**SAŽETAK:**

Ovaj se tekst bavi iščitavanjem perspektiva iz kojih dvije irske književnice različitih generacija, Kate O'Brien i Edna O'Brien, poimlju represivne katoličke dogme koje su gotovo čitavo dvadeseto stoljeće snažno definirale i oblikovale identitet irske žene. Odabrani romani, *The Ante-Room* (1934.) i *Mary Lavelle* (1936.) Kate O'Brien, te *The Country Girls Trilogy* (1960., 1962., 1964.) Edne O'Brien, analiziraju se u istom kulturološkom i ideološkom kontekstu, i polazište je članka da vrlo očito ilustriraju ono što je filozof Lous Althusser nazivao “ideološkim državnim aparatima.” Religija kao jedan od ključnih aparata države neprestano “interpelira” protagonistice ovih romana kao subjekte i one su stoga duboko a često i bolno potčinjene ideologiji i doktrinama irske katoličke crkve.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** katoličanstvo, Althusser, ideologija, obitelj, državni aparati, represija,

**ABSTRACT:**

This article examines the ways in which two Irish authors, Kate O’Brien and Edna O’Brien, articulate and subvert the repressive Catholic dogma which heavily impacted on the shaping of Irish woman's identity throughout most of the twentieth century. The chosen novels, *The Ante-Room* (1934) and *Mary Lavelle* (1936) by Kate O'Brien, and *The Country Girls Trilogy* (1960, 1962, 1964) by Edna O'Brien are read in the same cultural and ideological context, and are considered to graphically enact what the philosopher Louis Althusser terms as the “ideological state apparatuses” at work. The heroines of both authors are constantly “interpellated” as individuals subjected to the controlling force of religion and thus deeply and often painfully steeped in the ideology and doctrine of the Irish Catholic Church.

**KEY WORDS:** Catholicism, Althusser, ideology, family, state apparatuses, repression

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**(Dis)obeying the “Inexorable Censor”:**

**Catholicism in the Fiction of Kate O’Brien and Edna O’Brien**

Traditionally, literary scholars and critics have not considered novels of Kate O’Brien (1897-1974) and Edna O’Brien (b. 1930) together.[[1]](#footnote-1) Apart from grouping them together as banned Irish authors, they have rather tended to explore the works of these two writers separately, that is, in different historical contexts. On the one hand, Kate O’Brien started writing fiction in the early thirties and continued to write until the late fifties. It is a critical consensus that she created her finest fiction in the thirties and forties, during the heyday of the nexus between the Church and state in Ireland. The focus of this paper therefore also lies on the two novels from this period: *The Ante-Room* (1934) and *Mary Lavelle* (1936). Edna O’Brien, on the other hand, started her literary career in the sixties, at a time of gradual changes in Irish society and the second wave of feminism worldwide. Her early trio of novels which I will analyse here, *The Country Girls* (1960)*, The Lonely Girls* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964), are considered to have successfully introduced rebellious and audacious women characters into Irish fiction. *The Country Girls Trilogy* (hereafter *The* *Trilogy*) is therefore usually hailed as a crucial piece of women’s fiction to forever change the face of Irish women’s literary scene in the second half of the last century.

However, as my readings of their selected novels will attempt to demonstrate, it is possible to consider the fiction of these two writers in the same ideological and cultural context. These novels very vividly represent the huge impact of what the philosopher Louis Althusser terms “ideological state apparatuses” on Irish women for most of the twentieth century. In his famous 1969 essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser examines the function and influence of social forces such as religion, school, family, the political system, and censorship, to name a few, which subtly but continually control the everyday lives of each individual. He points out the religious, educational and family apparatuses as the major enforces of ideology. Observed in the light of his thesis, the Irish were deeply “steeped” in, that is, subjected to the ideology of the Irish Catholic Church for most of the twentieth century. Unsurprisingly, as Catholicism in Ireland had enormous impact on virtually every aspect of life, it completely permeated not only education and family, but also the political and cultural state apparatuses. In other words, religious ideology consistently hailed or “interpellated” the Irish as subjects, and the chosen novels enact graphically the social force of religion at work.

That is why the complexities which Kate O’Brien’s heroines and Caithleen Brady, one of Edna O’Brien’s protagonists, come across when facing many restrictions imposed on themare not as different as they seem at first sight. Whereas *The Ante Room* is set in the milieu of the late nineteenth-century middle-class Irish bourgeoisie, and the plot of *Mary Lavelle* in Spain in 1922, the *Trilogy* conveys a coming of age story of the two girls in contemporary Ireland, in the fifties and early sixties. This paper argues that Edna O’Brien’s Caithleen has much more in common with Kate O’Brien’s more or less compliant heroines than with her subversive and astringent friend Baba. The confines and oppression of a small, patriarchal and Catholic society determine her behaviour and her destiny almost as much as they do in the world of Kate O’Brien’s heroines. Notwithstanding the period in which each of the novels is set, what the three women (Agnes in *The Ante-Room*, Mary in *Mary Lavelle* and Caithleen in *The Trilogy*) have in common is the fact that they are very deeply “steeped” particularly in religious ideology. The profound and sincere devotion to the Catholic religion and the awareness of the dire consequences they will have to suffer if they disobey the doctrine, holds them in check and dominate every single aspect of their lives. They are all “‘individuals’ who live in ideology,” as Althusser would have it (113). They recognize too well, as the poet Eithne Strong says, “Voices of Authority which keep warning the mortal soul of many dangers: ‘Deny flesh: Mortify. Abnegate’” (34).

Compared to our other two heroines, Agnes Mulqueen in *The Ante- Room* remains the staunchest Catholic character and, possibly the most miserable of heroinesin Kate O’Brien’s fiction, as she sternly denies herself even the slightest prospect of emotional fulfilment with the man she loves. At the opening of the novel*,* the tolling of the bells[[2]](#footnote-2) announces the gloomy atmosphere, and also symbolically represents the crucial impact coming from the outside world, that of the Catholic Church which runs through the novel strongly and continuously. This is one of the rare aspects of the outside world sensed within the house and within the otherwise enclosed space of the family permeated with the odour of illness and approaching death. We soon find out that apart from tending her mother who is on the death-bed dying of cancer, Agnes’s true agony revolves around the forbidden love for Vincent, her sister’s husband. The news that her sister, Marie Rose, and her husband, are coming to the Roseholm household triggers a succession of interior conflicts and feverish introspection. Agnes examines her conscience with remarkable meticulousness, showing that she is too well aware of the moral dilemma that weighs heavily on her, but also displaying the extent to which she is subjected to the controlling force of Catholicism: ”For three months ... she has not received communion. ... At Mass and in her prayers Agnes sought to face her moral problem” (*The Ante-Room* 33).

Agnes constantly measures out her life with mass goings, regular weekly confessions and the number of Communions received which give her a much needed sense of moral purity and sinlessness, but also spiritual comfort. She lives in such a constrained religion-dominated world that it is no wonder that she is so harsh on herself. Rigorously participating in, as Althusser would have it, “certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus” (113), she lives in the religious ideology on a day-to-day basis. “These practices,” Althusser explains, “are governed by the *rituals* in which these practices are inscribed, within the material existence of an *ideological apparatus*, be it only a small part of that apparatus; a small mass in a small church, a funeral ...” (114). It is obvious early on in the novel that these rituals are an extremely important part of Agnes’s daily existence. If she happens to miss any of these, she well knows that in her unforgiving world it would imply only one thing: that she has recklessly neglected perhaps the major aspects of her identity – being a good and obedient Catholic.

Hopeful that she would finally dispense with her illicit reveries, she goes to church to confess to be finally “loosed from sin” (*The Ante-Room* 85-86). Louise Fuller states how hugely important confession was to the Irish:

“Sins had to be confessed in detail, as well as the number of times they had been committed. There was a very real fear of dying in a state of mortal sin and thus losing eternal salvation. Graphic images of hell-fire and damnation were etched into people’s consciousness” (21).

Agnes’s urge to have a confession captures well this importance. However, were she a woman whose faith is not so profoundly and sincerely lived, she would be perhaps able to deceive herself into believing that this simple and short religious act could obliterate a months’ long emotional suffering. As Eamon Maher notices, Agnes belongs to the line of Kate O’Brien’s women who “have an intellectual appreciation of the theology to which they plead their allegiance” (“Irish Catholicism” 98). Agnes soon realizes, however, that confession provides only a temporary relief, and that all she is left to do is gather all her strength on her own and exorcise her forbidden love for her brother-in-law once and for all.

Unlike our two other heroines, as we shall see, Agnes never flinches either from her faith or family duty. Not even when faced with Vincent’s outpouring of love for her near the end of the novel, does Agnes come close to overstepping the line of socially and morally acceptable behaviour of her time. Therefore, I do not completely agree with Anthony Roche when he claims that, as an Irish woman, she is driven both to draw and subvert on the “powerful tradition of Irish Catholicism, the only language in which she has been schooled” (97-98). When offered an alternative life they could have if they ran away together, Agnes realizes that “some inexorable censor in her knew that it would never happen” and almost feels like cheating on him (*The Ante-Room* 258-259). This “inexorable censor” is the nagging and deeply ingrained awareness that it is impossible for a woman to ever get out of the enclosed world of religion and strong family ties**.** It controls her life to such an extent that, although constantly carried away by invigorating fantasies, she keeps depriving herself of a life she envisages in secret. Given Agnes’s striking resolution and morality, I agree, on the other hand, with Lorna Reynolds who argues that in this novel, “Catholicism is not presented as a characteristic of the class and race of the girl.” She goes on to say that for Agnes “Catholic teaching is not just given mouth-service, merely acknowledged, but is understood and accepted as an inescapable part of life” (56). It is quite significant that her identity of a good Catholic and a loyal sister is so deeply implanted in her that Agnes does not experience her sacrifice as a burden.

Despite the fact that the eponymous character of *Mary Lavelle* is considerably bolder and that she actually subverts the tenets of Irish Catholicism, she eventually responds to the repressiveness of religious ideology in much the same way as Agnes. It has to be said, however, that she is a heroine ofa novel which does not explicitly confront “the wretched misery the Church can inflict on its faithful but rebellious members,” as Michelle Roberts correctly observes (xi). Although Catholic moral doctrine lurks here beneath every action and decision Mary makes and beneath the consequences she has to suffer, the repressive force of religion and its influence on the lives of the characters do not occupy the foreground of the novel. It is quite evident from the outset that here we are dealing with a somewhat different heroine, one who is not fully at peace with the role of a dutiful daughter and an obedient future wife and mother. She is, just like just like Agnes, born and raised in Mellick,[[3]](#footnote-3) but has a genuine need to step out of the stalemate world of the small town bourgeoisie, if only for a brief period of time. As opposed to Agnes, Mary herself dares to defy social forces by spending a year as a governess in a rich family in Spain.

However, it is not until she meets Juan Averaga, interestingly placed only in the second half of the book, that Mary starts to forcefully question her Catholic background. Their forbidden love awakens Mary to even deeper interrogation of the whole ideological system of truths she has lived by so far in Ireland. Our heroine falls in love with a married man in Spain, and suddenly realizes that the strict order and supervisory eye of her traditionalist home country are exactly what she needs to prevent her from falling deeper into what she sees as a moral abyss: “In Mellick there were blessed mists and rain, and the old rules were absolute. ... Ah God, to be back there, back in her own quiet heart, in coldness and tenderness” (*Mary Lavelle* 208). Although away from home and seemingly free from the suffocating concerns of life in a small rural community, Mary is, in Athusserian terms, naggingly “interpellated” by the controlling forces of state, religion and family. Once she has freedom to decide on her own what course her life would and might take, she is quite expectedly at a loss as to know how to behave. Just like Agnes, who tries hard to exorcise forbidden emotions for her brother-in-law with the only means available to her - confession and prayer, so is Mary compelled to pray in order to salvage her up to that moment enclosed and sheltered world of Catholic prohibitions and her alleged love for her fiancé: “God, help me! Oh, help me, please. Teach me how to pray. Teach me how to love John as I should” (*Mary Lavelle* 161). Nevertheless, praying and desperately calling upon “the old rules”, characteristic of the conservative young state, does not help her stay compliant with Catholic teaching. The omniscient narrator calls her conduct “foolish” very often throughout the novel, as if wanting to stress not only the oddness and nonconformity to the Catholic authority and any of the social conventions, for that matter**,** but also the fact that “well-behaved” Irish girls do not behave like this. Her Irish identity strongly defined by the power and influence of strict authorities is not something she can easily ignore. She remembers how she learnt “by hearsay – from confessors, from school retreats, from missions, from the exhortations of the catechism – that she was a sinner, a weak thing of the flesh” (*Mary Lavelle* 157). However, the lure of the forbidden, of the carnal pleasure she is yet to taste for the first time eventually turns out much more powerful. Although unable to shut down completely that “inexorable censor” which prevents Agnes from acting out and eventually helps her remain a “good” Catholic, Mary lets herself go and gets involved in an illicit love affair.

Terry Eagleton lucidly points out that for Kate O’Brien, especially in this novel, sexual love is “a kind of delicious insanity, a wayward, unmanageable, implacable force which disrupts all settlement and involves an ecstatic casting loose of one’s moorings. It is the enemy of communal spirit and social responsibility” (241). Mary’s conscious decision to give in to “sin” thus seems to be as far from social responsibility and the submissiveness to the religious ideology as can be. The moment the two make love quite simply implies the transgression of any kind of subjection, and it is interesting that it is Mary who initiates the intercourse (a detail which must have particularly stuck in the censors’ craw): “She put her arms round him and pulled his head down for her kiss” (265), “But I want you to have me first – just for this one time” (*Mary Lavelle* 266). We thus witness Mary’s intenseemotional coming-of-age as she is able to examine her “loose” behaviour and is ready to take the consequences in an astonishingly down-to-earth and mature manner. This is certainly another characteristic that brings her close to Agnes in *The Ante-Room*. Well aware of the oppressive nature of their Catholic background which neither Mary nor Juanito is able to escape from (“We’re Catholics” (*Mary Lavelle* 221)), the (im)possibility of divorce remains for our heroine nothing but an abstract notion of fleeing their plight. However, for a girl who was some time ago just a typical, inexperienced Irish virgin, afraid to even think or talk about, let alone indulge in sexual desire and adultery, discussing such a taboo matter is another act of boldness and even subversion**.** In eventually choosing neither to become the mistress of the man she is passionately in love with nor to marry her fiancé, she demonstrates both great intelligence and courage. Lorna Reynolds comments that Kate O’Brien “makes no moral issue of the behaviour of her heroine.” Nevertheless, “behind lies a question: Is it better for Mary Lavelle to learn the real nature of love, even though she sins against her Catholic training in doing so, than to sleep-walk amiably into marriage, agreed to but not desired by her?” (102). An intelligent young woman, Mary is well aware that in the stifling world of the narrow-minded Irish society she will never be forgiven for this transgression, and goes into self-imposed exile: “She was going home with a lame and hopeless story … And afterwards she would take her godmother’s hundred pounds and go away” (*Mary Lavelle* 300).

If we turn to Edna O’Brien’s Caithleen in *The Trilogy,* we can instantly notice that what she lacks is the emotional maturity and decisiveness that both Kate O’Brien’s heroines possess. Mary consciously decides to come clean to her fiancé about the committed “sin”, and then face an unforeseeable future on her own. For the sake of her faith and her family, Agnes remains forever subjected to the repressive social forces and renounces love knowing that she would never again experience such intense and profound feelings. Caithleen is a character who could at first sight easily find a place in the world of Kate O’Brien’s fiction. Her vision of ideal life – finish convent school, find a man, get married and live happily-ever-after as wife and mother – fits quite well into the image promoted by the fledgling Irish state and at the same time denounced by Kate O’Brien’s novels. However, in her desperate search for love she cannot help constantly breaking moral laws. Caithleen’s conduct is quite unacceptable for the still very conservative Ireland of the fifties and early sixties, let alone for the time of Kate O’Brien.

Caithleen, however, experiences Catholicism in much the same way as Mary and Agnes and eagerly participates in regular practices, prayers and confessions, which make an “inescapable part” of her life. Nevertheless, her “inexorable censor” is not as nearly as effective and strict as in Kate O’Brien’s women. At the outset of the *Country Girls*, upon getting up, the teenage Cathleen performs what seems to be her usual morning ritual – contentedly speaking to the picture of the Virgin Mary. Saying out loud that she loves Hickey, a workman on the farm where she lives with her parents, she addresses the picture of the Virgin and demonstrates in all her naivety how seriously she takes the power of prayer: “I said so aloud to the Blessed Virgin, who was looking at me icily from a gilt frame. ... She said nothing. It surprised me that she didn’t talk more often. Once, she has spoken to me, and what she said was very private” (*The Trilogy* 4). It is no wonder that Caithleen maintains such an intimate relationship, as it were, with the Virgin Mary, the supreme Catholic symbol of purity. Louise Fuller states that in the Ireland of the fifties, when the plot of *The Country Girls* takes place, the symbolic forms of Catholicism were everywhere to be seen, in the home as well as in the public – the holy pictures, particularly the picture of the Sacred Heart with the eternal lamp, the papal marriage blessing, the crucifix, the statues of the Blessed Virgin, the Infant of Prague, St Joseph and various other saints (10).

From her early childhood Caithleen is on a symbolical level also heavily “steeped” in the ideology and worldview, which would continue to determine her life all through to her death. Caithleen’s feeling that the picture of the Virgin Mary remains callous and insensitive to her prayers, announces early on in the novel that her often childlike and naive reliance on the Catholic faith will prove futile and wasted for much of her life. Her tragic death by drowning symbolically demonstrates that of all threeheroines under discussion here, she is the least able to cope with the unattainable ideal of femininity promulgated by the Catholic Church. As much as this extremely pious and meek girl tries to adhere to the religious ideological apparatus, she seems to inadvertently keep transgressing its prescriptions throughout her whole life. Of course, it is her friend Baba who constantly (and with much pleasure, it has to be noted) laughs at Caithleen’s devoutness and undermines the authority of her “inexorable censor,” as it were. Mocking Caithleen’s behaviour throughout the *Trilogy*, she in fact functions as a voice which undermines every notion of passive obedience that Catholic ideology fosters.

When the teenage Caithleen and Baba move to Dublin (and later London) after yet another punishment - the expulsion from the convent school, Baba enthusiastically enjoys their newly won freedom not only from the clutches of the church but from all kinds of subjugation of the tight-knit community. Caithleen, on the other hand, has difficulties adjusting to the city life. Their attitudes towards this new stage in life are starkly contrasted and illustrate perfectly two opposing views of the subjection to Catholicism:

“What will we do, Cait?” Baba asked as she lay full length on the single bed.

“I don’t know. Will we go to confession?” It was what we usually did on Saturday evenings.

“Confession. Christ, don’t be such a drip, we’ll go downtown. Oh, God, isn’t it heaven?” (*The Trilogy* 128-129).

When Caithleen eventually ceases to eagerly participate in all those small rituals, which Althusser necessarily connects to the functioning of the religious apparatus, she feels that she has disengaged from her Catholic background and, for that matter, from the sense of belonging. Unlike Baba, but like Mary or Agnes, she obviously finds it easier to live under constraints and guidelines imposed on her by religion. The act of going to confession is for Baba, on the other hand, just another symbol of the hated religious repression she cannot wait to get rid of. She has no problems whatsoever shunning it and readily turning to many possibilities the city has to offer to young girls freed from parental control or the prying eye of the Church.

It is interesting, however, that the God-fearing Cathleen, while in an odd relationship with a certain Mr Gentleman,[[4]](#footnote-4) stops going to “Mass and confession and things” (*The Trilogy* 167) dismissing them, just like Baba, as time-wasting activities. All of the sudden, Catholic identity is for Caithleen no longer as important as it used to be. As Rudiger Imhof notices, what is increasingly at work especially in the first two novels of the *Trilogy* is a “subtle transference from religion to love ... Love is felt as a new devotion, a new religion, as a quest for paradise on earth” (72). He suggests that Edna O’Brien consistently uses the “religious metaphor,” as Caithleen perceives men in her life very much through the lens of religion.[[5]](#footnote-5) She thus refers to Mr Gentlemen as “my new God, with a face carved out of pale marble” (*The Trilogy* 57). The first time she meets Eugene Gaillard, her future husband, his face reminds her “of a saint’s face carved out of gray stone which I saw in the church every Sunday” (*The Trilogy* 185). However, in Caithleen’s case, just like in Kate O’Brien’s novels, love can never fully substitute religion. The more pronounced her neglect of Catholic practices and her disobedience of the Catholic Church, the guiltier she feels about it and the sense that she is once again interpellated as the subject gets more intense. A desperate need to be loved and an equally strong need to be subjected to Catholicism prove to be mutually exclusive. When in a new troubled relationship, that with Eugene, she is aware that breaking away from religion brings her nothing but misery: “I could feel the goodness going out of me, as I had not been to Mass for five weeks” (*The Trilogy* 327). The sharp contrast between the two disparate aspects of her life – love for Eugene and living in sin with him, and her Catholic devoutness - clearly signifies that her need for this subjection is not only symbolical but genuine and sincere. When Eugene, who is a non-Catholic, mocks sarcastically at her need to seek consolation in Sunday Mass, he seems to pinpoint the essence of her increasing anguish: “So, when you’re in there, you become a convent girl again. … I don’t know how you can do it,” ... “How can you live two lives? In there ... you’re deep in it with crucifixions and hell and bloody thorns. And here am I sitting on a wall” (*The Trilogy* 328-329).

Living in sin (with a divorced man, to make things worse) only underlines Caithleen’s constant torment as for this young Irish woman anything connected to sex is quite unsurprisingly the “unmentionable subject.” The bashful Caitheen has, for example, “an idea that couples had to be married for a long time before a woman got a baby” (*The Trilogy* 169). This utter ignorance of the facts of life may be taken to stand as a perfect paradigm for Irish womanhood for greater part of the last century. Her fear of sexuality and having sex for the first time almost recalls the naivety of Mary Lavelle (before coming to Spain!): “I knew that I was about to do something terrible. I believed in hell, in eternal torment by fire” (*The Trilogy* 228). However, Caithleen and Eugene’s subsequent marriage, the only approved context for the expression of sexuality, does not provide any sort of bliss either, as Edna O’Brien ironically puts in the title of the third book. The hasty wedding ritual stresses the impossibility of the turbulent relationship ever turning into a happily-ever-after marriage, but also deepens the rift between her two identities, so to speak. Caithleen, a “convent girl,” and Caithleen, a grown up woman who desperately tries to meet the demands of contemporary society are juxtaposed, as they keep resisting each other all the time. A Catholic Church wedding, another ritual inextricably linked with the subjection to the religious authority, is for Caithleen the obvious choice, or, in other words, the only possible option. However, as she is heavily pregnant and her husband-to-be a non-Catholic they make an image of a highly undesirable Irish couple of the sixties, and can be married only in the back of the church. As their marriage is considered a mixed marriage, the act *per se* is scandalous in the eyes of the Catholic Church, although they do not get married in Ireland but in England. The Catholic Church fostered strict rules concerning such marriages until the late 1960s. Louise Fuller argues that the wedding “could not take place in any consecrated building,” “there could be no religious vestments or rites,” “the priest must not bless the couple,” and finally the wedding was treated as a “second-class affair” (17)

The “religious metaphor,” however, gets even more pronounced as Caithleen is at a loss to know how to cope with the fact that their relationship has not lived up to the Catholic ideal of the indissoluble marriage union. In an attempt to expiate her sinful behaviour - a platonic affair with another man which sets off their separation and later divorce - the pious Caithleen resorts to constructing a new martyr-like image for herself. When Eugene eventually rejects her as a woman of loose morals and deprive her of the right to nurture their son, she starts a solitary existence which conjures up this martyr-like conduct.Her new life of a recluse in a “cell”, a shabby room in a lodging house, tends to function as an act of atonement for all the alleged sins she has committed, but also for the shame she wants to hide from the prying eyes of the others. It turns out that, from the beginning until the very end her life within marriage it is heavily laden with a sense of the Catholic guilt and shame.Caithleen fails to fit into the appropriate image of what a good Catholic woman should behave like and therefore must bear the consequences: “In the mornings she cooked her breakfast in the kitchen - ... saluting the dog or the landlady if she met either, appeasing them both with a smile before vanishing into her cell once again (*The Trilogy* 442). It is somewhat of a paradox that Caithleen who so desperately strivesto be a good Catholic, in other words, submissive and obedient woman, ends up like the worst of sinners.

After she is forced to give in to her husband in the custody battle, she resorts to a sterilization operation. With this severe and radical act of eliminating “the risk of making the same mistake again” (*The Trilogy* 508), she rejects woman’s primary role mandated by Catholicism: becoming a mother again. If the *Trilogy* finished here, with Caithleen’s sterilization, it could be argued that through her decisiveness, although harsh and perhaps somewhat too strict, the dejected Caithleen resembles Mary Lavelle and Agnes Mulqueen. Although Kate O’Brien’s women eventually stay loyal to religion and willingly consent to being controlled by the Church, and Caithleen, for that matter, totally counters it, each of them turns out a strong character as they make a life-affecting decision. However, we find out in the Epilogue that the image of a disillusioned woman who has suddenly and finally turned self-confident is heavily undermined. Even as a mature woman, she cannot seem to escape the vicious circle of the same pattern of behaviour – she remains that submissive god-fearing girl who constantly gets involved in dead-end affairs with married men and hopes in vain to find true love: “It goes on, by Jesus, it goes on” (*The Trilogy* 511). When Anne Weekes Owens claims that Mary Lavelle, before her coming of age in Spain, is “O’Brien’s indictment of the [religious ideological] system” (“Trackless Road” 133), it seems to me that she might sadly apply exactly the same words to the character of Caithleen. She retreats into the detrimental dolefulness and eventually into the arguable suicide. She is well aware that in the eyes of traditionalist Irish society she would never be a good enough Catholic, no matter how hard she tried to make amends for her continual misbehaviour – the expulsion from a convent school, failed relationships with much older men, a disastrous marriage with a divorcee, a divorce and extramarital affairs: “I’ve come to a nice end,” she said aloud, and thought, “Where are convent scruples now?” (*The Trilogy* 497).

These three women (Kate O’Brien’s Agnes and Mary, and Edna O’Brien’s Caithleen) each in her own way inflict punishment on themselves because they are aware that the supervisory eye of the repressive forces will not let them off scot-free. I argue here that they might be observed in complete contrast to Edna O’Brien’s other protagonist, the gold-digging Baba. As we have already seen, she is a character who continually and stubbornly resists subjecting herself to the repressiveness of the church and thus disengages herself from the image of an ideal woman fostered by church and state. Even though she does not altogether escape the entrapment of the suffocating Catholic culture and even though she does not get everything she wants from life (she ends up in a loveless marriage with a man she despises, gets pregnant during a one-night stand, has a bad relationship to her daughter), Baba still finds the way to go about things**.** The fact that in the Epilogue to the *Trilogy,* Edna O’Brien kills off one of her characters, that of Caithleen and not of Baba, demonstrates symbolically but unambiguously that in contemporary Irish literature, the “bad” side of Irish womanhood should prevail over the often irksome kindness of the “good girl.” In the last book, *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, it is Baba who, fed up with Caithleen’s plaintiveness and servility, simply says: “She was so goddamn servile I could have killed her” (*The Trilogy* 421).

It comes as no surprise then that Baba’s circumstances challenge the ground tenets of Catholicism much more unashamedly and openly than Caithleen’s more or less inadvertent misbehaviour. Whereas Caithleen, contrary to her life-long beliefs and principles, manages to gain control over her body and her life at least for a brief period of time, Baba is near the end of the *Trilogy* subjected to this same control. She marries a nouveau riche builder then gets pregnant outside marriage and finally, completely lacking maternal instincts, tries to induce an abortion in a hot tub. When this act, probably one of the most infamous moments in the *Trilogy,* proves unsuccessful, she is not only forced to tell her flabbergasted husband about the unwanted pregnancy but is also compelled to undergo a series of highly unpleasant medical examinations. Baba has to succumb to the control of male gynaecologists over her body, now more vulnerable than ever:

I was thinking of women and all they have to put up with, not just washing nappies or not being able to be high-court judges, but all this. All this poking and probing and hurt. And not just when they go to doctors but when they go to bed as brides with the men they love. Oh, God, who does not exist, you hate women, otherwise you’d have made them different. And Jesus, who snubbed your mother, you hate them more*.* (*The Trilogy* 473)

No matter how blunt and earthy, Baba’s comment reveals a mature young woman much more aware of the predicament of women of her time than her friend. According to Amanda Greenwood, “Baba's recognition of women's entrapment by a male construction of 'God' who 'does not exist' in their interests anticipates O'Brien's ongoing deconstructions of myths of femininity under Irish Catholicism” (29). Therefore, when her Catholic gynaecologist tells her “God has fructified your womb” (*The Trilogy* 473), his words sound nothing but hollow and meaningless. Baba constantly refuses to perceive her pregnancy and maternity in terms of God’s blessing or any kind of God-given gift to her. In her world, the concept of God or subjection to religion are categories which she readily dismisses. Unlike Caithleen, in rejecting motherhood from the very first moment and in eventually failing to achieve an affectionate bond with her child, she persistently resists being identified as a good Catholic. When she compares herself to her friend, she does not feel the need to apologize for her behaviour either: “I’m not a mother like Kate, drooling and holding out the old metaphorical breast, like a warm scone or griddle bread” (*The Trilogy* 515). Unlike her friend or Kate O’Brien’s protagonists, Baba can be simply termed a bad Catholic who does not heed the rules of moral behaviour fostered by the religious ideology. Far from feeling that she is “interpellated” by the authority of the Church, she behaves in a way that Alhusser would simply term “wicked” (113).

If the images of Agnes, Mary or Caithleen largely correspond to what many Irish women of the twentieth century were really like - limited by the Church-state conception of womanhood, then Baba might be said to portray what they would have liked to be but never dared to try. In creating Baba, Edna O’Brien recognizes the need for a totally different, bolder type of woman in the more secular and global Ireland in the second half and towards the end of the twentieth century. She might be just as well suggesting that Baba’s asperity and subversiveness, although somewhat exaggerated at times, encapsulate the too long awaited backlash of Irish womanhood to the exigencies of the weakening but still rigid Catholic Church towards the end of the twentieth century. As Edna O’Brien herself states in her famous essay, “heroines don’t have to be good anymore” (“Why Irish Heroines”).

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1. The two authors are not related. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The novel’s atmosphere owes much to the time of year in which Kate O’Brien sets the plot. It takes place at the end of October, over the three Catholic feast days concerned with dead: the Eve of All Saints, the Feast of All Saints and the Feast of All Souls. The book is also divided into three parts, each signifying one day. In the Afterword to the 1988 edition, Deirdre Madden suggests that the structure of *The Ante-Room* constantly reminds the reader that this is a novel focused on death (307). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Although the story of *Mary Lavelle* is entirely set in Spain, its Irish characters are, just like those in *The Ante-Room*, inhabitants of Mellick, a fictional town which largely corresponds to O’Brien’s native Limerick. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century the ever growing hysteria over paedophilia, I cannot help thinking of this romance (which remains strangely unconsummated!) in terms of a relationship between a potential paedophile and his young victim. It is also somewhat surprising that no critic so far has addressed this contentious issue in *The Trilogy*. When they start seeing each other, Caithleen is a minor, only fourteen, and his age remains unidentified. From the way O’Brien portrays him, he is at least three times her age (“he was such a distinguished man with grey hair” (12)). However, according to Shirley Peterson, this odd relationship does not necessarily bear negative connotations and is in effect contrasted to the much darker one with Eugene Gaillard. Peterson suggest that “if Mr Gentleman is Kate’s childish fantasy of the Goody Father, then Eugene Gaillard is the dark underside of this desire” (158). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For similar observations, see Byron (463-4). However, neither Imhof nor Byron notices the way Caithleen connects other seemingly mundane experiences in her life with her devoutness. For instance, when she tries on a new bra in a fitting room of a shop, it is an act in her mind related to a forbidden and deeply immoral act: “Will you fit on the brassiere, Miss Brady? The shop-girl asked. Pale, First Communion voice; pale, pure, rosary-bead hands held the flimsy, black, sinful garment between her fingers, and her fingers were ashamed” (142). Quite predictably, unable to break free from the nagging sense of Catholic guilt and shame, Caithleen resorts to the religious metaphor when depicting the girl’s voice and hands. In this way, they stand in sharp contrast to the “sinfulness” of the bra she is going to wear. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)