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## NATURE AS SPACE: GENDER ROLES AND SUBVERSION IN EDNA O'BRIEN'S *A SCANDALOUS WOMAN*

**Abstract:** The rigid social conventions for women in rural twentieth century Ireland, specifically that of the nun and the mother, are illustrated and subsequently subverted by the figures of the scandalous woman and the witch in Edna O'Brien's short story, "A Scandalous Woman". Most of the scholarship on this short story and O'Brien's work in general has been focused on the gender roles in terms of women's rights. The purpose of this paper, however, is to explore the interrelationship between both the accepted and subversive roles of women, and at the same time demonstrate how social conventions are made subversive by the natural surroundings, outlining both the conventional and subversive nature symbolism which underpins conventional morality. Nature takes on various guises in the story: it has symbolic importance as spiritual sustenance, it has an underlying psychological component, and finally it is present in both erotic and esoteric situations. Spaces are inexorably intertwined with religion and the role of the women in the story, specifically in the context of Eily, the protagonist, and her progression from an innocent girl to a scandalous woman. These connections also serve to illustrate the main character's progression from innocent girl to scandalous woman in terms of the interactions of gender, nature, and space.

**Keywords:** *Edna O'Brien; space; Ireland; gender roles; subversive; nature.*

The role of gender in Edna O'Brien's short story, "A Scandalous Woman" underlies and also subverts prevailing ideas of feminine identity and women's social roles in twentieth century Ireland. The purpose of this paper is to broaden the perspective of identity and gender and examine how nature and space play two important roles: on the one hand underpinning submissive female identity and on the other subverting this same identity. Conversely, conventions are

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upheld by the controlled indoor and outdoor spaces that have clear limits for women in the form of chores or functions within the family, all of which are closely linked to identity.

Even though she was largely ignored at the beginning of her career, the recent studies on Edna O'Brien tend to focus on her contribution to Irish literature both as an author and a champion of women's rights thanks to the female protagonists in her stories and novels, as Lisa Colletta and Maureen O'Connor point out:

Ireland, in fact, banned her books in 1969 on the grounds of their frank portrayal of female sexuality, a subject considered by Irish censors to be pornographic and obscene. Even outside of Ireland, O'Brien's attention to 'women's' concerns, like sex, romance, marriage, and childbirth—and her expression of the inevitable frustrations and failures attending these unsatisfying, claustrophobic "female" preoccupations—has relegated her to, at best, critical neglect or, at worst, outright opprobrium (4).

With the publication of a collection of critical essays they hope to remedy the fact that "she has long been under-regarded by scholars" (3). She has not, however, been ignored by the guardians of conventional morality. O'Brien has been censored in Ireland explicitly, as well as implicitly, that is, by people ignoring what she has written and essentially expressing moral disapproval. Perhaps this is because she takes on controversial themes and, as O'Brien herself points out in an interview, "although Ireland has produced so many great writers, there is a deep suspicion about writing there. Somehow they know that writing is dangerous, seditious [...]" (Guppy 22). In "A Scandalous Woman," the subversive nature of the story is present from the beginning, made explicit in the title, and later developed through the character of Eily.

Studies are scarce when it comes to the connection between Ireland as space and gender roles. In her article "The Mythopoetic Ireland of Edna O'Brien's Fiction" (2010), Maureen O'Connor explains that O'Brien's Catholicism coupled with that of the Irish countryside is "an ironically 'unnatural' construct (particularly the west of Ireland, whose topography has been shaped by a history of conflict and suffering) has yet to be considered in discussing the impact of her work, though it has informed her fiction from the start" (219).

In this essay an effort has been made to flesh out the roles of nature and

space within the context of the story and examine the implications of their potentially subversive nature. These elements will be put in the context of narrative arc, that is, the progression of Eily from innocent girl to scandalous women, and how they interact with the gender roles that determine identity.

“A Scandalous Woman” is a short story that recounts the life of a young woman in rural Ireland. It is narrated by a childhood friend, Brady. The main character, Eily, falls in love with Jack, a Protestant. Eventually she becomes pregnant and is forced to marry him by her family, following the social convention of the time. She thus seals her fate as a scandalous, rather than a respectable, woman.

The narrator of the story defines what it meant to be a scandalous woman: “She had joined that small sodality of scandalous women who had conceived children without securing fathers and who were damned in body and soul” (27). Rebecca Pelan has commented on the wording of this phrase: “O’Brien’s choice of the word ‘sodality’ is interesting here since, apart from its general meaning of fellowship or society, the word has a specific meaning within the Roman Catholic Church, ironically, a society with religious or charitable objects” (15). The interplay between religion and morality, on the one hand, and scandal, on the other, constitutes the main conflict in the story. It follows what is a “general tendency in O’Brien’s short fiction is to depart from the conventional notions of femininity endorsed by Irish nationalism and Catholicism, by depicting characters who openly challenge sexual repression and the authority of the State and the Church” (Villar Argáiz 90).

This being said, Edna O’Brien makes the reader empathetic with Eily’s plight, juxtaposing the ideal image of women in Ireland (the submissive wife and mother), with the wild, scandalous woman who holds a romantic idea of love, which in the end leads to her social and psychological exile. In this way O’Brien “challenges powerful cultural mythologies, including the ones women construct about their own lives” (Colletta 6).

There is a clear socialization of the gender difference, where in an overtly patriarchal and staunchly religious cultural system women tend to be limited to a general identity. This is done in a rural Irish context, where, as O’Brien herself says, “any small, claustrophobic, ingrown community resembles another” (Guppy 28). It is therefore universal, as she goes on to say, “the passion and ignorance in the Deep South of America and the west of Ireland are the same” (Guppy 28). This explains “rural”, the first adjective regarding the context. The

second adjective, Irish, is more complex:

O'Brien creates a different metaphor for Ireland. Ireland is not an old sow that eats her farrow but, as described in her powerful memoir, *Mother Ireland*, a woman who has been raped by various enemies, a woman with whom other women can identify, indeed, must identify, and always to their sorrow. It is the mother who emerges in O'Brien's fiction as the most compelling love object, a figure at least as romantically and erotically cathected, and even more desirable, elusive, and destructive, finally, than any heterosexual object of desire (Colletta 8).

An oppressive idea of Ireland is present throughout, while notably lacking is Eily's mother as a loving, supportive figure. Herein lies an important emotional paucity. In an interview with Philip Roth, O'Brien says:

If you want to know what I regard as the principal crux of female despair, it is this: in the Greek myth of Oedipus and in Freud's exploration of it, the son's desire for his mother is admitted; the infant daughter also desires its mother but it is unthinkable, either in myth, in fantasy, or in fact, that that desire can be consummated (46).

In this context, women lose their individuality in the only identities possible for them, that of mother or nun, or scandalous woman, the former two being the accepted convention and the latter suggesting a basic disgrace of the person and the family from a social perspective. O'Brien plays with these positive and negative connotations: "Matrimony is portrayed as a prison for women, an institution which delimits their freedom and determines their lives of submission and service" (Villar Argáiz 93). While marriage (and therefore religion) is limiting, by extension the family must also play a role in limiting women: "apart from religion and nationalism, O'Brien also presents the family as the framework for the consolidation of patriarchal values and the perpetuation of conventional gendered roles" (Villar Argáiz 92). Eily is a subversive character in this sense, in that she represents "women's repression in the grip of a strict Irish patriarchy" (Griffin 15).

A more radical characterization of the woman outside of the social convention would be the figure of the witch. In terms of identity, there is a binary

opposition present, where the nun and mother are quiet, obedient, and socially acceptable, while the scandalous woman and witch are loud, both literally and figuratively, and rejected by society. Eily does not reveal anything about her burgeoning emotional and sexual awakening until she becomes pregnant, precisely because she “understands the importance of maintaining a code of silence” in terms of her sexual relationship with a man who is not her husband (O’Byrne 232). The quiet, submissive girl figure is regarded as innocent and angelic, but then this quickly changes. Eily is later portrayed as “the sexually voracious but emotionally unfulfilled fallen woman” which “calls attention to the implicit sexuality, as well as the oppressive brutality, of cultural/ national gender stereotypes” (Colletta 5). The angel falls and is subsequently pigeonholed into a social and moral category defined strictly in terms of prevailing morality. Eily becomes pregnant outside of wedlock, so she is, apart from a sinner in terms of Catholicism, someone who has encroached on the established moral chronology concerning females: the virgin, marriage, childbirth, mother.

Edna O’Brien, in her essay “Why Irish Heroines Don’t Have to be Good Any More” (1986), traces a history of heroines in Irish literature, “realizing that the earlier heroines were bawdy and the later ones lyrical I decided to have two, one who would conform to both my own and my country’s view of what an Irish woman should be and one who would undermine every piece of protocol and religion and hypocrisy that there was.” Here she is referring to characters in *The Country Girls* trilogy, but this can also be applied to the narrator of “A Scandalous Woman” and Eily, the former embodying what “an Irish woman should be” while the latter undermines all of the conventions, only to be easily quelled by them afterwards.

Eily, therefore, can be considered a tragic heroine in two ways, firstly in the sense that fate, broadly understood as social convention, forces her into the role of the outsider, and secondly, due to the fact that her fatal moral flaw is the cause of her downfall. The interaction between the two, social convention and morality in the framework of gender roles, drives the plot and finally determines the outcome of the story.

It is interesting to note that the established morality also takes the form of a woman, defended in this case by the character of Mrs. Bolan. She was the conscience of the community and at the same time the moral police; she protected public decency and the idea of order by walking around the town in search of hidden courting couples. The excuse she would use for exploring all of

the nooks and crannies where mischievous couples would be prone to temptation and sin would be that she was looking for turkeys or turkey eggs (18). Place here becomes both the excuse and the reason that legitimates Mrs. Bolan's role, which is reinforced on the one hand by the town's inhabitants and on the other by gender roles and religious dogma. As we have seen, there is subversion at work in the plot as well as the characters, as O'Brien "challenged the unquestioned cultural and social norms of traditional Irish society and the authority of the up-to-that-time untouchable trio of ideological apparatuses: family, Church and State" (Košta).

Spaces in the story are closely related to the identity and role of women, especially the convent and the kitchen. Eily, as a child, was described as a "madonna" and had ironically considered becoming a nun earlier on (9), but in the end decided against it, in contrast to the narrator's sister who entered a convent (15). Nuala, Eily's sister, was destined for the conventional role of the woman in the household, studying for the colorful professional title of "domestic economy instructress" (15). The nun or the housewife juxtaposed with the scandalous woman maintains a dramatic element in following Eily's exploits, that is, "the high status of the nun is achieved through the low status of the 'fallen woman,' through contrasting the hard-bought virtue of one with the so-called sinfulness of the other. The nun's convent may seem imprisoning, but so may the home of the respectable wife or the ditch of the 'fallen woman' " (Shumaker 185). This tension serves to outline the various roles available to women, and their corresponding spaces and consequences.

Spaces are also related to safety, hiding, and both psychological and physical convalescence. At the beginning of the story, under the kitchen table was a safe space for Eily when she was a child. She would hide there to escape punishment from her father (9). When Eily and her sister were young girls, they would meet up and play doctor in the kitchen. One would feign becoming ill from eating certain foods such as sherbet or rainbow toffees, and then have to swallow difficult brews such as turpentine or castor oil in order to recuperate and feel better (13). They were then offered a biscuit when the mother arrived back home. There is a mirroring of this later in the story when the narrator felt she was sinning in that she was disobeying God as well as her own mother. The narrator feels guilty for aiding and abetting the sins of her friend, and so takes refuge in penance. In her atonement she would refrain from eating, or even gargle with salt water to physically purge herself of this guilt caused by sin in the

eyes of God (17). There is also an allusion to a “back-street” abortion in a game that the girls played as children (O’Byrne 7). The narrator was the patient, Eily was the nurse and Nuala the practitioner, who: “Liked to operate with a big black carving knife, and long before she commenced, she gloated over the method and over what tumours she was going to remove. She used to say that there would be nothing but a shell by the time she had finished, and that one wouldn’t be able to have babies or women’s complaints ever” (11).

When Eily’s father found out about her actions, he locked her in the room that was used for storing the oats (29). They fed her only bread and weak tea during the time she was locked in this room (29). She was now physically imprisoned in her own house, all the while psychologically imprisoned by misogynist morality and the limited roles for women in rural Irish society.

The other place for women, apart from the kitchen and the convent, was of course the psychiatric hospital. This was the place for women who did not neatly fit into an identity category. Eily’s father considered the option of sending her to a lunatic asylum (29), but then confronted her lover and decided that he must “make an honest woman out of her” (33-4). This thinly veiled euphemism makes explicit the moral aspect of marriage as the only way for a woman who is bearing a child to continue in society, and it was the father’s duty to see that this was accomplished.

The specific food relationships that will be examined in terms of subversion are gooseberries and the gooseberry bush in terms of chaperones and procreation, the hazelnut in terms of love, and rhubarb as figurative purgative.

Gooseberries are first used to describe Eily’s skin and eyes at the beginning of the story (9). O’Brien uses foreshadowing in her physical description of Eily, suggesting what will later come to pass between her and her lover, and a more literal meaning as to what the couple would be doing in the vicinity of these shrubs. In fact, it is the excuse that both girls give so Eily can secretly rendezvous with her lover. The girls said that they were going to gather gooseberries, and later came back empty-handed saying that there were none to be had (16). This marked the beginning of the narrator’s role as an accomplice as she helped to make up excuses so that the two lovers would be able to meet away from the watchful eyes of her parents (15). The denotations hold a triple meaning here. Firstly, ‘to be born under the gooseberry bush’ is a euphemism for the following: “In former times boy babies were explained to young siblings as having been found under the gooseberry bush, that being a part of the garden seldom dug

over or hoed...allowing the weeds to remain undisturbed and the stork to drop its bundle discreetly" (Holder 201-02). Secondly, to *play gooseberry* is to "to play the devil with a courting couple by keeping them company when they would rather be left alone" (Holder 201). The gooseberry bush, therefore, represents a symbolic space where discretion reigns, in terms of childbirth, while at the same time it is a secret hidden place for lovers, as well as a place where a couple can easily be discovered.

Hazelnuts are mentioned in the story as being plentiful in the area. Eily and the narrator were sitting on a wall under the hazelnut tree when she first asked her what she thought about Jack (14). The hazel is the tree of wisdom in Irish folklore as well as fertility and protection against evil spirits (Watts 183-85). It is implicit in Eily's attitude that she believes that because she is in love, her actions are wise and therefore justified, and so she emerged from her safe, conventional space as a girl into the much more exciting and passionate space as a woman, a space of adventurous love.

The solution to Eily's problem in her relationship was a trip to consult a witch. The witch can be placed outside of the standard roles for women in the sense that it is a hyperbolization of the scandal, and the polar opposite of the nun. The witch was able to foresee the future of the relationship, and stated that Eily would end her days with this man (24). Eily's hopes for the future are never revealed, which suggests that she was following an immature passion, an "impoverished vision of romance that leads to her liaison" (Shumaker 191). She did not consider the possible consequences, which paved the way for what would be the tragic life she would soon lead.

Eily's family invited Jack, the bank clerk, over for dinner to discuss the formalities of the wedding. The social role of the dinner was to tell Jack he was obliged to marry their daughter due to the fact that he was responsible for getting her pregnant. He attempted to shirk this responsibility and leave town, but was swiftly and roughly brought back by the men, who maintained the social order by not letting one of their own daughters live out the worst possible role that a woman could, life as an unmarried mother. They, like Mrs. Bolan, maintain the social convention. They represent the interplay of Ireland, morality, and religion.

Eily and Jack became an ostracized couple on the wake of the scandal. They were said to have pathetic household utensils, and so it is therefore assumed that she could never properly run a household without these important implements

and tools of the trade (37). The girls in the town were warned not to follow in Eily's footsteps and not to give in to temptation, but to be virtuous and good. For this they were advised to go home in pairs, to speak Irish, and to not walk provocatively and call the attention of men (37). She became an example of what path not to follow for virtuous and well-bred girls. O'Brien describes her work in general in something that is certainly applicable to this story, the theme of loss: "But my work is concerned with loss as much as with love ... So my central theme is loss—loss of love, loss of self, loss of God" (Guppy 31). This is certainly seen in the story, where Eily loses her idealized idea of love, and then loses her identity, and finally loses her mind.

Eventually the narrator found out that her childhood friend Eily had had a son, had become odd, and then had had two more children over the next four years. She was described as a "wild creature", which was a terrible epithet for a woman, and sealed her fate as someone who had gone down the wrong path, sinned against the moral norms of the society in which she lived, and was considered mad (40).

The last visit the narrator makes to Eily at the end of the story is in the general store that she and her husband run. He was not there at the time. In shop they have toffee, which reminds us of when the girls used to play doctor when they were much younger (13). It is also a reminder of how, after Eily had been found out and was being punished, her friend offered to make toffee together with her in order to cheer her up, and was refused (32). The narrator describes her friend as not being herself, as if something had "drugged the feelings out of her" or that she had imbibed "strange brews". This observation by the narrator suggests that "her recovery into a mindless contentment despite her husband's affairs is portrayed as even more disturbing than her madness" (Shumaker 190). When they were parting, Eily gave her a kiss and applied holy water to her forehead and touched it as if she were "dough" (43). Eily becomes almost unrecognizable not just physically as a "wild woman" but also psychologically, to the narrator. In the end, "Eily's relief from pain comes not through wifhood, but through a madness that allows her to express her rage towards the family and friends who were supposed to protect her, not reject her. Finally, her relief comes through a supposed cure, possibly a lobotomy, a numbed sanity that represents oblivion" (Shumaker 191).

It was mentioned by the witch's husband that Ireland would once again become a land of saints and scholars (24). Eily's friend, the narrator, applies this

in a more stark, honest way at the end of the story, referring to a “land of shame, murder, strange sacrificial women” (43). The narrator views Eily as a subversive character in terms of the clearly defined and accepted role of women as well as the space which is Ireland.

In this short story, the main theme of the fall of the innocent girl to a scandalous woman. The social implications this entails form an integral part of the social fabric in Ireland. The relationship of the role of women and spaces is sheds light on the conventional and subversive aspects that led to Eily’s fall from grace, as it were, and is present at all of the stages of Eily’s relationship with her friend, her family, and her lover. Nature and space is inextricable from the perceived proper role of women in Irish society, as well as the opposite, the affront to morality which defined the relationship of Eily and her lover, and the subsequent consequences that they faced in the wake of their transgressions. Eily was transformed from an innocent, naïve and even angelic girl to a “wild” unkempt mad woman, and outsider who was unable to escape the oppressive forces of family, Ireland, and religion.

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