment.

Pussy’s abandonment and her search for her real mother grow more important as the text progresses. Pussy leaves Ireland at least in part to search in London for her mother, a move which proves to be dangerous as Pussy is first nearly killed by a murderer and then is nearly killed in an IRA bombing. Once again, mother and son proves to be a sexual relationship, as Pussy enters into a sexual relationship with Louise, a woman who has lost her son, one in which role playing as mother and son plays a crucial role. Pussy dresses up as her son, a role she only went along with because of her habit of dressing up as a woman. This relationship is connected to nationality, as Louise had been married to an Irish man and “really began to get excited when she asked me [Pussy] to call her ‘Mammy’ which, apparently, because of his dad being Irish, was exactly the way Shaunie pronounced it” (91). Thus it is Pussy’s Irishness which allows Louise to fully buy into the fantasy that Pussy is her son. Yet what does this mean? Is Pussy merely being used by Louise? If Pussy is being used by Louise, it is certainly with her consent, as she leaves her former lover for Louise because “Louise as a part of the bargain had been doing my hair so beautifully” (92). While Louise seems to revel in the situation, Pussy has doubts. She “kept thinking: ‘You shouldn’t be doing this, as well you know. She’s not your mammy… Your mammy was special. Even if she did dump you on Whiskers Braden’s step and leave you for ever. Even if she did do that, no one, no one!, could ever take her place” (92).
Thus it seems as though Louise, an Englishwoman, is more comfortable with the idea of an incestuous relationship than Pussy as an Irishman, although defining Pussy as a man is problematic. Yet while Pussy clearly isn’t comfortable with the relationship, her discomfort is not due to the sexual aspect, but rather because of the idea of trying to replace her mother. This discomfort comes to a head when Louise dresses up as Pussy’s mother, and it is at this point that Pussy begins to lose her grip on reality. Her therapist Terence says, “[I]t all dated back to then. ‘You’ve never been quite with us since, have you?’” (114). By dressing up as Pussy’s mother, Louise taints her image of her, an image that seems to be all that is keeping her sane.

After this episode Pussy becomes even less reliable as a narrator, and reality becomes more unclear. Her fantasies about meeting her mother grow stronger, fantasies which seem connected to her possible IRA ties. While in jail for being in a bar bombed by the IRA, a bombing Pussy claims within the text she had nothing to do with, Pussy begins to hallucinate about her and her mother. These hallucinations are connected not only with her mental reunion with her mother, but also her potential forgiveness of her father, a forgiveness she cannot accomplish: “‘I can’t, Mammy!’ he cried, and got into quite a stat. ‘I can’t, you see! I’ve tried and tried!’” (153). McCabe shows the damage Pussy’s inability to forgive her father causes, a damage which may have begun as purely emotion, but which quickly progresses to physical, as Pussy is “bouncing himself off the walls… about to do some serious damage” when the guards come in to check on her. Eventually after she is released, Pussy returns home and burns down her
father’s church, the only act of violence Pussy commits that the text confirms as true. This act, however, does not free her. While burning down the church might punish her father and the parishioners who didn’t always treat Pussy with kindness, it will not bring her mother back; the text ends with Pussy confirming that she has never found her mother.

Pussy ends the text with no family and seemingly no friends, alone in her apartment. It is perhaps unsurprising that her last longing in the text is to be surrounded by family. Yet she does not only wish to be surrounded by family, she ends by dreaming once again of having a child. McCabe again emphasizes that this dream is more connected to having a constant source of love and acceptance. The family surrounding Pussy is undefined, a vague crowd who “beam with pride, in their eye perhaps a tear or two… hardly able to speak as they wipe it away and say: “He’s ours!” (199). The last sentence, “He’s ours,” could refer to either Pussy, who’s gender is constantly in flux, or to her son. Either way, however, the crowd is accepting Pussy as who she claims to be, taking her and her son in with loving arms. This provides a poignant contrast to Pussy’s actual living conditions. Pussy can never manage to overcome the loss of her mother and the actions of her father and thus is left without family or support.
CONCLUSION

Having examined the eight texts individually in the previous chapters, I will now discuss them together. Clearly eight novels are only a small segment of current literature in Ireland; that each of the eight has a complicated portrayal of motherhood, though, is notable. There do seem to be some differences between these portrayals, as would be expected when examining different authors. But these differences seem to be connected to the gender of the author. As I discussed in chapter one, some female authors such as O’Faolain have stated that they needed to kill off their mothers metaphorically before being able to write. While not all of the authors examined have made statements along those lines, in three of the four novels by women, the mother of the main character is either dead from the beginning or dies during the course of the novel. The same is true of one text by a male author, Annie Dunne, yet given that this novel takes place when the protagonist is advanced in years, the fact that her mother is dead is unsurprising. This is not to say that the death of the mother in Annie Dunne is not traumatizing to Annie; her mother did die when Annie was young and this seems to have had a lasting impact. Yet by setting the novel at a date so much in the future, Barry takes some of the impact out of the death and lessens the importance of the event.

While the female authors kill off their mothers, the male authors seem more likely to portray mothers abandoning their children: two of the four male authored texts do so. It is also notable that the two texts that do not fall into either category of
abandoned or dead mother are the texts dealing with homosexuality. The mother-daughter relationship in *Hood* comes the closest to being healthy; while the daughter keeps her mother separated from some of the most important parts of her life, they do communicate on a regular basis and the mother plays at least some role in her daughter’s life. This is not to say that homosexuality alone can create a good mother-child relationship, as seen in both *The Blackwater Lightship* and *Breakfast on Pluto*. Yet while Pussy in *Breakfast on Pluto* is abandoned by her mother, she remains sympathetic. Rather than blame her mother for leaving her with a horrible substitute, Pussy blames her father for impregnating her mother. She does fantasize about finding her mother, and about her mother finding her, but these imagined reunions again hold no blame for the mother, but instead emphasize a hatred for her father. In *The Blackwater Lightship*, it is the homosexual character, Declan, who holds the family together. Although Declan has some issues with his mother and the way she treats him, he is the one who remains in contact with her and is the one who calls everyone back to his grandmother’s house. Yet the fact that it is his dying that brings about a reconciliation between the women in the family raises questions about his role in the family. Why must the only remaining male die? Toibin seems to suggest that because the rift in his family was begun by a tragedy, the death of his father, it will take another tragedy to heal it.

Why do homosexual characters seem better able to maintain relationships with their mothers in these texts? One answer seems to be in differing societal expectations.
As discussed earlier, Irish society set forth very strict gender roles. Yet a homosexual man or woman is clearly already bending or breaking those roles. These characters already do not fit into the mold society is trying to fit them into. Therefore it seems a much lesser risk to continue to break these molds, in particular for the men. Pen in *Hood* still is reluctant to come out to society in general; while she finally admits her sexuality to her mother at the end of the text, her coming out process is gradual. She doesn’t seem ashamed of her sexuality, but rather seems to fear not only becoming a social outcast but losing her job as a teacher and losing her home with Cara’s father if it becomes widely known. This suggests that while homosexuality is now legal in Ireland and while society might be becoming more accepting, the gender roles for women still remain strong.

Arguing that the mother figure can in fact represent Ireland, while the father figure can represent either England or Irish nationalism, brings all the mother-child issues discussed into a different light. This is not to say that all the texts are strictly allegorical. Yet the fact that various mother-child issues come up in every text is more than mere coincidence; instead, it seems to indicate a cultural issue being worked out within texts, an issue that can be connected to colonialism. It is possible to argue that failed motherhood is representative of a failed support system. The country of Ireland failed women by creating a repressive society after Ireland received independence, one which cut women off from each other as women began to police each other. The abusive fathers discussed show how Irish nationalism has damaged families, as well as
the impact England has had on Irish identity. There are also missing fathers within
several of the texts, yet a missing father seems much less traumatic than a missing
mother, as the body of a mother comes to represent far more than the actual mother
figure and perhaps as a mother plays more of a central role in the children’s lives.

The feminist theory discussed in the first chapter provides a helpful way to
examine the texts by female authors, although connecting these same theories to the
novels by male authors is more of a stretch. That feminist theories around motherhood
don’t apply as well to the male-authored texts seems unsurprising, but shows that issues
surrounding motherhood are perceived differently by the different sexes. The fact that
more of the male authors portray characters abandoned by their mothers suggests that
these men perhaps are not comfortable with the changing gender roles within Ireland.
As women began to work more and challenge the traditional role of staying at home,
they are also abandoning the concept that their lives should revolve around being a
mother. This can be seen in *A Star Called Henry*, despite the plot taking place in the
early twentieth century, within the character of Miss O’Shea, who leaves her child to
continue her job of fighting. While the text portrays this neutrally, she does leave her
child in order to commit violence in order to destroy the political status quo.

The murdering of mothers by the female authors suggests a different sort of
discomfort, a discomfort with the old culturally prescriptions. The mothers must be
killed off in order to allow the daughters in the novel to become their own persons, free
of the societal pressures the mothers have come to represent. Yet this too is more
complicated than it might seem. While the mothers die, the daughters in the texts are not free of societal pressures; instead, they must struggle to create a space for their own needs and desires. This then suggests that the death of the mother is only a beginning. The daughters must continue to fight the hegemonies telling them their job is to stay home and be mothers. It is interesting that none of the main characters in the texts by female authors is herself a mother or even married, further proof that these women are rebelling against cultural norms.

These main characters also lack a female support system, as none seem to have a real community. Pen in *Hood* comes the closest to being supported, as she progresses in developing a community in order to support her in her grief, and she is also the only one who has a living mother with whom she has a decent relationship. Thus O’Reilly’s argument regarding African American culture and the importance of community does seem to hold true for Irish women, who have lost a sense of community because of colonization. Donoghue’s portrayal of the lesbian community focuses on the support and affection these women provide each other; thus perhaps women of all sexualities can learn from this supportive lesbian community, a community formed because of shared struggles.

There seems to be hope for the future generations of Irish children and mothers, as both men and women work through the aftermath of colonization to determine what kind of community an Irish community is. Whether eventual success comes from a wider acceptance of all sexualities, an embracing of female sexuality, an empowering of
mothers, or the passing of time since colonization, the fact that problems around motherhood are being brought to the forefront of national consciousness suggests that Ireland as a country and a community is beginning to deal with these issues on some level.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


