Scandalous women: ‘unmarried’ mothers in short stories by Mary Lavin, Edna O’Brien and Eilis Ni Dhuibhne

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Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/6565

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: The Edwin Mellen Press

Please cite the published version.
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Frank O’Connor provides the following chilling account of rural Ireland in the 1940s:

I was living in County Wicklow at the time and became aware that all around me were farmed-out illegitimate children, many of whom were cruelly treated. High-spirited girls who left home in a hurry were trailed by plain-clothes policemen to see whether or not they had a baby and if so, what they did with it. Once I saw a dozen of them appear in rapid succession in Green Street court house to be indicted and sentenced to death for the murder of their babies. (O’Connor 1967, 227)

O’Connor was not alone in his concern about the dilemma of unmarried motherhood in the new republic. It was to be a topic which exercised the imagination of Irish writers for the rest of the twentieth century, as can be seen in the three short stories discussed in this article: ‘Sarah’ by Mary Lavin;¹ 'A Scandalous Woman' by Edna O’Brien,² and 'Midwife to the Fairies' by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne.³ Lavin's story is set in the 1940s,⁴ O'Brien's in the 1950s,⁵ and Ní Dhuibhne's story uses the cultural references of popular television programmes Hill Street Blues and Dallas⁶ to place it in the 1980s. Despite their chronological differences, the societies depicted by these writers have some important elements in common: a silence surrounding female sexuality, to the extent that women can be said to inhabit a sub-culture in society, and the enforcement of that hierarchy through economic power, and physical violence. Mary Dorcey succinctly sums up the situation of women's lives in twentieth-century rural Ireland when she writes:
Reality … was made up of the things men did, what could be spoken of in public without lowering the voice. And the rest -- all that concerned women only -- was veiled; a secret, so that even sisters lied to each other. (Dorcey 1989, 31)

The female characters depicted by Lavin, O'Brien and Ní Dhuibhne cope with the constricted nature of their lives by means of various stratagems, notably, as I will discuss, by semblance and dissemblance, and in effect, by cultivating a dual existence.

I will deal first with the issue of secrecy. In Lavin’s short story, the identity of the fathers of the eponymous, unmarried, Sarah Murray's first three children remains a mystery. This does not seem to be an issue with anyone except the priest, who, on the birth of her third child, threatens ‘if she didn't tell him the name of the father, he'd make the new born infant speak and name him' (Lavin 1978, 62). To the neighbours, Sarah is merely 'unfortunate' (58), and her behaviour is describes as if it were hereditary: 'And don't forget she had no father herself!' (58). To Sarah’s brother Patrick, her misdemeanours are explained away as the indiscretions of local bachelors: "'If the country is full of blackguards, what can we do about it?'" (61), thus absolving his sister of any agency. It is only when Sarah threatens the status quo by naming the father of her fourth child as Oliver Kedrigan, a newly married man, that her brother throws her out of the house:

‘That ought to teach her,’ he said. Carrying on with a married man! No one is going to say that I put up with that kind of thing. I didn't mind the other times when it was probably old Molloy or his like that would have been prepared to pay for his mistakes if the need arose, but I wasn't going to stand for a thing like this.’ (66)

It is apparent in an earlier exchange between the Murray brothers that they already suspect Kedrigan of being the father of Sarah's child (62-63), but a
silent unmarried mother does not threaten the prevailing order, whereas the 
exposure of adultery attacks the family, the main unit of the society.

The 1937 Constitution gave emphasis to the important status of the 
family in the new Irish state. Article 41.3.1 reads as follows:

The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of marriage, on which the Family is founded and to protect it against attack. (Kennedy 1989, 69)

This defensive stance implies that the composers of the Constitution feared that the family was under 'attack' from which it needed to be protected. The message conveyed by Lavin's story illustrates this attitude: the real transgression of Sarah is not the conceiving of a child out of wedlock, but the naming of a married man as the father.

In Edna O'Brien's story, Eily, the 'Scandalous Woman' of the title, understands the importance of maintaining a code of silence. She enlists the narrator, Brady, as accomplice in her covert romance with a bank clerk, and makes her 'kneel down in the field and promise never ever to split' (O'Brien 1990, 202). Brady remarks on the fact that Eily is unforthcoming about her romance: 'She never discussed him except to say his middle name was Jack' - as in Lavin's story, the specific naming of a man is taboo. Even after Mr Hogan 'had found his daughter in the lime kiln, with the bank clerk, in the most satanic position, with her belly showing' (209), Eily will admit to nothing. The narrator likewise: under cross-examination, she 'said no to everything' (209). Eily, when questioned about her associations with the bank clerk also 'said no, over and over again, and at moments was quite defiant . . . . [She] denied ever having met him and was spry enough to say "What do you take me for, Mrs Brady, a hussy?"' (211). She progresses from defiance to dumbness: 'Eily
was silence itself . . . Even to her mother she refused to speak' (213). Eily apparently perceives the actual admission of guilt as more damning than being caught in the sexual act. She entreats Brady once more ‘for God’s sake not to split on her’ (212), apparently believing the Almighty to be also in favour of taciturnity. However, she is betrayed by her own body, as she turns out to be pregnant, thus giving visible proof of her activities.

In 'Midwife to the Fairies', Ní Dhuibhne puts a similar premium on women's silence. The sanctions on speaking out are everywhere in the narrative. The narrator is a woman who acts as unofficial midwife to the community. In this unlicensed occupation, confidentiality is a required part of the job: ‘with my calling you've to be very careful (Ní Dhuibhne 2003, 27). In cases where the child is born out of wedlock, the midwife's discretion is essential; it is the whole reason her services are used. Given her own habit of self-censorship, it is not surprising that Mary disapproves of a guest on the Late Late Show:

It wasn't much good this night, there was . . . some young one from America who was after setting up a prostitute's hotel or call-in service or something. God, what Gay wants with that kind I don't know. (22)

The outspoken woman on television contrasts with the midwife, who denigrates women who express their emotions: 'I've no belief in that pre-menstrual tension and post-natal depression and what have you' (22). Ní Dhuibhne uses physical details to convey the midwife’s instincts for self-preservation and self-control: 'I keep the chain on all the time and I think that's the important thing. As long as you keep the chain across you're all right' (23). Throughout the story, Mary emphasises her code of silence, as can be seen in the following examples:
I didn't let on of course (24). . . . Neither of us said a word the whole way down (25). . . . His family or hers I didn't bother my head asking (26). . . . I didn't say a word . . . . I wanted to scream at them, really. But what could I do? . . . . I didn't say a word about what was after happening to anyone . . . . I don't talk, it's not right. People have a right to their privacy, I always say, and with my calling you've to be very careful (27) . . . . I said I knew nothing and I'd never heard tell of them (38).

The image of the vocal woman on television also contrasts with the silent young woman the midwife attends, giving birth in a 'remote' (26) house the midwife describes as being situated 'down there in the back of beyonds' (28):

The girl . . . was . . . on her own . . . . [S]he must have been feeling a good bit of pain but she didn't let on, not at all. Just lay there with her teeth gritted. . . . She said nothing. (27)

When the young woman's baby is found dead a week later, and the story is broadcast in the newspapers, the midwife's husband counsels her to keep quiet: "'Keep your mouth shut, woman . . . . This is none of your business'" (28). According to Mary, the mother and child had been 'on [her] mind' (28), but only when the baby's death has been brought to public notice does the midwife break her silence, alleging that 'it was on [her] conscience' (28). Obviously, fear of being prosecuted rather than her conscience brings her to tell the Guards, whereupon she experiences a great sense of relief: 'I walked out of that Garda station a new woman. It was a great load off my chest. It was like being to confession' (28). Significantly, her husband is appalled at her speaking out, and even implies that to do so is mad: "'God Almighty, woman," he said, "what possessed you to go to the guards? You must be off your rocker'" (38). The midwife eventually tells her story to a priest in confession, who advises her that God would understand: 'He does not ask of us that we put our own lives in danger' (29). This occludes the fact that she has put the
baby's life in danger by not reporting the birth, since, as she told the family, 'the child was too small', and '[b]y rights she should be in an incubator' (27).

The midwife's permission to speak or not speak is given by men: she confesses to the Guards and to the priest, is told to shut up by her husband and a knife-wielding man. Echoing O'Brien's story, apparently even God condones her silence, according to the priest. Her only authority is in the actual physical act of being a midwife and outside that role she feels powerless, as her appeals to the reader testify: 'But what could I do?' (36).

What she does not do is write down her story: 'The sergeant hadn't taken a statement from me, and that was his mistake and my good luck, I suppose, because I don't know what would have happened to me if I had testified' (38). If the sanctions on speaking out are strict, the prohibitions on a written record are even more severe.

I will now go on to discuss the main strategy, beside silence, which women are shown to use to subvert the imposed constraints on their lives. One that is employed in all three stories is the living of a dual life. In Lavin's depiction of society, one may get away with a good deal of licence in one's private life, as long as one is seen to be pious in one's public behaviour. Sarah Murray has had three children outside of marriage, but lives a life of apparently scrupulous religious observance. Lavin's narrator tells us:

If Sarah had been one to lie in bed on Sunday and miss Mass, her neighbours might have felt differently about her.... But Sarah ... never missed Mass. She observed abstinence on all days abstinence was required. She frequently did the Stations of the Cross as well. And on Lady Day when an annual pilgrimage took place to a holy well in the neighbouring village Sarah was an example to all - with her shoes off walking over the sharp flinty stones, doing penance like a nun. (Lavin 1978, 58)
During her fourth pregnancy, we are told, she 'boldly faced [the] congregation at Mass on Sundays, walking down the centre aisle and taking her usual place under the fourth station of the cross' (63). Sarah could be judged a hypocrite, someone who practises the outward signs of Catholicism while showing no signs of obeying its precepts on sexual morality. However, Lavin attributes the hypocrisy to her neighbours rather than to Sarah herself, stating that they held 'greater understanding in their hearts for sins against God than for sins against his Holy Church' (58). Kathleen Kedrigan is prepared to overlook Sarah's reputation for the sake of her domestic skills: 'I know she has a bit of a bad name . . . but she's a great worker' (59). Thus, Sarah wins a sort of acceptance in her community by performing an outward show of traditional Irish womanhood, devotedly Catholic and domestically competent.

Issues of semblance and dissemblance run right through Edna O'Brien's story. Eily, the eponymous 'scandalous woman', is described as having 'the face of a madonna', and once 'thought of being a nun' (O'Brien 1990, 197). O'Brien first introduces the idea of disguise through make-believe games. The narrator, Brady, and her friends alter their appearance to act out various roles: 'we played families and gave ourselves posh names and posh jobs, and we used to paint each other with the dye from plants or blue bags and treat each other's faces as if they were palettes' (199). Some of their games have a more threatening aspect: 'Eily also had to don an apron, a white apron, that formerly she had worn at cookery classes' (199), to assist her sister Nuala as she performs gruesome pretend operations which mimic those of back-street abortionists. To carry out these activities, Nuala dons a mask left over from the Wren ceremony. Thus, O'Brien shows that the girls
utilise the tools of domesticity, a 'blue bag' and 'white apron', in combination with a symbol of traditional Christian/folk beliefs, the Wren mask, to perform their own explicitly feminine rituals:

[Nuala] used to say that there would be nothing but a shell left by the time she had finished, and that one wouldn't be able to have babies or women's complaints ever. She had names for the female parts of one, Susies for the breasts, Florries for the stomach, and Matilda for lower down. She would sharpen and re-sharpen the knife on the steps, order Eily to get the hot water, the soap, to sterilize the utensils and to have to hand a big winding sheet. (199)

Eily's transition from these childish games to a more grown-up form of artifice is marked by her makeover of a dance dress from America. This symbol of a world outside her own locality transforms her life. Wearing it, she first encounters the bank clerk, an event she describes as if he were an alien from another planet: 'something out of this world had taken place' (198; my italics). The language conveys her need to escape from her everyday life, in which, we are told, she works 'like a horse' (197), and also reveals that her attraction to him has much to do with his status as a non-local. The courtship proceeds in a series of disguises. We see Eily concealing her 'cerise dress with the slits at the side, . . . a most compromising garment' under 'an old black dirndl skirt' (203). The dissemblance is not confined to physical appearance. The girls come up with ingenious excuses as alibis for Eily's dates: they pretend to be practising with the choir, teaching young children how to receive Holy Communion, and visiting the sick. The religious nature of these excuses conveys that they have learned how to manipulate the strictures of religious observance to their own ends. Ironically, the one secular excuse they give, of picking gooseberries, is the one which almost gets them found out (202). On the way home from Eily's dates, they would 'say prayers
and ejaculations, and . . . while Eily donned her old skirt and her old canvas shoes, we said one or other of the mysteries of the Rosary' (203). The double entendre of the word 'ejaculations', reminding us of sexual emissions while apparently referring to religious utterances, is typical of O'Brien's humour, and of her awareness of the multiple levels of meaning in this society. Like Lavin's Sarah, Eily is also domestically gifted: '[s]he was wonderful at knitting and could copy any stitch just from seeing it in a magazine or in a knitting pattern' (198). So, both Lavin and O'Brien convey the importance of the overt performance of devotion and domesticity in Irish women's lives.

It is small wonder that the young women in O'Brien's story appear to be morally equivocal, as the adults of their community are shown to be ambivalent in their behaviour. Mrs Bolan pruriently spies on courting couples under the pretence of hunting turkeys she does not own, and is 'known to tell tales to be calumnious' (203). When Brady and Eily visit a fortune-teller, the woman pretends not to be herself: 'She closed the door in our faces. I said to Eily "That's her"' (207). When Eily's family tidy their home in anticipation of visitors, commonplace items take strange forms, and we are told that Eily's father 'lifted up a bit of cretonne, to make sure it was a tea-chest underneath and not a piece of pricey mahogany' (214).

The narrator Brady is on the receiving end of mixed messages: 'My mother let me put on her lipstick, and praised me untowardly for being such a good, such a pure little girl' (217). There is much irony in purity being rewarded by the sexually-alluring lipstick, and Brady also recognises that her teacher does not practise what she preaches:

Ever since the scandal she was enjoining us to go home in pairs, to speak Irish and not to walk with any sense of provocation. Yet she
herself stood by the fire grate, and after having hitched up her dress
petted herself. When she lost her temper she threw chalk or
implements at us and used very bad language. (207)

O'Brien conveys that the girl has learned the lesson of hypocrisy: 'on Monday
mornings [I] had all my books newly covered so that the teacher would praise
me' (217).

The theme of a double life is even more marked in Ní Dhuibhne's
'Midwife to the Fairies'. The title is taken from an old folk-tale 'concerning a
midwife called to assist at a fairy-birth' (O'Connor 1992, 61), which results in
the loss of the midwife's eye, a clear illustration of the necessity of 'turning a
blind eye'. Ní Dhuibhne weaves this folktale into her own short story, forcing
the reader to compare the two narratives and recognise their similarities.
There is another duality at work in the narrative. Mary, the protagonist and
narrator, has two jobs, an official one as 'nurse's aide, . . . nine to five,
Monday to Friday' at the local hospital, and, as I've already mentioned, an
unofficial one as midwife. Her official job is not one which confers high social
status, but she is proud of her second calling: 'My mother did it before me and
her mother before her' (Ni Dhuibhne 2003, 24). Her mother refers to midwifery
as 'works of mercy', and Mary says, 'You get indulgence' (24) which is time off
from purgatory. This suggests the existence of a God who condones their
midwifery practice, although, being unlicensed, it is, like many of the births
they attend, illegitimate. Outwardly, the midwife is a practising Catholic who
attends Confession, and has never 'committed a mortler' (29), but she is
careful to confess some details of this particular secret birth to a Carmelite
priest 'in White Friar Street, not to any priest I know' (29). The text suggests
this priest too condones unlicensed midwifery, as he assures her that 'God
would understand' (29). The very phrase 'White Friar' has resonances, however, of the Pharisees in the Bible, whom Jesus accused of hypocrisy, referring to them as 'whited sepulchres' (Matt. 23: 27).

In each of the stories, the crisis occurs when the submerged life, exposing women's sexual secrets, bubbles up from under and makes itself known in public discourse. In Lavin's story, Sarah threatens the status quo when she names the father of her child. In O'Brien's narrative, Eily's pregnancy gives the game away more decisively than her discovery by her father, and in Ní Dhuibhne's story, the body of the baby is discovered on the farm, a week after the secret birth. In Lavin's 'Sarah', it is the protagonist's letter which leads to Sarah's death and that of her baby. In O'Brien's story, the bank clerk made his first date with Eily by means of a note left in the hedge, a risky strategy, because, as the narrative points out, it 'might have come into someone else's hand' (201). In Ní Dhuibhne's story, the midwife refuses to give a written statement to the Gardaí, and the publication of the baby's death in the media disturbs her deeply: 'I couldn't sleep, I got so I couldn't eat. I was all het up about it, in a terrible state really' (28). It is interesting to note that in each of these works by Irish women writers, the written word is demonstrably dangerous. It seems that even our most successful female writers perceive writing about women's sexual lives as a transgressive act in itself.

In all three stories, older women are seen to take an active part in upholding the moral social order. In Lavin's story, we learn that

when Oliver Kedrigan's wife, a newcomer to the locality, spoke of getting Sarah in to keep house while she was going up to Dublin for a few days, two of the older women in the district felt it their duty to step across to Kedrigan's and offer a word of advice. . . . 'If I was you, I'd think twice before I'd leave her to mind your house while you're away! . . . She has a queer way of looking at a man!' (Lavin 1978, 59)
In O'Brien's story, the narrator notes that 'Mrs Bolan was one of the many women who were always prowling and turning up at graveyards, or in the slate quarry to see if there were courting couples' (O'Brien 1990, 2003). Eily's sister Nuala, who condemns Brady's appetite for 'unwholesome things, such as sherbet and rainbow toffees' (200), is conveying the lesson that female desire must be controlled. When Eily's romance is discovered, O'Brien suggests that the narrator's mother feels some guilt, perhaps because she felt she had failed in her duty to protect the virtue of a younger woman: 'My mother seemed the most perturbed. . . . as if she herself had been found out in some base transaction. . . . She cross-examined me' (209). When Eily is brought in for questioning, the narrator notices that 'my mother was . . . the most exacting' (211). In 'Midwife to the Fairies', it might seem that the midwife is sympathetic to the unmarried mother as she assists her in childbirth and does not report the birth, but, as she goes to the guards only when the baby's body is discovered, it is clear that her prime motivation is self-preservation. Actually, in her role as silent midwife, she colludes with the desire of the society to hide active out-of-wedlock female sexuality. Tom Inglis in his book, Moral Monopoly, reports that 'throughout the twentieth century in Ireland, the moral supervision of children became the sole preserve of the mother' (Inglis 1998, 146). Judging by the society depicted in these three short stories, a woman does not have to be a mother to take responsibility for enforcing moral codes. Whether one is a teacher, a midwife/nurse’s aide or a neighbour, womanhood seems to carry the burden of the policing of the actions of younger women. However, when younger women transgress despite the best
efforts of their elders, it is men who take more forceful action, as I will now go on to discuss.

What are the constraints that force women in the societies depicted by these writers into secrecy, and what risks do they run in defying the social order? Each of the authors reveals an awareness of the economic constraints on women. Lavin's Sarah, like her sons, is used by her brothers as an unpaid source of labour in their home. Furthermore, when she comes home from looking after the Kedrigan homestead, [we are told] she 'gave them her money' (Lavin 1978, 61). Her brothers refuse to co-operate in putting her in a Home for unmarried mothers as long as she is needed by them: 'what would we do without her? There must be a woman in the house! . . . Her brats need her too . . . leastways until they are old enough to be sent out to service themselves' (62).

It is important to bear in mind the context of Lavin's story. 'Sarah' was first published in 1943. The government scheme of children's allowances was only set up in 1943 (Gray 1997, 204-5), which gives weight to the Murray brothers' eagerness to make their nephews earn their keep. Finola Kennedy records that

[w]ell into the twentieth century, and particularly in the small farm context as it existed until World War II, children were an economic resource. Even while still at school, children worked on the family farm. . . . The economic value of rural children to their parents and the nation was stressed by the President of the Irish Vocational Association. . . . Tillage and turf production made heavy demands on rural juvenile behaviour. (Kennedy 1989, 10-11)

This practice is shown in the Murray household, where their uncles 'made [the boys] work all day footing turf and running after sheep like collie dogs' (Lavin 1978, 61). However, Lavin prevents the assumption that Sarah regards her
offspring as 'an economic resource' by stating that her sons were only thus employed 'while she was away' (61).

In O'Brien's narrative, Eily is a farmer's daughter. As the Limerick Rural Survey of 1964 found, farmers' daughters were used as unpaid domestic help in the house, and as auxiliary help on the farm when needed. McNabb reports: 'When a daughter reaches sixteen, if she remains on the farm, she must do a full day's work, and too often her life is one of unrelieved drudgery' (McNabb 1964, 30). We see these circumstances depicted in the life of Eily, who 'used not to be let out much, in the summer, because of all the extra work' (O'Brien 1990, 197). Her mother, after Eily's fall from grace, is heard 'condemning her for not having milked for two weeks' (211). That her contribution to the small farm economy is important can be judged by the details which reveal their poverty: 'It was well known that Eily and her family hid their shoes in a hedge near the road, so that they would have clean footwear when they went to mass, or to market, or later on, in Eily's case, to the dress dance' (198). The dress she wears to the dance is second-hand, and when Eily is found to be pregnant, her mother bemoans the fact that 'they would never provide bricks and mortar for the new house now', a house towards which '[f]or years [they] had been skimping and saving' (213). The necessity of providing Eily with 'a dowry of two hundred pounds' (216) drains their resources. The ending of the story, however, shows Eily in charge of a shop, and, we are told, '[s]he was complete mistress of her surroundings' (220). The farmer's daughter has become a woman of business, marking a change from agricultural production to market economy. In this position, Eily is
invulnerable: '[s]he winked each time she hit the cash register, letting me see what an expert she was' (220).

In Ní Dhuibhne's story, the part played by money is also crucial. The midwife and her husband drive a second-hand, 'nearly new' car (Ní Dhuibhne 2003, 25), and consider 'a few . . . cream slices' on Friday night to be 'a little treat' (23), so they are obviously not well off. The midwife mentions that the local maternity unit where she used to work has closed down, and her job as nurse's aide is not secure: 'with all the cuts you really have to earn your keep there nowadays!' (22). Mary's initial assistance at the secret birth is well paid for: '[t]he father, the ould fellow, that is to say, put a note in my hand . . . it was worth it from that point of view, I'll admit' (27, ellipsis original). The young mother in this story is also shown to be in poor circumstances: she is in labour in an unheated room (26), with no arrangements made for the newborn: '[n]ot a cot, not even an old box' (27). In all three stories, women are seen to be economically vulnerable, but in Ní Dhuibhne's story, the writer adds a twist. The midwife is paid for keeping quiet about her activities, whereas the call-girl on television, we are told, 'made a mint out of . . . writing a book about her experiences' (22). As we are told that this woman is 'from America' (22), Ní Dhuibhne seems to be indicating that there is a double-standard operating in Irish society: Irish women are required to be secret and covert about their sexual lives, whereas women from overseas are celebrated in the same national media which condemns the young woman whose dead baby has been discovered. The journalist Nell McCafferty makes a similar point in her report on the death of teenager Ann Lovett and her baby. McCafferty writes that 'eleven nights after Ann Lovett's death, [the alleged father] stood in a pub
with four of his pals, watching the *Late Late Show*. Gay Byrne was discussing pornography with an American woman' (McCafferty 1984, 50).

If the Irish women in these stories are economically vulnerable, they are also liable to be threatened by physical violence. In Lavin's story, the heavily pregnant Sarah is 'pushed down . . . on a chair' by her brother Patrick, and when 'she tried to get to her feet', he 'pressed her back' (Lavin 1978, 65).

Eventually, he

caught her by the hair, at the same time pulling the coat off her. Then, by the hair he dragged her across the kitchen and pushed her out into the rain, where she slipped and fell again on the wet slab stone of the doorway. (66)

On what is described as 'a bad night, wet and windy' (67-68), Sarah is "'out all night in the rain" . . . "[T]hat's where they found her in the morning, dead . . . [a]nd the child dead beside her"" (68).

In O'Brien's story, the dangers of Eily's behaviour are made explicit through the childish imagination of the narrator. Sneaking off to Eily's first assignation with the bank clerk, she 'said we were like soldiers in a war and [Eily] said we should have worn green and brown as camouflage' (O'Brien 1990, 202). These young women are engaged in combat against forces who are prepared to use violence to preserve social and moral control. Later, after Eily's love affair has come to light, the narrator tells us, 'I was already thinking of the flogging I would get for being implicated' (209). However, she is neither discovered nor beaten, whereas Eily is. Brady, having witnessed Eily being sick in church, reports that:

I said to my mother that most likely Eily would die and my mother said if only such a solution would occur . . . . The next evening Eily was in our house, in the front room . . . . I listened at the door, and ran off only when there was a scream or a blow or a thud . . . . [H]er father swore that it was to a lunatic asylum that she would be sent. (211)
We have already been informed in the narrative that Eily's father had 'an atrocious temper' (206), and Eily is obviously at the mercy of it. A defiant response from her 'incurred some sort of belt from her father, because I heard my mother say that there was no need to resort to savagery' (211). The bank clerk does not escape either. The father's first response is a threat to "'hang, draw and quarter him'" (209), and later he

went to the bank, where he . . . assaulted the bank manager, and tried to saw off part of the bank clerk's anatomy. . . . When the Sergeant came on the scene, . . . he was still trying to aim a kick at the blackguard who had ruined his daughter. (212)

When the bank clerk tried to leave town at dawn, the local males intervene to detain him:

three strong men impeded him and brought him up the mountain for a drive . . . . For a week he was indisposed, and it is said that his black eyes were as big as bubble gum. It left a permanent hole in his lower cheek as if a little pebble of flesh had been squeezed out of him. (215)

Unlike the descriptions of the beating of Eily, O'Brien manages to inject some comedy into the treatment of the bank clerk, but this does not hide the fact that this is a violent and revengeful community, who are intent on extracting, if not a Shakespearean pound, at least a pebble of flesh, from anyone who threatens their moral codes.

In Ní Dhuibhne's narrative, the midwife is threatened by a young man who

pulled out a big huge knife out of his breast pocket and pointed it at my stomach. He put the heart crossways in me. And then he says, in a real low voice, like a gangster in Hill Street Blues or something:

'Keep your mouth shut. Or else!' (Ní Dhuibhne 2003, 29)

Her husband also warns her that she may be liable for prosecution: 'They'll be arresting you next!' (29). It is clear that the threat of violence and the fear of
retribution ensure the midwife's silence, as they do the silence of the female characters in Lavin and O'Brien's stories.

Irish society, if we are to judge by these narratives, is a dangerous place for women. Subversive females who wish to operate with a degree of sexual freedom do so covertly. Sarah Murray, who threatens to expose her community's sexual secrets, is left to die like 'a rat' (Lavin 1978, 68). Like a resistance movement in a war situation, non-conforming women are driven underground. In O'Brien's story, couples come together in 'the thick of the woods' (O'Brien 1990, 202), in a 'lime kiln' (209), in 'graveyards, or in the slate quarry' (203). In 'Midwife to the Fairies', the single mother gives birth in a house which 'was kind of buried like at the side of the road, in a kind of a hollow' (26). We should not forget either, that the newborn baby dies in Ní Dhuibhne's story, as does the newborn in Lavin's tale, showing that babies of rebellious women are also endangered. The condition of women's lives in all three texts is best summed up by Edna O'Brien's conclusion: 'ours indeed was a land of shame, a land of murder and a land of strange sacrificial women' (O'Brien 1990, 221).

NOTES

1. Lavin, Mary, 'Sarah', in Tales from Bective Bridge, Dublin: Poolbeg, 1978, 58-68


4. 'Sarah' was published in Lavin’s first collection of short stories, *Tales from Bective Bridge*, in 1943. As Ireland, like Britain, suffered from shortages of tea and petrol during the war (Gray 1997, 7; Keogh 1994, 136, 163-64), it may be deduced that this story is set in the years preceding the second world war, when details such as Kathleen Kedrigan’s trip to Dublin by bus and Sarah’s consumption of several cups of tea would have been credible.

5. The Mau Mau, mentioned by the fortune-teller's husband in O'Brien's story (O'Brien 1990, 208), was 'the phrase used by the colonial authorities for the uprising in Kenya ... which caused a state of emergency in the early 1950s' (Boyd and Lenman 1993, 593).

6. *Dallas* is mentioned by Ní Dhuibhne’s midwife on p. 26 of the story. As Barbara O'Connor explains, 'the melodramatic serial *Dallas* was first broadcast in 1978' on RTE (O'Connor 1990, 9), and, by the 1980s, had taken Europe 'by storm' (3). Another contextual detail is the mention of the woman who 'was after setting up a prostitutes' hotel' (Ní Dhuibhne 2003, 22). This may be an echo of the controversial appearance on the *Late Late Show* by 'Cynthia Payne, a retired English brothel keeper' known as Madam Sin', in November 1982 (Earls 1984, 120).

7. The Wren, as Terence Dolan explains, is a tradition 'associated with St Stephen's Day (26 December). 'Wren boys [are] . . . young men, often wearing straw masks, who travel around their locality with a dead wren'. The tradition arose from the belief that wrens gave away the hiding place of St Stephen, who was stoned to death (Dolan 1998, 289). O'Brien's use of the wren mask may have multiple meanings in this narrative. When a 'woman taken in adultery' is brought to Jesus, he said: 'He that is without sin among you, let him cast a first stone' (John 8: 3-7). Therefore, the wren mask worn by Nuala, who condemns worldly appetites, may prefigure the hypocrisy of the adults who later condemn Eily.

8. Note again the double entendre in O'Brien's phrasing.

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