

EDNA O'BRIEN'S *MOTHER IRELAND* REVISITED: CLAIRE KEEGAN'S "(M)OTHER IRELAND"*

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ABSTRACT

Back in 1976 Edna O'Brien published a series of essays entitled *Mother Ireland* in which her aim was to portray an eternal and contemporary Ireland that seemed to be anchored in a line of ancestry and remembrance, legend and truth. This paper revisits that Mother Ireland of O'Brien's fiction that has transformed herself into a (M)other Ireland best expressed through a new contemporary portrayal of her plights and predicaments. In *Antarctica* (1999) and *Walking the Blue Fields* (2007), short story writer Claire Keegan's compelling fictional skills do not only offer a re-visioning of those eternal ideals of Ireland's past. Among many other issues, Claire Keegan's short fiction revisits O'Brien's "Mother Ireland" and questions traditional and hegemonic approaches to this eternal Irish feminine within a new discourse of Ireland. Her fiction does not represent a commemoration of loss nor a return to nostalgia; but, rather, a celebration of a twofold newness in Irish society as a whole and in the role of the Irish woman in particular. Keegan delves into a sociological depiction of this new Ireland. Her short stories approach the Irish identity from within, narrating the present from a close distance.

KEY WORDS: Irish feminine, "Mother Ireland," re-visiting Ireland, nostalgia, Irish short stories.

RESUMEN

En 1976 Edna O'Brien publica una colección de ensayos titulada *Mother Ireland* con la intención de acercarse a una Irlanda contemporánea y, a su vez eterna, que parecía estar anclada en un pasado de recuerdos, leyendas y tradiciones. El presente artículo reconsidera la Irlanda pasada descrita por O'Brien y cómo la transformación de la misma se expresa de una nueva forma. Así, la estrategia de ficción de la escritora de relatos Claire Keegan (*Antarctica* [1999] y *Walking the Blue Fields* [2007]) no ofrece únicamente una reconsideración del pasado. Keegan cuestiona el "eterno femenino" irlandés dentro de un nuevo momento discursivo en Irlanda. Su ficción no representa una mera conmemoración de la pérdida de valores pasados, ni una vuelta a la nostalgia como estrategia estética, sino la celebración de una nueva Irlanda y de la mujer en la Irlanda del siglo veintiuno, ahondando en una representación sociológica de este nuevo país.

PALABRAS CLAVE: lo femenino irlandés, "Mother Ireland," re-escribir Irlanda, nostalgia, relato corto irlandés.



I live out of Ireland because something in me warns me that I might stop if I lived there, that I might cease to feel what it has meant to have such a heritage, might grow placid when in fact I want yet again and for indefinable reasons to trace that same route, that trenchant childhood route, in the hope of finding some clue that will, or would, or could, make possible the leap that would restore one to one's original place and state of consciousness, to the radical innocence of the moment just before birth. (O'Brien 144)

Back in 1976 Edna O'Brien finished with these lines a volume which has been considered an "iconoclastic commentary and travelogue" (Welch 401), a series of memoir-essays entitled *Mother Ireland* in which O'Brien's aim was to portray—always with a female voice—both an eternal and contemporary Ireland that seemed to be anchored in continuous and never-ending lines of ancestry and heritage, legend and truth, landscape and society. Very much following the narrative of her already acclaimed *The Country Girls Trilogy* of the 1960s to a great extent (Burke 224) and peppered with illuminating photographs by Fergus Bourke, O'Brien's detailed account of her remembrances, childhood experiences and everyday life in Ireland was published at a time when Ireland was undergoing crucial changes that would utterly transform what Ireland had stood for forever. O'Brien's volume was published just a few years after the main atrocious events in the North. It was a time when the Republic of Ireland started its process of profound europeanisation as the country joined the European Common Market together with Great Britain and was about to experience a development in economic and social terms that was to bring about a decisive cleavage between the isolationist post De Valeran decades and the highly influential and globalising Celtic Tiger phenomenon at the end of the twentieth century. But, more than thirty years after O'Brien's publication of the volume a new Ireland, rather a "(M)other Ireland," can be reflected upon with a new light. One could argue that this newly envisaged and represented "(M)other Ireland" is emerging as a result of the revisiting and rewriting of a variety of issues previously dealt with in O'Brien's memoir-essays, producing an alternative say on these.

The aim of this paper will be to approach how the representation of that "Mother Ireland" envisaged in 1976 has transformed itself into a "(M)other Ireland" with a new contemporary portrayal of the country's plights and predicaments. Today's "(M)other Ireland" faces the advent of rapid economic development and its subsequent crisis, the increase in immigration as opposed to former continuous emigration, the establishment of a multi-cultural and multi-religious society, and the questioning of social inequalities that were entrenched in that eternal Ireland O'Brien portrayed back in 1976. Indeed, not only the Irish landscape, but, also, social mores in Ireland and the new conception of the Irish woman have undergone

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a substantial and inevitable evolution, as this paper will show. For R.F. Foster, feminism and secularism¹ constitute the two main forces that paved the way to this profound transformation of the role of the Irish woman; and, to a greater extent, these two forces were also the basis of the “rejection of old authoritarian formations: patriarchy and the Catholic Church” since the 1970s which O’Brien describes up to the present day (37). Accordingly, a new commemoration which negotiates the Irish future ahead can also be envisaged in this revisited “(M)other Ireland,” in which the role of the Irish woman has found a new place of representation in literature; a place that, as this paper will try to demonstrate, will not need its writers to “live out of Ireland” as O’Brien concludes in order to advocate the centrality of the Irish woman and the female voice in the Ireland of the twenty-first century.

For many, Edna O’Brien’s *Mother Ireland* represents the product of a dislocated but already well-known author living in London, who urgently needs to be an outsider not to lose her actual identity at times of change at many different levels. O’Brien’s memoir exudes what has essentially been regarded as Ireland and to be Irish; conceptions she cannot be separated from in any case. As Edna O’Brien herself states, “Irish? In truth I would not want to be anything else. It is a state of mind as well as an actual country” (144). But, O’Brien’s volume stands for much more than a fiction-memory approach to Ireland and Irishness in the mid 1970s. Indeed, *Mother Ireland* can be analysed under a twofold prism. Firstly, O’Brien has recourse to Irish history and story—past and present—at once. The contents of the memoir include vivid outlines and descriptions of the Irish land and landscape, the home town, the events in socially suffocating close-knit villages, instances of the strict education of the 1950s and 1960s, the representation of an overpowering Catholic religion and religious institutions, the centrality of authoritarian patriarchy, the overall influence of Dublin as the beacon-capital of the country and the ultimate—and much needed—escape to a neighbouring England. This latter aspect—recurrent in O’Brien’s fiction up to that point in time—already highlights deeper social issues in which forms of the exile and migration of large cohorts of Irish men—and especially Irish women—to Britain were the norm. These forms of exile were principally caused by dissatisfaction with a suffocating Irish society for these women in terms of economy, work and morality. (Barros del Río 112) Consequently, Edna O’Brien uses her mastery in combining myth, history and story so as to present not only a “state of mind” but also an “actual country” in her fictional description of Ireland. In essence, the Ireland of the 1970s portrayed by O’Brien encompasses what is past and present in such a way that what has been regarded as the “eternal Ireland” is shown in a snapshot.

But, secondly, and more importantly, the trope of Ireland O’Brien has recourse to is also that of the “eternal feminine” which is at odds with a new Irish female that strives to find her place in a new Ireland in social and economic change

¹ For a detailed account of how feminism and secularism developed in the Republic of Ireland see Chapter 2 “How the Catholic became Protestants” in R.F. Foster.



and turmoil in the 1970s. This referential trope of Ireland as the “eternal feminine” has often offered a variety of readings and analyses that include colonial, post-colonial, post-imperial, feminist, nationalist and revisionist perspectives to name but a few. These symbols, images and myths of an eternal “mother Ireland” have traditionally formed a crucial part of a variety of discourses which were part and parcel of the cultural iconography of Ireland up to the time of O’Brien’s volume in 1976. For O’Brien, any country—but Ireland in particular—has been emotionally engendered from its very inception. In the case of Ireland, it has “always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare.” (11) Edna O’Brien analyses once again not only an alienation from her actual country in geographical terms as a writer in exile and an Irish migrant in London; hers is a “desire for belonging, [which] characteristically revolves around the writing of this “home” in terms of the female body” (Arrowsmith 130). As a result, O’Brien’s examination of her “home” metaphored in the female body encompasses both colonial and nationalist discourses—among many others—in her attempt to break free from the overall relegation of Irish women behind these tropes and metaphors. In essence, O’Brien exposes what González Arias describes as the asymmetries of gender that very much inform patriarchal societies and that are highly accentuated in countries such as Ireland both in theory and social praxis (68). Even if to some extent, O’Brien’s memoir-essays still seemed to retain what was widely and very much regarded as the eternal Ireland in the mid 1970s, O’Brien, however, aims at distancing her voice and her conception of what could be regarded as a “female Ireland of nostalgia” and timidly advances her comprehension and approach to the rise of a new woman in Ireland.

All in all, voicing childhood and youth memories and associating Ireland with the feminine, as the very title explicitly states, Edna O’Brien’s *Mother Ireland* represents that umbilical cord that closely maintained, as Mary Burke states, “a prelapsarian womb that cannot be returned to” (237); but, likewise, a cord that somehow cannot be broken nor cut off from entirely, I would add. In 1976 O’Brien set out to encapsulate in her writing what could be termed as a distinct portrayal of an Irish pastoral nostalgia. (Frawley 2005) It is writing that engages at once with land and landscape, history and myth, tradition and the longing for modernity. But, more importantly, O’Brien’s *Mother Ireland* heightened a sense of nostalgic social mores that were intrinsically part and parcel of what Ireland had staunchly meant to be in the eyes of her inhabitants inside and outside her shores up to the 1970s. In this sense, as was the case with a long tradition of Irish writers over the twentieth century, O’Brien’s writing can be categorised in that group of “Irish migrants and their cultural expressions [which] are conventionally characterised in terms of nostalgia and sentimentality” (Arrowsmith 130). In her study on the connection between Irish pastoral and nostalgia in Irish literature Oona Frawley has argued that it is possible “to examine cultural and historical developments,” (1) and social ones too I would add, through the study of how the Irish landscape and nature has been traditionally represented in the arts, especially literature. Frawley goes on to state that eventually such a study may allow us “to ascertain how cultural changes might be represented” (1).



Frawley's analysis raises an array of question as to whether such a nostalgic conceptualised representation of landscape and nature varies when the Irish nation ages, when expansive modes of urbanisation appear and, more significantly, when Ireland's entry in a globalising and europeanising new environment is currently taking place. For Frawley, this representation of landscape and nature in Irish literature "can be read as a verbal charting of not only the physical but also the social landscape." (2) All these concepts and preoccupations make her come to the conclusion that former ideas and portrayals of that nostalgic pastoral Ireland had inevitably turned into "ghostly fossils" that have haunted contemporary representations of what Ireland and to be Irish stand for. (2) Edna O'Brien's volume engages in the exposition of the fossil and stagnant traditional Ireland in a nostalgic way but also advances, albeit timidly, the much needed revision and revisit of the female and eternal feminine encompassed in what was regarded as "Mother Ireland" until then.

Hence, a new approach to "Mother Ireland" has become a peremptory challenge in a twenty-first-century Ireland which, as a country, has experienced an overall and comprehensive transformation at many different levels from Frawley's "ghostly fossil" nostalgic idea. In R.F. Foster's detailed account of change in Ireland between 1970 and 2000 Foster states that even if "much of the Irish stereotype (and the tourist brand-image) conjures up an unchanging land where time stands still, the Irish faculty for changing practices or expectations with bewildering rapidity has been underestimated" (3). Therefore, today's Ireland, I argue, has been widely and fiercely contested, revisioned and revisited since 1976 from outside and inside the island. As was stated above, Edna O'Brien's memoir represents a commemoration of the social, traditional and somewhat eternal Ireland and its traditions and mores; but, "such a commemoration also memorializes loss—whether loss of the person for whom a place is named, or of the social system that witnessed the landscape described—and invokes nostalgia." (Foster 2) Contemporary approaches to Ireland, however, are not exclusively imbued with this memorialisation of loss, nor the invocation of nostalgia; rather, these approaches are open to the negotiation and contestation of what Ireland and Irish identity stand for; and more importantly, they engage in the examination, the revisit and the rewrite of the portrayals of Ireland as an eternal feminine and the rise of the new Irish woman in today's world.

Short story writer Claire Keegan has published two volumes, *Antarctica* (1999), *Walking the Blue Fields* (2007) and two separate short stories: *Salt: The second chapter* (2002) and *Foster* (2009) in which a distinctly contemporary approach to the Ireland of the twenty-first century as a whole is presented, paying special attention to the role of the Irish woman in this new society. Awarded The Macaulay Fellowship, The Rooney Prize for Irish literature, The William Trevor Prize and The Davy Byrne award among many other prizes Claire Keegan's "voice is already unique" (Mahony) in Irish literature, especially in short fiction. For many, Keegan's prose exudes suggestions of Seamus Heaney, William Trevor, Sebastian Barry, Marina Carr, Patrick McCabe, John McGahern and even James Joyce. (Hunt Mahony, Enright) Keegan's compelling fictional skills offer not only a re-visioning and revisiting of those eternal ideals of "Mother Ireland"'s past, I argue. She delves into a thorough sociological depiction of both new Ireland and the new Irish woman of



the last decades. Her short stories approach Irish identity, social landscape and the role of the Irish woman from within, narrating the present from a close distance; but, offering a fresh new account of “(M)other Ireland”—a new state of mind as well as an actual country in what could be regarded as a questioning and a revisit of that concept of “Mother Ireland” approached by Edna O’Brien back in 1976.

Antarctica was Keegan’s short story collection phenomenal debut according to critics and readers. The volume contains fifteen stories which range from Irish-set narratives to England and North America based accounts. As Cristina Hunt Mahony states with regard to Claire Keegan, “on the whole the Wicklow or Irish-based stories conunand more pure admiration, although the atmosphere apprehension figures transatlantically.” Those stories whose setting finds place out of Ireland approach issues such as a middle-class married woman’s need to sleep with another man before it is too late. Although this short-story, “Antarctica,” which gives title to the whole first collection, ends with the swap from the chains of domestic chores and marriage to those of a sinister stranger, Keegan already advances ideas that can be translatable into the Irish socioscape she is approaching and contesting. In a clear reversal of the recurrent metaphor of colonial penetration, the married woman says “‘Pretend you’re America’ [...] ‘I’ll be Colombus’” (Keegan 9) as she climbs on top, affirming thus the necessity of re-visiting and re-visioning the asymmetry and gendering of colonial vocabulary at the end of the twentieth century. This starting fictional statement by Keegan already reverses O’Brien’s starting paragraphs when she reflects upon the Irish land itself. For O’Brien as we stated above, “Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course the gaunt Hag of Beare.” (O’Brien 11) O’Brien goes on to recount all the ages of invasion Ireland has suffered, how it was always subdued, almost taken, conquered and “most thoroughly dispossessed.” (12) As González Arias states all these personifications of Ireland imbued with colonial and then nationalist impetuses represent the feminization of a land that awaits passively her destiny but demonstrates, also, her lack of power and accentuates the agentive capacity of the male. (68) Ultimately, Keegan’s women in her short fiction challenge and question these former suffocating constructs imposed upon them and have a new say.

In Keegan’s short fiction it is the role of the female characters that stands out in a successful way. It could be argued that her fiction represents a study on the change of the female in Ireland in the last decade as opposed to Edna O’Brien’s traditional and submissive approach to women in Ireland up to 1976. In this vein, there is one aspect that both share and which is directly approached by O’Brien’s *Mother Ireland*, “countries are either mothers or fathers, and engender the emotional bristle secretly reserved for either sire.” (O’Brien 11) In Keegan’s fiction the voice of the Irish female is revisited through the exposition of ordeals experienced by women of all ages well after O’Brien’s memoir. Thus, Keegan enters the psyche of a lonely woman who awaits a married local doctor’s divorce to turn their affair into an open relationship in her short story “Love in the Tall Grass.” Although this lonely woman is certain of her love for him and has awaited his decisive step for more than nine years, she still needs to approach a confession box and state: “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.” (Keegan 25) Keegan reflects, thus, on the pace and time needed for social change



in Ireland. In Keegan's story, a mixture of social conventions and religion attended by the doctor's refusal to break up his marriage leaves resolution at the hands of the two women: the doctor's wife and Cordelia, his lover. Unlike the world of hypocrisy and overpowering silence present in O'Brien's memoir, which, in general, tends to offer Irish women the escape from their own village or even suicide, Keegan makes her female characters break away from this former traditional Irish socioscape and demand resolution. Eventually, on a rainy night, the three characters stand facing one another not knowing what to do but realising a solution is imperious. Keegan ends the short story reversing Beckett with "Cordelia, the doctor and his wife, all three mortals waiting, waiting for somebody to leave." (38)

Sexuality is a bone of contention both in Claire Keegan's approach to the "(M)other Ireland" of her first collection *Antarctica* as it is in Edna O'Brien's *Mother Ireland*. In O'Brien's memoir priests going to bed with village girls and censoring books, films and papers circulating in Ireland at the time (O'Brien 34), village men with "hidden desires" who "used to hide behind hedges lying in wait for girls [and] dragging some unfortunate girl in there" (73), the idea of sin which "got committed by the hour" (100), courting, unwanted pregnancy (124) and sexual repression are clear exemplars of a conscience-ridden eternal—motherly for O'Brien—Ireland subjugated by fierce and fearsome domineering religion and religious institutions after De Valera. In Keegan's *Antarctica* there is a disconcerting voicing of the outcome of this repression in today's Ireland. In "The Ginger Rogers Sermon" Keegan overtly exposes a young farmer's suicide after child molestation in a claustrophobic Irish community in which traditional social mores are recalled in a setting that questions the pastoral and eternal Ireland we referred to at the beginning of this paper in terms of nostalgia. In "Quare name for a boy" Claire Keegan presents a revision and a rewrite of the topic of a young girl's acceptance of her unwanted pregnancy. The young girl well knows that tradition has it that, "Irish girls should dislike England; they should stay home and raise their sons up right, stuff the chicken, snip the parsley, tolerate the blare of the Sunday game." (98) But, England was the place where unwanted pregnancy could be dealt with. In 1976 Edna O'Brien recalls the story of a friend of hers who "lost her job, and was living in digs with a devout woman who upbraided and re-judged her all the time and she was not allowed out" (124) when she found out that she was pregnant and not married. Likewise, Keegan makes the female character in her short story recall how a girl had been secluded by her own father in a "one-roomed place without a chimney" (98) in a wood nearby so that no neighbour could know of her unfortunate condition. However, Keegan's pregnant character has a final say on her condition and realises she knows a lot about herself now and has the right to choose. She senses that everything that kept her united to her fling has no longer significance. Instead, she breaks away from her chains and realises as a new and free woman who has the choice to decide:

[...] pride is something I know about. Suddenly I don't want you, won't keep you away from the boys and your smoky snooker nights. I'll drink this parting glass, but at the end of the night I'll shake your hand. I'll be damned if I'll snare you like a fox, live with you that way, look into your eyes some night years from now



and discover a man whose worst regret is six furtive nights spent in his mother's bed with a woman from a Christmas do. (102)

A social portrayal of a different "(M)other Ireland" has special significance in Keegan's debut collection too, especially in rural Ireland, that eternal landscape and nature O'Brien constantly referred to, many times in terms of pastoral nostalgia. Among other issues Keegan tackles family life in a farm in rural Ireland, the different life-experiences of two sisters, one who stays in rural Ireland and one who emigrates to England in search of a better economic and social future, and how urban and road planning tramples over a traveller's family traditional life. In *Mother Ireland* O'Brien already envisaged the change about to be experienced by Ireland, although no explicit approach to the social response to this change is advanced. O'Brien states that "the country is breathlessly beautiful but there is too an undeniable sadness, the sadness of being cut off, the sadness of rabid materialism, jerry building, visual barbarities and a cultural atrophy that goes all the way to the brain" (33). In Keegan's "Men and Women" the picturesque countryside of Ireland wraps the sadness of an empty marital life through a young girl's eyes. "My parents do not kiss [...] I have never seen them touch" (129) remembers the young girl after separating her dad from a younger girl he was dancing with at a ball in the village before her very wife's crying eyes. Keegan remarkably depicts an Ireland in which the price of sheep is a scandal, money has to be given to starving African children, the boy of the family has to study while the young girls have to help in the chores of the farm, men smelling of Jeyes Fluid dance, drink and look for a perfect match at a village ball and women are relegated to their role as childbearers and farmkeepers. Nothing that far from O'Brien's "Mother Ireland" except for the wife's resolution when the family car gets stuck and she refuses to get out and open the gate at her husband's command. Once her husband is out she grips the wheel and, "Mammy is taking us forward" (Keegan 134), exclaims the young girl, invoking, thus, the realisation of a resolute new Irish woman who takes control of her life in a new Ireland.

In "Sisters" Keegan touches on a "(M)other Ireland" as the reuniting place for Louisa, who had to emigrate to a seemingly successful life in England, and her sister, Betty, who after their mother's death had to "step into her mother's shoes and mind her father" (138-139). Owner of a section of a former Protestant "Big House" and repository of the connection to land and traditional life in Ireland, Betty had to put up with her sister's progress in England and her overall patronising air. Her sister's annual visit turns to a moment of truth when Betty finds out about Louisa's failing marriage and how the invention of her life of luxuries had come to an end. As she had always done, Louisa's return to her sister and Ireland was designed to keep on treating Betty as her slave. But, Betty does not feel as the poor sister anymore. Her life has been based on hard work and truth and is proud and resolute enough to look forward to a future alone, not having to be looked down on by her "almost English" sister. Keegan revisits a former diminishing feeling of inferiority on Irish identity, always coming to terms with an overpowering England, and what's more, a sense of achieving self-realisation out of Ireland exclusively. After 1976 "(M)other Ireland" finds a new place of her own, devoid of an economic and social inferiority



complex. Keegan reverses the traditional colonial symbol of Ireland as the poor sister needing help from her colossal and always patronising English counterpart. Keegan does away with a feminisation of the Irish land that was at the hands of England; a trope formerly used in colonial and postcolonial discourses.

The last story with Irish referent in *Antarctica* is “The Burning Palms”: a cathartic story of a young boy and his grandmother who have to overcome past remorse. The grandmother, a stubborn former traveller who settled down in a small derelict cottage, rejects any offers from the Council who wants to knock her house down and build a new road. As a result, a tall wall is erected between the new road and the cottage, blocking any physical contact with progress but also enabling Keegan to denounce the persistent “ghettoization” of the Irish traveller community in twenty-first-century Ireland. Unlike in O’Brien’s pastoral and nostalgic references to tinkers as the old tribes of Ireland with lives of their own, Keegan’s traveller grandmother decides to burn her cottage after her daughter dies in a tragic accident which involved a lorry that skidded off the road and crashed into her cottage, a night in which her grandson repeatedly refused to go back to a drunk, gambling and vociferous father. Through the grandmother and the mother of the short story Keegan also denounces the reality of these women at the hands of their husbands and the much needed extension of the achievements of feminism and secularisation in Ireland in the twentieth century to all the Irish society, as for Keegan this extension was still pending for the traveller community in Ireland. Ultimately, Keegan reflects upon the predicament of the traveller community in Ireland as a whole, separated from the progress and development that have been extended to everybody in Ireland except them. Today’s travellers are only participant to a certain extent of government or council plans to integrate them into the common strain of Irishness without coming to understand their economic or social needs or problems.

I will briefly sketch some issues touched on in some stories in Keegan’s more recent *Walk the Blue Fields* as many of the topics dealt with in her second collection of short stories are an extension of her first approach to a new Irish society that cannot be comprehended through the lens of the stereotype of “Mother Ireland” any more. Among others, Keegan tackles issues such as a young girl’s escaping her farm in the country and breaking free from a suffocating life of sexual abuse by her father in “The Parting Gift,” a woman’s realisation of the futility of her marital life in “The Forester’s Daughter,” a priest’s insecurity about his vocation and how women picture in his life in a newly affluent Ireland in “Walk the Blue Fields” and the approach to married women and men in rural Ireland as tending the land does not offer a life of fulfilment in “Dark Horses” and “Night of the Quicken Trees.” These stories in *Walk the Blue Fields* are an exemplar of Claire Keegan’s voicing of how Ireland should be read in the twenty-first century. If Edna O’Brien finishes *Mother Ireland* escaping to England and remembering, as she walks on the deck about to board her boat, how other writers before such as “Mr Thackeray and Mr Heinrich Böll had come in by boat to write leisurely about it” (142), Keegan’s prophetic opening story in *Walk the Blue Fields*, “The Long and Painful Death,” can be read not only as a revisioning of those writers’ visit to Ireland but as the Irish writer’s need to negotiate today’s Ireland and Irish identity. Set in Heinrich Böll’s house in Achill, “The



Long and Painful Death” is the story of an Irish female artist-in-residence seeking inspiration, who is visited by a German Professor of literature. The story is Keegan’s “(M)other Ireland.” It is a reflection on today’s Ireland. Keegan establishes a contrast between that Ireland Böll came to portray and Ireland nowadays. An approach to a theme-park touristy Irish landscape and people offered by the German professor, the resident Irish writer’s uncertainty about her religion, her decision not to marry and remain alone and the German’s statement that a former poor Ireland was more content eventually end with the female writer-in-residence finding her inspiration and writing with a new voice. It is Keegan’s contribution to a new reading of what Ireland stands for that moves forward with a new voice from within. It is a revisit to that umbilical cord the Irish writer cannot cut off but will not escape from to comprehend Ireland and Irishness. It is a productive reimagining and revisit of that nostalgia in a positive sense always through a female voice.

Edna O’Brien’s *Mother Ireland* had been neglected as it somehow disguised a clear stance on answers to social issues about Ireland and Irishness (Lindahl-Raittila 74-75) and failed to act as a counter-narrative. O’Brien’s references to divorce, sexuality, unwanted pregnancy threatened the moral integrity of an Ireland that “would become no better than other nations” (81). O’Brien stated in a 1995 interview that “Literature, if it’s any good, is archetypal” (Pearce 5) and follows the hegemonic discursive practices of conservative discourses on sex, divorce, contraception. Her *Mother Ireland* is very much the “oppressed and victimized nation” “breeder of sons (rather daughters in the case of O’Brien) for sacrifice” (Peelan 126,129) be this sacrifice social, religious or economic in exile or in Ireland. O’Brien commemorates a past in 1976 which, as she stated, she “returned inwardly” (126). She delivers a pastoral social nostalgia that cannot be returned to as it will eventually imply suffering and female victimization.

Claire Keegan’s short fiction, however, revisits O’Brien’s “Mother Ireland” and questions traditional and hegemonic approaches to this eternal Irish feminine within new discourses of Ireland. The Ireland in which Keegan’s fiction finds expression is an Ireland which has experienced “the strange death of Romantic Ireland” as Foster argues as it has been “transformed, modernized and globalized; in matters such as fertility and marriage patterns, sexual attitudes, the tabloidization of the newspapers and fast-food culture.” (185) Keegan negotiates and advances a new “(M) other Ireland.” She follows O’Brien’s choice for the centrality of female characters and voices which enable her to debunk and challenge the way in which “Mother Ireland” was regarded as a national myth (Peelan 127). Keegan’s Irish women face social, religious, sexual and economic issues from within without the urgent need to “live out of Ireland” as O’Brien felt peremptory. They advocate the centrality of their voice and decisions in today’s Ireland negotiating, hence, the concepts of “Irishness,” “identity” and “woman” in twenty-first-century Ireland. As Rebecca Pelan states:

Contemporary Irish women writers need to use neither codes nor exile, but are instead involved in radical, subversive cultural practice which allows them to confront issues of gender and nationality/ethnicity from within the country itself. Women writers from the Republic primarily are involved in demythologizing



what are inherited, entrenched and essentialized notions of what it means to be “Irish” and “woman” and they do so by re/imagining the inherited images of both concepts. (143-4)

Claire Keegan’s fiction does not represent a commemoration of loss nor a return to nostalgia; but, rather, a celebration of a distinct “newness” both in Irish society as a whole and in the role of the Irish woman in particular. Ultimately, Claire Keegan’s short-fiction is a re/imagining and revisit of Edna O’Brien’s 1976 memoir. Keegan advances her proposal for a new twenty-first-century “(M)other Ireland.”

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