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and  
Female Blame:  
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## SHAME AS AFFECT

For most of the twentieth century, in popular Irish culture, Catholicism was intimately connected with shame. Some lived their Catholicism with a sense that feelings of both shame and guilt were a routine part of the faith. Indeed, shame and guilt were often so intertwined that they were almost indistinguishable. Yet shame is distinct from guilt and is arguably, more significant in the Irish Catholic context. Shame flows through established social norms<sup>1</sup> so that the interpersonal relationships formed in each society shape its particular versions of shame.<sup>2</sup> Since shame is not only biological (e.g. being hot with shame), but is also social, Irish shame varied from the shame of other cultures.

In order to feel shame, one must first have experienced joy or interest in something.<sup>3</sup> This is why shame is the most personal of affects. Shame reaches into the depths of who we are as people, making it both dangerous and intrinsically linked to our sense of self-worth.<sup>4</sup> Guilt and shame are intimately connected yet they are distinct. Guilt is associated with an act of wrongdoing, which

- 1 Jacquet, J. *Is Shame Necessary?: New Uses for an Old Tool*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2015.
- 2 Kaufman, G. *The Psychology of Shame: Theory and Treatment of Shame-Based Syndromes*, 2nd ed., New York: Springer Publishing Company, Inc, 1996.
- 3 Kosofsky Sedgwick, E., Frank, A. and Tomkins, S. *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, London: Duke University Press, 1995.
- 4 Pattison, S. *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

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can be apologised for and amended.<sup>5</sup> Further, while guilt can be a positive force in ‘creating and maintaining relationships and moral responsibilities, shame has a more dubious effect’.<sup>6</sup> Shame is not necessarily about morality, but more about conforming to an expected behavior. This is an important distinction since the link between Catholicism and shame in Ireland was reinforced by Church control of social norms. Indeed, for much of the twentieth century, Catholicism in Ireland tended to be hierarchical, fundamentalist and theocratic and to enforce social norms. As successive scandals have subsequently revealed, some Catholic social norms were abusive and unethical. In the Irish version of a twentieth century theocracy, the lines between the state, Church, and civil society tended to be blurred.<sup>7</sup> The more centralized and authoritative the Church’s teaching became, the more those who did not conform to it felt shamed. When chronically shamed, people tend to hide and to remove themselves from communion with others. They feel there is something wrong with them.<sup>8</sup> If shame’s ‘sweet spot’ is found, its power can make an individual conform unquestioningly to society’s view of what behavior is acceptable,<sup>9</sup> beneficial and justified. In the history of humanity, diverse religious traditions have sometimes exploited the power of public shaming to prevent people from deviating from their prescribed norms. So much so that if shame is repeatedly evoked it can become an internalised condition. Sometimes it dehumanizes and leads to social stigmatization where it ‘strips transgressors of their personal dignity’.<sup>10</sup>

As a researcher examining the theme of shame and Catholicism in Irish literature, I was fascinated by Edna O’Brien’s infamous trilogy, *The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girl* (1962), and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964), published together with an epilogue in 1987. These novels focus on twentieth-century Catholic social norms in Ireland, especially in relation to gender, where the negative consequence of Catholic shame is an underlying theme.

5 Park, C. ‘Chronic shame: A perspective integrating religion and spirituality’, *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 35(4), (2016): 354-376.

6 Pattison, p. 129.

7 Valente, J. (2017) ‘Psychoanalysis in Ireland – Ireland in Psychoanalysis’, in *Ireland in Psychoanalysis: Special Issue*, ed. Joseph Valente, Sean Kennedy, and Macy Todd, Breac, 7, online.

8 Karen, R. ‘Shame’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, (1992): 40-70.

9 Jacquet, p. 451.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

## CATHOLIC SHAME AND FEMALE BLAME

### SHAME AND SHAMELESSNESS: TWO PROTAGONISTS

O'Brien stated she, 'decided to have two [protagonists], one [Caithleen] who would conform to both my own and my country's view of what an Irish woman should be', while Baba 'would undermine every piece of protocol and religion and hypocrisy there was'.<sup>11</sup> I assert in this way, Caithleen represents shame and Baba shamelessness. In the novels we follow Caithleen, the ideal of Irish, Catholic girlhood, as her shame develops in the first novel, *The Country Girls* and O'Brien's two consecutive novels. Though originally published individually, reading the trilogy together with the 1987 'Epilogue' allows us to trace the sources of shame present in Caithleen's life until her death. Ironically, O'Brien's fictional narration of shame also became shameful,<sup>12</sup> when O'Brien's expression of sensitive topics was censored by the State for 'explicit content'.<sup>13</sup> Her first novel was 'burned by a local parish priest, in search of some post-rosary drama'.<sup>14</sup> *The Country Girls* voiced the greater independence women felt in the 1960s,<sup>15</sup> and importantly, it also voiced women's shame as they undermined traditional Catholic gender relations in Ireland.

*The Country Girls* begins in mid-century, Western Ireland, before continuing in Dublin in the second novel, *The Lonely Girl*. In this patriarchal society, driven by the concept of the nuclear family, and women as the bearers of national identity and virtue, Caithleen's childhood was shaped by shame.<sup>16</sup> Subjected to repeated beatings by her drunken father and the abandonment and sudden death of her mother, she experienced fractured dysfunctional interpersonal relationships, resulting in shame.<sup>17</sup> Relationships are key. Through relationships we learn specific 'ways of thinking and feeling about ourselves',<sup>18</sup> that dictate how we respond to future situations.<sup>19</sup> Caithleen's shame was caused by a variety of factors including her own body issues, the judgment of her peers (including Baba), her intimate relationships and the disapproval of the nuns

11 O'Brien, E. 'Why Irish Heroines Don't Have To Be Good Anymore', *The New York Times*, 1986.

12 Probyn, E. *Blush*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

13 McBride, E. 'Foreword' in E. O'Brien, ed., *The Country Girls Trilogy*, London: Faber & Faber Limited, 2017.

14 McBride, p. ix.

15 Meaney, G. *Reading the Irish Woman: Studies in Cultural Encounters and Exchange, 1714-1960*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013.

16 Ingman, H. 'Edna O'Brien: Stretching the Nation's Boundaries', *Irish Studies Review*, 10(3), (2010): 253-265.

17 Kaufman (1996).

18 Kaufman, G. and Raphael, L. 'Relating to the Self: Changing Inner Dialogue', *Psychological Reports*, 54, (1984): 239-250.

19 Probyn; Kosofsky Sedgwick, E., Frank, A. and Tomkins, S.

in school. She developed two romantic relationships with married, older foreigners, and in the second novel, Caithleen becomes Kate, as her new lover Eugene finds Caithleen too 'Kiltartan'.<sup>20</sup> This hints at the contempt Eugene feels for Caithleen and her country roots. As the trilogy progresses, Eugene's contempt develops. Caithleen belongs to a 'socialization process', where 'women learn to define their self-identity through a relationship to a man'.<sup>21</sup> She is shamed by her father and compatriots as they continuously try to remove her, at times physically, from relationships they deem unsuitable and a threat to their, and her, reputation, and virtue. When speaking to a priest about her behavior, she says, 'It's as big a sin for my father to be like that as for a man to have two wives'. The priest replies he is surprised to hear her speak of her father like that because he is a good man.<sup>22</sup> As a consequence of her internalized shame, Caithleen feels unlovable and inferior. Her continuous search for love reinforces her failed relationships and the shaming of the men surrounding her.

As the name of the novel suggests, ironically, *Girls in Their Married Bliss* examines the lives of Kate and Baba after they have married. O'Brien chose to alter the ending of the third novel in 1987, as she did not see Ireland's culture changing.<sup>23</sup> Though O'Brien's second protagonist, Baba, is unhappily married and does not find joy in motherhood, nonetheless she survives. Unlike Kate, shameless Baba did not suffer from chronic shame. Indeed, Baba often deflected shame onto Kate. Kate's attempted transformation into what an 'Irish woman should be',<sup>24</sup> simply resulted in shame when she did not uphold Catholic social norms, illustrating her internalisation of these norms and her inescapable shame. Baba also rejected these Catholic norms yet rejected their attachment to shame. O'Brien 'knew that Baba's asperity had to prevail', and the heroine's 'masks are coming off by the minute'.<sup>25</sup> Although Baba might have been able to avoid shame, and remove her mask, symbolically removing shame, Kate could not. By the final novel, Kate's first-person perspective is too shameful to recount. Baba becomes the new narrator, as she does not care about the opinions of the Church and society. Kate's act of hiding comes from her inclination to turn away from the other and to withdraw herself to prevent shame through further exposure. Yet this only reinforces

20 O'Brien, E. *The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue*, London: Jonathon Cape, 1987.

21 Kaufman, G. (1996), p. 43.

22 O'Brien (1987), p. 343.

23 Byron, K. "'In the Name of the Mother ...': The Epilogue of Edna O'Brien's Country Girls Trilogy", *Women's Studies*, 31, (2002): 447-465.

24 O'Brien, E. (1986), online.

25 Ibid., online.

her shame rather than prevents it.<sup>26</sup> While it is natural to respond to shame by hiding, this act simply reinforces shame by creating silence.<sup>27</sup> O'Brien demonstrates this through Kate's sterilization and death.

Kate defies social convention and Church teaching by becoming pregnant outside of wedlock. Even after Eugene divorces his wife and marries Kate, she repeats the pattern of searching for love, in an attempt to reinforce her sense of worth. Though Kate is never unfaithful to him, Eugene leaves and takes their only child, breaking yet another interpersonal bridge. She decides to become sterilized, thereby permanently separating herself from the Irish, Catholic, female ideal of motherhood. Indeed, she feels she is no longer worthy of being a mother. Eugene illustrates his contempt for Kate, making her feel a 'debased, dirty thing, a derided and low animal'.<sup>28</sup> Not only is she shamed by her husband but she is also ashamed of not upholding social norms. We see 'abuse and misogyny are internalized...converted into self-hatred,'<sup>29</sup> which leads to chronic shame around her sterilization. In severe shaming situations, wishing no longer to explore and take interest in the world, a person can feel 'unlovable', 'undeserving of love and unworthy of a place in society'.<sup>30</sup> When shame leads to self-contempt, it can lead to the desire to get rid of or remove the part of the hated self, and in O'Brien's novel this is represented by Kate's sterilization, and eventual suicide.<sup>31</sup>

In the 'Epilogue', Baba relays Kate's death by 'accidental drowning'<sup>32</sup> after a lapse of twenty years. The narrative picks up after Kate regained custody of her estranged son, who leaves for university, and another failed relationship with a married man. Kate tells Baba she is trying to overcome a 'last big breach'. She 'put her hand to her heart and said she'd like to tear it out, stamp on it, squash it to death, her heart being her undoing'.<sup>33</sup> It was not so much her heart that was her undoing, but her shame. After repeated ruptures of relationships, constant shaming at the hands of her friends, kin, countrymen, and husband, she died of mortification.

26 Park, pp. 359-361.

27 Kaufman, G. *Shame: The Power of Caring*, Rochester: Schenkman Books, Incorporated, 1992.

28 Wurmser, L. *The Mask of Shame*, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

29 Rookes-Hughes, L. 'The Family and the Female Body in the Novels of Edna O'Brien and Julia O'Faolain', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 22(2), (1996): 83-97.

30 Moran, P. and Johnson, E. *The Female Face of Shame*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.

31 Bouson, J. *Embodied Shame: Uncovering Female Shame in Contemporary Women's Writings*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009.

32 O'Brien, E. (1987), p. 571.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 677

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As Baba says, ‘I don’t blame her, I realize she was in the f--- wilderness. Born there. Hadn’t the reins to haul herself out’.<sup>34</sup> Still critical of the Church, Baba discusses its stance on motherhood and contraception as she relays her only friend’s tragic ending, and an understanding of Kate’s inability to save herself.<sup>35</sup> In retrospect, Baba’s shamelessness was her salvation, while Kate’s shame was her undoing. If, like Kate, a ‘person comes to the point where there is no place left to hide from the shame and contempt they feel, it becomes lethal, and they choose to erase themselves’.<sup>36</sup> When shame no longer provides a chance to re-evaluate the self and do good but is instead an internalized, chronic condition, it can lead to self-contempt and suicide.

## CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of O’Brien’s novels, it becomes evident that shame involves attachment to societal norms. O’Brien’s trilogy suggests that shame itself is not at fault, but rather the social norms that shame enforces.<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting that some accused O’Brien of shaming women through her writing.<sup>38</sup> Other critics have argued that O’Brien released them from shame by giving a voice to a generation who were ‘previously muzzled’.<sup>39</sup> By confronting issues such as marriage, sexuality, family, education, religion, and motherhood in *The Country Girls Trilogy*, O’Brien offered a fictional Irish shame narrative that offers readers an opportunity to reflect on Catholic social norms in 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland. When analyzing Kate’s character, we might ask whether her transgressions against the norms of the time were transgressions that required shame, or whether shame led to her humiliation and stigmatisation. Hopefully, Kate’s fictional death helps us reflect on what aspects of Catholic culture and faith can be life-giving, and what societal norms can be oppressive and dangerous, particularly to women.

34 Ibid., p. 679.

35 Ibid.

36 Johnson and Moran, p. 5.

37 Jacquet, p. 214

38 O’Leary, A. (2019) ‘The Country Girls – an evocation of “Catholic” Ireland’, *Books Ireland*, 386, (2019):30-31.

39 McBride, p. xvi.