

2024

## A Turning Point for Future Conversations

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### Recommended Citation

Harney-Mahajan, Tara (2024) "A Turning Point for Future Conversations," *James Joyce Literary Supplement*: Vol. 37: Iss. 1, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls/vol37/iss1/4>

## A Turning Point for Future Conversations

MAUREEN O'CONNOR, *Edna O'Brien and the Art of Fiction*.

Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press, distributed by Rutgers University Press, 2021.

\$150.00 hardcover; \$32.95 paperback; \$32.95 ebook.

**Tara Harney-Mahajan**

Maureen O'Connor's field-defining *Edna O'Brien and the Art of Fiction* is the monograph O'Brien Studies needs to launch what will hopefully be many more. To date, critical studies of Edna O'Brien have been relatively far and few between and O'Connor deftly tracks the undulations of this uneven critical landscape to reveal how O'Brien frequently became a lightning rod and foil for misogynist critics and academic scholars who, time and time again, failed to comprehend O'Brien's wider vision. In O'Connor's meticulous accounting of this decades-long critical landscape—from non-academic reviews to literary criticism, interviews, and commentators—she shows us how O'Brien was disparaged, especially early on, because she had the audacity to be a woman writer who insisted on representing the grim realities of Irish girls' and women's lives instead of writing aspirational literature. Making sense of a life lived over ninety-plus years and a writing career that began in the 1950s, O'Connor not only demonstrates an erudite familiarity with O'Brien's incredible oeuvre, but also gifts us critical insights only possible for a scholar after decades of engagement and contemplation.

O'Connor marshals a wide range of interlocutors, from Jack Halberstam's theories on "shadow feminism" (2011) to Irving Massey's *The Gaping Pig* (1976), as well as previous vital contributions from O'Brien scholars—there are not very many, but they are mighty. The six chapters of the monograph examine the damaged and damaging patriarchal Irish family in violent contrast to female protagonists' desire "at the core of O'Brien's narrative" (Chapter 1); domestic objects and things, the "inanimate in O'Brien's work" (Chapter 2); the landscape and the "natural" world in relation to O'Brien's prose (Chapter 3); dreams, mythologies, folklore, and verse, and O'Brien's "nonrealist aesthetic" (Chapter 4); (dis)embodied shape-shifting and human-animal hybrids (Chapter 5); and, the dead, the unborn, and the "irredeemable filth" of and beyond the body (Chapter 6). But first, the introduction: a seventeen-page masterclass overview of O'Brien, including her texts, her life, and a summation of the critics (both academic and otherwise) who have mostly hounded—and sometimes hailed—her over many decades. From there, each chapter establishes a theoretical network which is applied to many of O'Brien's interviews, short stories, nonfiction, memoirs, and novels. Through its treatment of such a wide range of O'Brien's works, O'Connor's expert assessment of O'Brien's project emerges. The chapters also intersect and build on each other such that the reader's understanding of each critical insight deepens, and doubles back, as they read along.

To take a closer look, in Chapter 1, "Anti-Oedipal Desires," O'Connor parses the methods of resistance—not always liberatory, not always successful—to the family, state, and church that she perceives in O'Brien's representation of relationships among women. First, considering the complex mother-daughter relationships we have all come to know in O'Brien's fiction, O'Connor extends her analysis to counteract the "Barbara Cartland-style pursuit of 'romance'" for which O'Brien has often been condemned to show us how female relationships (both of friendship and erotic) underscore a

desire that cannot be contained or satisfied within patriarchal systems (23). O'Connor covers over a dozen of O'Brien's texts before she takes a more thorough look at *The High Road* (1988), O'Brien's extended representation of a lesbian relationship. But even more than desire, O'Connor emphasizes the sense of loss that precedes female desire and pervades all of O'Brien's work. This relationship between desire and loss can be both "transformative and paralyzing" in O'Brien's work, O'Connor contends (23).

Any reader of O'Brien's work will recognize her reliance on "things"—often small, silly, cheap, kitschy objects imbued with an outsized sense of devotion by their female owners and caretakers. Chapter 2, "The Liberating Sadomasochism of Things," one of the most illuminating chapters in the book, scrutinizes O'Brien's characters' preoccupations with *things*: their infatuations with elegant, luxurious objects that are out of reach for them, as well as their obsessions with minor, junky items which ostensibly possess little or no value. Although O'Connor turns to "Inner Cowboy" from O'Brien's more recent collection of short stories, *Saints and Sinners* (2011), at the conclusion, the major contribution of this chapter is to offer a theoretical framework to understand O'Brien's representation of mid-to-late twentieth century rural Irish women and their deep, compulsive relationships with material objects: these are "poignant attempts by O'Brien's abused and lonely wives to vivify domestic interiors" that "uncover a hidden history of small refusals to submit to patriarchal expectations of women's total self-abnegation in post-Independence Ireland" (37). Working primarily with *The Country Girls* (1960) and the short stories "Green Georgette" (1978) and "Rose in the Heart" (1978), O'Connor establishes that a preoccupation with things functions as "sadomasochistic defiance in the face of expected modes of development" that emerge "as violent undoings of the 'natural' order of reproduction" (37). Extending the "S/M" dynamic previously established in Chapter 1, O'Connor moves here to "include relationships between the animate and inanimate, demonstrating the variety and complexity of possibilities for connection in O'Brien's fiction" (37).

"The Ungrammatical Sublime" (Chapter 3) demonstrates the so-called "radical messiness" of O'Brien's prose—a topic many commentators have discussed, typically offering "implicitly gendered critiques," but few have attempted to truly understand or explore (52). Briefly mentioning a plethora of O'Brien's texts, but then making connections among ten or so novels, O'Connor most fully considers *A Pagan Place* (1971) and underscores how O'Brien "provoke[s] self-consciousness in the reader by bringing a text's textuality to our attention", thus allowing "her prose" to "potentially destabilize the normative dynamic and distance 'proper' to the relationship between author, character, and reader..." (58). Convincingly illustrating how critics often took the opportunity to conflate her authorial persona (which they found threatening and unconvincing) and personal life (which they also found threatening) with her prose, O'Connor demonstrates that the "textual dissonance" (58) readers experience "stage[s] a confrontation between form and content" (59) and reveals O'Brien's "purported stylistic deficiencies as defiance of formal authority and its determinate structures" (57). Through this exploration, O'Connor wryly shows us that what James Joyce (an eternal touchstone for O'Brien) has been acclaimed for, "flouting... grammar," in O'Brien is read as "personal and professional failure" (58).

Contextualized within a network of many O'Brien texts, Chapter 4, "Otherworldly Possessions," contemplates connections to Irish storytelling, folklore and mythology, fairytales, and dreams via a thorough examination of one of O'Brien's most controversial novels (since *The Country Girls* was published in 1960), *In the Forest* (2002). Repositioning O'Brien as more than a realist or naturalist writer, O'Connor's reading here is vital because she focuses on the main character of the novel, Michen O'Kane, to offer a sympathetic yet brutal reading of Irish masculinity in early twenty-first century Ireland. Complicit in the creation of O'Kane, who was terrorized by his abusive father before being sent into the savage Irish industrial school system after the death of his mother, is Irish

society. When he returns to his childhood village as a deeply troubled, traumatized, dangerous young man, the “local residents practice a kind of willful blindness to him” neither accepting nor rejecting him (75). The relevance of O’Connor’s intervention here is to show how prescient O’Brien would be in her portrayal of the rage of a tortured, motherless orphan boy/man and how, once again, she was scolded by indignant critics for being out of touch and supposedly too long gone from Irish society to represent accurately some of its most problematic complexities.

“Myth and Mutation” (Chapter 5), focusing on *The High Road* (1988), *Time and Tide* (1992), and *House of Splendid Isolation* (1995), considers “instances of shape-shifting and human-animal hybrids” as “figurations that can effect a kind of autoethnography, an ironic exoticizing of not just Irishness but also Irish femininity” (83). O’Connor ruminates here about the power of metamorphoses, “female and nonheteronormative,” noting that while these can be effective (if temporary) modes of resistance to the “binarized conception of volition and (in)dependence that enables the oppositions of ‘power’ and ‘powerlessness’...such resistance [also] does not escape punishment” (see here: Catalina from *The High Road*, McGreevy from *House of Splendid Isolation*, and Nell from *Time and Tide*) (89). Concluding with the “mythic figure of the banshee,” which features repeatedly in O’Brien’s fiction, O’Connor argues that O’Brien’s use of Irish mythologies and legends allows her to perform and transgress countless boundaries in her fiction, including the boundaries “between the human and nonhuman, between the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary,’ and even between life and death” (97). These transgressed boundaries are “terrifying” journeys (rather than “reassuring”), “but they are [also] potentially liberating and transformative” (97).

In the final chapter “Disorder, Dirt, and Death” (Chapter 6), O’Connor flawlessly works with a multitude of texts that feature the dead body or the unborn, considering how they determine and undermine the self “and through this dynamic provide access to the liminality essential to creative imagination” (98). Most importantly, O’Connor demonstrates how O’Brien “confront[s] illness, decay, refuse, and death,” which “humbles the human, insists on our relationality, connects us to the rest of creation via the loss of our carefully guarded, inviolable self” (99). Perhaps concluding in a sense where she began, O’Connor wraps up the chapter by considering “the terror of the mother,” arguing that this terror, “experienced culturally and individually, is simultaneously the terror of life, always necessarily moving toward destruction,” and a “paradoxical source of creativity and imagination” (110). Chapter 6 is also where the monograph concludes. If I had to offer one critique, it would be that I would have relished reading O’Connor’s more expansive, closing thoughts in the form of a formal conclusion, given the powerhouse nature of the preceding chapters. But this is a minor quibble.

With O’Connor’s broad and interconnected study of O’Brien’s texts, the ways in which *Edna O’Brien and the Art of Fiction* succeeds are too numerous to count. One of the most notable, however: it is one of the first book-length treatments to feature O’Brien’s archival material held at Emory University. We can only hope that this archives-centric methodology will catalyze future examinations of O’Brien’s work. O’Brien’s archival materials are also held at University College Dublin and, as of 2021, the National Library of Ireland. Another of the book’s key achievements is how O’Connor completely debunks the notion that O’Brien does not write sympathetic male characters. Indeed, O’Connor proves that they are unambiguously as complex and nuanced as O’Brien’s female characters, starting with her earliest fiction. A third highlight: O’Connor reminds us how *funny* O’Brien’s texts can be (as a few other scholars have argued), and this this element of her fiction is often overlooked. It’s O’Brien’s hopeless mothers, with their fumbling, brash, hapless, and comical daughters, that we return to again and again, finding, always, minor and major moments of defiance and resistance against the power dynamics that dominate their existence. Finally, O’Connor demonstrates how O’Brien unfailingly forces us to *look* at the lives of girls and women, entangled as they are in the local and global societies that create and consume them. We are only

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beginning to understand O'Brien's impact on the fields of women's writing, Irish literature, contemporary writing, and feminist postcolonial studies. *Edna O'Brien and the Art of Fiction* is a landmark book—a turning point—for future conversations.

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