

# *Houses That Remember: Readings of The Troubles in Edna O'Brien's Fiction*

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Daniel Floquet

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## **Abstract**

This essay examines how the Irish writer Edna O'Brien represents the Irish conflict known as The Troubles in her fiction, specifically in the novel *The House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) and in the short story “Black Flower”, published in the collection *Saints and Sinners* (2011). By choosing this topic, I wish to understand if this theme represents a departure of her early narratives, as stated by some of her critics, or if it can be read in the general framework of her oeuvre.

**Keywords:** Edna O'Brien; Violence; The Troubles; Irish History; Masculinity.

## **Resumo**

Este artigo examina o modo como a escritora irlandesa Edna O'Brien representa, na sua ficção, o chamado Conflito na Irlanda do Norte, conhecido em inglês pelo nome “The Troubles”. Utilizando como corpus de trabalho o romance *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) e o conto “Black Flower”, publicado na coletânea *Saints and Sinners* (2011), procuro avaliar se a escolha desta temática representa, com efeito, o início de uma nova fase para a escrita da autora, como é frequentemente afirmado por parte da crítica académica.

**Palavras-chave:** Edna O'Brien; violência; The Troubles; história da Irlanda; masculinidade.

Since its publication in 1994, Edna O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation* has been seen as a game-changer in her oeuvre. John L'Heureux, for example, considered that the novel “marks a dramatic departure for Edna O'Brien in both subject matter and style”

(7) since, supposedly for the first time, O'Brien was dealing with a "political" theme: in this case, the subject of The Troubles and how it affected the lives of many people in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland during more than three decades of conflict. Until that novel's publication, O'Brien was mostly known for her exploration of the theme of female sexuality, a reputation developed since the beginning of her literary career in the early 1960's, with the novel *The Country Girls* (1961). As once observed by Philip Roth, many critics seemed comfortable with simply associating her writing to "eerily intimate stories relating to sexual love" (7). To those critics, the change of focus in O'Brien's work would be confirmed with the publication of her two next novels: *Down by The River* (1996) and *Wild Decembers* (1999), both also addressing subjects more easily identified as "political": the latter derives its plot from what is known in Ireland as the "land problem"; the former is dedicated to the still problematic question of the abortion legalization in Irish law. Christina Hunt Mahony, also seeing *House of Splendid Isolation* as "a departure for O'Brien" (214), suggests that this renewed interest in subjects can allow us to organize the author's work in two distinguished phases: the "sentimental one", from the early 1960's until 1994, and the "political one", from *House of Splendid Isolation* until now (217).

The problem with such division, however, is the fact that it fails to recognize that sex and sexuality, usually understood as the primary interest of O'Brien's first novels, are also political subjects. In fact, *The Country Girls Trilogy*, in the context of its release, confronted a specific social context where women were deeply marginalized and silenced. As pointed out by Kathryn Laing, the *Trilogy* was the first literary work to address the "construction of female sexuality and the consequences of this to women within a specifically Irish context" (1). Moreover, other examples of O'Brien's early works can also be understood as deeply political: both "Irish Revel" (1962) - her first published short story - and the novel *A Pagan Place* (1970) address the subject of rape and abortion, denouncing the way that women's bodies are subordinated to the interests and choices made by the State and the catholic religion, a subordination institutionalized not only by Irish culture but also by the Irish law.

In light of that broader perception, instead of separating O'Brien's work into "sentimental" and "political", a more appropriate reading could be the one suggested by Laura Engel, who understands the new phase in O'Brien's works as "more concerned with the way that many stories connect to shape versions of a collective history" (341). According to Harris, *House of Splendid Isolation* remains a landmark in O'Brien's oeuvre, but not because it is the author's first political novel, but for the

leap it takes from the individual struggle of her characters to a collective one, with an emphasis in the Irish history and in the country's collective memory. In other words, O'Brien widened her scope to engage with the question of the Irish identity, and even more specifically, with the country's violent past and its role in its citizens' lives.

By choosing *House of Splendid Isolation* as the main corpus of this essay, I consider the discussion above of great importance, since it allows me to take the narrative strategies of O'Brien's previous works in consideration while I try to understand how she thematises The Troubles in the novel. The conflict indeed became a very recurrent subject in O'Brien's work, but in *House* it represents the very reason of the narrative itself. I am also interested in examining how the same conflict is represented in the short story "Black Flower", published in 2011 in the collection *Saints and Sinners*, a narrative that, in many ways, can be read as a thematic sequence of O'Brien's 1994 novel.

#### **"Chains of History": representation of The Troubles in *House of Splendid Isolation***

The *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) was published four years before the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, signed on 10 April, usually considered the official end of the conflict that terrorized the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As stated above, the novel addresses this historical period directly, exploring the resentment about the war in both sides of the border. Although the novel does not specify an exact date, several historical references present in the narrative allow us to point out that the novel's diegesis can be placed sometime between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s.

At the heart of the narrative is the encounter between Josie, an octogenarian recluse who lives outside the city in an old house, and McGreevy, a Northern Irish terrorist, who escapes the police in the north and goes to the south to hide. McGreevy chooses Josie's house as a hideout by following an information given by an ally, who told him that the house was inhabited by an old lady, a sympathizer of IRA's cause, "her husband and herself, martyrs for Ireland" (O'Brien, *House of Splendid Isolation* 62). The information, as we are told later, is wrong, since Josie's husband was killed by mistake in a conflict involving the terrorist group, and Josie herself was never interested in politics, and chose to withdraw from the public life decades ago. McGreevy then decides to take her as his hostage for seven days, the time he needs to fulfil his organization's next planned attack. What follows, during the time the two main characters share the house, is a long discussion about Irish history and its violent past, and also a meditation about violence as a tool to achieve a political goal.

However, before exploring those aspects, it is necessary to pay some attention to the narrative structure of the novel itself. Although the main plot of the narrative is the interaction between Josie and McGreevy during the time she was his hostage in the old house, the novel alternates between the present and the past, exploring in particular Josie's past experiences, in order to explain her decision to live a secluded and lonely life. Thus, *House* is divided in seven sections, named "The Present", "The Past", "Captivity", "A Love Affair", "Last Days", all framed by two small sections named "The Child", one at the beginning and one at the end of the novel. The sections "The Past" and "Love Affair" explore Josie's background, her unhappy marriage with James O'Meara, his rampage of violence towards her, her attempt to escape that situation, and her ultimate decision to have an abortion instead of bearing his child.

Conversely, McGreevy's background is never fully explored in the novel as Josie's. In fact, almost everything that is revealed about his past is told by himself to his hostage, leaving numerous unfulfilled gaps.<sup>1</sup> That aspect is important to understand the novel's dynamics: for a long time, McGreevy is perceived as a mystery to Josie, but, as I argue below, he is not perceived in the same way by the reader. After all, our perception of the character is moulded not only by Josie's perspective or by the opinions expressed by a multitude of secondary characters that don't even interact with McGreevy during the novel. In fact, to the construction of our perception of him, one recurrent element is the comparison between McGreevy and a variety of heroic and mythical figures, taken from both Christian and Gaelic lore. That helps to create the idea that he lives apart from society and even represents a menace to those who interact with him.

At the beginning of the section titled "The Present", for example, the son of a policeman compares McGreevy with the Irish mythical hero Cúchulainn, when he sees the terrorist escaping the police in the news: "'Cúchulainn did that, Daddy... He ran the length of Ireland, kicking a ball,' Caimin said, remembering a hero from his schoolbook" (O'Brien, *House* 12). The daughter of the same family compares the terrorist with a spaceman, a not mythical but certainly a modern form of a hero (*House* 11). Danine Farquharson and Bernice Schrank notice that those interactions are mediated by a TV set, reporting McGreevy's escape in a sensationalist way (O'Brien, *House* 132). However, there are many other moments in the narrative where the narrator himself associates McGreevy to mythical and even religious figures. In fact, it is possible to quote more than one passage where McGreevy is directly compared with the image of Jesus Christ:

The manure bags don't soak up the wet, but at least they are cover. Three plastic bags and a manger of straw. Like Jesus. Not that he's praying. Others pray for him, but he does not pray; he's seen too much and done too much and had too much done to him to kneel down and call on a God. Some of what he's done he's blocked, he's had to, but inside, in the depth of his being, he feels clear and answerable and circumspect. (O'Brien, *House* 12)

Other aspects of Christian - and Jewish - imaginary are also associated with McGreevy: he needs to complete his task in seven days (O'Brien, *House* 62), the drippings of water from the trees hit his face like holy water (O'Brien, *House* 207), and, also like Jesus, McGreevy was betrayed by one of his friends, who informs on his location in exchange for money:

A car tailing them from the time they left the house. Someone grassed. Who. He'd know one day and then have it out. Friends turning traitor. Why. Why. Money or getting the wind up. Deserved to die they did, to die and be dumped like animals, those that informed, those that betrayed. Bastards. (O'Brien, *House* 7)

As a terrorist trained in the art of killing, our first thought is to perceive McGreevy as a harbinger of death. However, the narrative also subverts this perception, when he crosses a cow who went to a manger to give birth to her calf. Notice in the following passage how his strength and his military skills are used to help the animal to give birth, which can be read as him becoming also a harbinger of life:

"Fuck's sake," he says as he stands close to her, the breathing now in laboured and hollow groans. The hooves of the calf come prodding out, then recede, then more moans as he grips her and tells her to push, in God's name to push . . . Her contractions thick and rapid and agonising make no difference at all. The calf is too big - nothing for it but rope.

He finds some and coils it around the jutting hooves, then shoves it up inside her so as to grip the shins, all the while saying these idiotic things. From the gate he uses as leverage the moans follow him, something primeval in them, the moans of the cows and cattle of ancient times, for which land and fiefdoms were fought over. She can't do it. He can't do it. The hindquarters and the hips are knifing her. He has to be tougher. He pulls the gate back a few more inches, knowing he will either break the legs or manage to haul it out, and when the clatter hits the cobbles he is unable to suppress his joy. "She's out... She's out. " . . . As he begins to wipe the slime off her

face she gets up, staggering at first, then feels her legs, flexes herself, hardening to the wonder of life . . . . (O'Brien, *House* 14-15)

Therefore, before McGreevy's encounter with Josie, we are not only presented to the police's negative view of him, but also to positive perceptions. In that sense, McGreevy arguable did not look like a terrifying figure to the reader in his first encounter with Josie. However, it is in the clash of different points of view that *House of Splendid Isolation* reaches its higher qualities. After all, in Josie's perspective, he is an invader and a real and direct threat to her:

What it took was the turning of the wooden knob, two, three swivels, then a wrench because of its loose threading, the door itself swinging back and forth quietly but with a livid glee, then a face hooded, eyeballs prominent, eyes like grit, and a voice reasoned telling her not to move and not to scream, saying it several times. He lowers his gun when he sees that the only thing confronting him is an elderly woman in a fourposter bed, clutching the strings of her bedjacket.

"Who are you . . . What's your name?"

"Who are you?" she hears herself asking, amazed that speech has not betrayed her, because in all her nightmares it does. Except that this is no nightmare, or rather the substantiated one, the criminal she has read of and has thought of as being chiefly confined to cities confronting her in her bed . . . . (O'Brien, *House* 61)

However, even in that crucial moment for the novel, he still manages to maintain a hero's aura in the description provided by the narrator. After all, although handing a gun and having his face hooded, the narrative also describes his body in the following aspects:

. . . his boots and trousers caked with the muck of the country. **The debris of three provinces is on them** and his breathing is short. There is something animal within the stillness of him, as if he is covered in a tawny fur that cannot be seen or smelt with lay senses. In a voice completely assured he tells his organisation, his rank, and says she need not come to harm if she does as he says. (O'Brien, *House* 61, emphasis mine)

Although the free indirect speech is as an important mark of Edna O'Brien's narrative style, often mixing her characters perspective with the narrator's, in the case of the passage quoted above, it is undeniable that Josie could not know that McGreevy's boots and trousers were carrying "the debris of three provinces on them". In that regard, this description should be credited specifically to the narrator, and I

believe that this is another example of McGreevy's heroic aspect, for he brings with him the muck and the debris of all Ireland, he knows the north and the south of both countries he fights to reunite.

I have been stressing this aspect of the character because it is crucial to be aware of those strategic narratives to understand the way a terrorist like McGreevy could impact Josie's perception of life. In that matter, I have a different perception from that of Farquharson and Schrank, for example, who argue that Josie is capable of influencing McGreevy's perception about Irish history and violence as much as he is to influence her (135). Instead of that, I believe there is a subtle power play at work in the discussions of those two characters and, ultimately, it is McGreevy who more deeply affects Josie's perception about History and violence, two related subjects that are crucial to the novel, as stated in its opening lines: "History is everywhere. It seeps into the soil, the sub-soil. Like rain, or hail, or snow, or blood. A house remembers. An outhouse remembers. A people ruminate. The tale differs with the teller" (O'Brien, *House 3*).

These lines establish the main *motifs* of the novel, not only by linking history, memory and violence, but also by emphasizing the importance of perspective ("the tale differ with the teller") in the persistence of the Irish conflict. Thus, stories are told in different ways by the cast of characters, often with different conclusions and even with different motivations. That clash of perspectives, of course, is at the centre of the interactions between McGreevy and Josie.

In the beginning, she despises his presence and affirms that "the lawn, the fallen leaves and gutted apples no longer resembled those she had seen a few nights before - everything blemished by his coming" (O'Brien, *House 65*). But then she tries to establish contact with her captor, trying to understand his motivations. After all, she had decided long ago not be involved in any way with Irish political life and cannot understand what drives McGreevy. In their first discussion on the subject, she says to him: "It's not my war", to which he replies: "It's your war whether you like it or not" (O'Brien, *House 74*).

Trying to cope with her situation, she starts to search for old diaries, and she finds one written by her uncle, who died in 1921, fighting in the Irish War of Independence. She shows the diary to McGreevy in an attempt to gain his sympathy, to show him that they "are on the same side" (O'Brien, *House 85*). But it is clear that they have very different views about Irish History and the role of violence in it: Josie affirms that the war in 1921 was different, the violence was justified, and McGreevy replies:

“It wasn’t... It’s exactly the same”

“... Innocent people.”

“For Christ’s sake, I’m trying to save my fucking country, so stop telling me about innocent people.”

“Then fucking do it... Without having to kill and maim innocent people,” she says, shocked at her own directness.

“Look, miss us . . . You stick to your gracious living and your folklore.”

“Are you afraid of me?” she asks, and allows a smile.

“Why should I be afraid of you-you?”

“Afraid of what I might say.”

“Talk has got us fucking nowhere in our fight.”

“Maybe you don’t want it to.”

“Look ... you would have to be born there to know it,” he says, and with a coldness he hands her back the diary, meaning that she has been wasting her time and his. (O’Brien, *House* 85-6)

She insists that the Ireland he is “chasing is a dream... doesn’t exist anymore... It’s gone. *It’s with O’Leary in the grave*”<sup>2</sup> (O’Brien, *House* 193). McGreevy, by his turn, resents “the sunny South, where people had time for love and strawberries”, and laments the fact that many citizens of the Republic “forgot their brothers and sisters across the border, let them rot” (O’Brien, *House* 63).

The possible parallels between The Irish Revolutionary Period and The Troubles are a subject of discussion among other characters as well. Echoing Josie and McGreevy’s disagreements, the cops sent to capture McGreevy also cannot reach a consensus about the role of violence in Irish history:

“But if you’d been in 1916 you’d be on their side”.

“That’s different. That’s a totally different ball game. These guys are without conscience, without ideals, and with only one proclamation, money and guns and murder, guns and money.”

“It’s a sad thing, all the same.”

“It’s monstrous. Think of the deaths, the mutilations, the broken families, the gutted homes. You and me and the lads down here risking our lives... Think of that” (O’Brien, *House* 187)

But one of the cops, Cormac, does not forget that violent actions are not necessarily condemned in History’s eyes:



Cormac balks at the word. At home in Kerry there is a green-and-gold painting of the heroes of 1916, and he can see it, scorched from the flames and a bit smoky, and remembers being picked up as a child and asked to recite the list of names and being praised for it. (O'Brien, *House* 188)

Therefore, although “history” is “everywhere”, as stated in the novel’s opening lines, it has clearly a negative connotation in the novel, since it is related not with the country’s rich tradition, but with traumas, unresolved conflicts and deaths in the family.<sup>3</sup> In one moment of the narrative, a soldier points out to an old house in the countryside and tells his comrades:

“You see that pub”, he says and points to a gloomy, yellow, rained-on building at a god-forsaken crossroads. They look.

“There’s two bullet holes in there, where the Tans shot through a toilet door... Shot a man dead”. Bits of history, bits of folklore. (O'Brien, *House* 197)

In line with the passage above, Ireland’s landscape is recurrently described like this in the novel: marks of violence in the land, that keep conflicts of the past alive. Thus, it is not surprising that history is constantly described as a “yoke” (O'Brien, *House* 66). Josie describes it as “the dark threads of history looping back and forth and catching her and people like her in their grip, like snares” (O'Brien, *House* 54).

In fact, the idea that history repeats itself is more than a metaphor, but a narrative structure of the novel itself. The aforementioned Josie’s uncle, for example, was shot dead by the English army, in an ambush (O'Brien, *House* 84). Decades later, her husband is fatally wounded in an ambush, this time for helping the IRA to hide some weapons (O'Brien, *House* 54). At the end of the novel, the pattern repeats itself, and a similar situation is responsible for her death and McGreevy’s capture (O'Brien, *House* 205-212).

Different times, similar conflicts, same results. A longstanding war is up to create resentments on both sides of the battle. In that sense, O'Brien is clever in changing her focus, at the end of the novel, to the young police officers and soldiers who are chasing McGreevy. O'Brien is not usually remembered or recognized by her male characters characterization, an assumption she masterly challenges in *House of Splendid Isolation*’s last chapters. Here, she describes the soldiers’ and police officers’ fears and anxieties in extensive details, arguable achieving some of the best moments in her literary career:

each of them taut with suspense but not showing it openly, showing it in different ways, a tic, a shrill laugh, the maddening mashing of a Coca-Cola tin; the man only just married wishing to be inside in bed with the wife, others who wouldn't miss it for anything, their adrenaline up. The low hills and fields like patchwork of ground, parcelled between the stone walls. God-forsaken. (O'Brien, *House* 197)

The link between masculinity and violence is ancient and culturally established. Muriel Dimen, for example, affirms that masculinity is also a cultural construct: “through images reduplicated in speech, print, pictures, and music” (41), we tend to equate masculinity with “the glamour of heroic, solitary, self-discovery travellers” (39). But for this image to succeed, the heroic man must also cultivate a self-dependent image: he is autonomous, rational, and mature. Lack of emotional control is a sign of weakness, and it is an aspect culturally associated with women (Dimen 42), and, therefore, must be avoided by men of action.

O'Brien brilliantly challenges this link in her narrative by focusing not on the soldiers “who wouldn't miss” the violent altercation “for anything”, but on the “shrill laugh” of one, on “the maddening mashing of a Coca-Cola tin” by another, and on the feelings of a newlywed soldier (O'Brien, *House* 197). It is even possible to find some resemblances between Dimen's images and O'Brien's: to the former, the perfect symbol of this masculinized hero is the “lonesome cowboy, the Marlboro man”, who is “notoriously uncomfortable” with “dependency and loss of self” (Dimen 39). Thus, it is not surprising that, in one passage of *House of Splendid Isolation*, one of the cops, who acts as if he is enjoying the manhunt for McGreevy, bravely yells: “Tell Manus to tell Dublin that this is cowboy country and we're cowboys here” (O'Brien, *House* 170).

In one of the most accomplished passages of the narrative, Tommy, a young police officer, kills one of McGreevy's allies. But, instead of any feeling of glory, he experiences guilt and remorse when he went near the body: “it feels light, innocuous, the back a warm palette of shedding blood. It is too dark to see where the bullet went and he is glad of that, glad that he cannot see. Something, shame or pity, makes him take off his jacket to cover the chest and the face” (O'Brien, *House* 167). While the officers congratulate him, he knows that he will carry the violent act with him forever, and suffers with the fact that no one noticed: “He's been through hellfire and not a single human being has asked him how he is” (O'Brien, *House* 168), not even his wife, whose voice sounds “cold and impersonal when he tells her that there's been a serious incident and a guy is shot” (O'Brien, *House* 169).

It also should be noticed that O'Brien not only deconstructs the link between masculinity and violence. Contradicting her image constructed by many critics and

scholars over decades, she also denounces the cultural association between femininity, violence and peace: to Josie, women are inherently peaceful, and war exist exclusively in consequence of men's actions. In one of her discussions with McGreevy, she states to him that "If women ran your organization there would be no shooting... No bombs" (O'Brien, *House* 77). McGreevy, however, informs her that terrorist organizations "have plenty of women" (O'Brien, *House* 77). Her reply reveals her stereotyped perception of the matter, since she believes that, if some women are capable of violence, then "they are not mothers" (O'Brien, *House* 77), and remain with no answers when asked: "How would you know whether they're mothers or not" (O'Brien, *House* 77).

It is true that Josie never came to agree with McGreevy's point of view, not only about the possibility of women being violent, but also about the political validity of violence as a method to achieve political goals. But she is deeply affected by his worldview, nonetheless. She starts to question her decision to withdraw from the public life, especially when she realized that she was not completely ignorant of the consequences of the conflict which tore her country up over the last decades:

Things she has read keep coming back to her, particular murders, in fields, or on roadsides, priests brought to give extreme unction to the dead and dying, then next day more murders, retaliation from crowd to another, then some couple in a lovely cottage, gunned down at dawn, the a supermarket and on and on. (O'Brien, *House* 97)

Ultimately, she decides to be involved with society again, but choosing a non-violent approach: if she survives the confrontation between the police and McGreevy, "she will give [her] house over to young people, a youth for those who travel, a place to be lived in" (O'Brien, *House* 180).

Unfortunately, the novel ends in a pessimistic tone, with Josie shot dead by a missing bullet, and McGreevy, far from reconsidering his violent approach to the political situation in Ireland. Instead, one of the cops that knew McGreevy from before notices that his eyes are now even more "cold and spiteful", in consequence of Josie's death, the only person in many years who have treated him as a human being. The future of Ireland still seems tainted by violence, since "trust had gone out of the land and out of people, the old wars, the old atrocities had got replaced with crooked and bitter ones and brother no longer gasped at the bloodshed of brother" (O'Brien, *House* 212).

## “The fight isn’t over”: the aftermath of The Troubles in the short story “Black Flower”

*House of Splendid Isolation* was not the only time that Edna O’Brien has dealt with the subject of The Troubles in her fiction. Seventeen years after the novel was published, she returned to the conflict in the short story “Black Flower”, published in the collection *Saints and Sinners* (2011). However, if *House of Splendid Isolation* brings two protagonist that were living during the years of that Irish conflict, now we have the perspective of characters who live in the aftermath, since the short story takes place many years after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, that is officially considered the end of the war between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

In a variety of ways, we can read O’Brien’s 2011 short story as a thematic sequence of her 1994 novel. “Black Flower” tells the story of Shane, an ex-Ira member who was captured in 1990s in “a hair-raising capture that attracted the attention of the nation and confirmed him as dangerous outlaw” (O’Brien, “Black Flower” 66), a description that bears many resemblances with the last chapters of *House of Splendid Isolation*, when McGreevy is captured. Since Shane was released after spending 15 years in prison, his story can be read as a prolongation of McGreevy’s.

There are many parallels between the two characters background stories. As briefly stated above, this is probably a result of the fact that they were both drawn from the life of the Irish terrorist Dominic “Mad Dog” McGlinchey. Both Shane’s and McGreevy’s wives were shot dead during the time the two men were in jail, as retaliation for their crimes. In both narratives, O’Brien emphasises the fact the two women were shot while bathing their child (*House* 163; “Black Flower” 65), which was the same tragic destiny of Dominic McGlinchey’s wife. In Shane’s case, one of his sons even died of meningitis, the same disease that killed McGlinchey’s third son.

The similarities between both O’Brien’s characters, however, are not limited to their backstory: both McGreevy and Shane are using women to escape their adversaries, although in very different circumstances. In “Black Flower”, Shane met a woman named Mona during his last years in jail. We are informed that she “had volunteer to give painting lessons in the prison” (O’Brien 64) where he was serving his time. She falls in love with him and even starts visiting him after her time as a teacher has ended. Eventually, they both met after Shane is released from prison, and, as often happens with many of O’Brien’s female characters, Mona does not seem to notice that she’s been used by Shane.

Taking this plotline into account, it is easy to believe that “Black Flower” is similar to many of O’Brien’s narratives. However, I intend to demonstrate that, by a

very subtle use of symbolism, O'Brien is making a political commentary, disguised in her traditional plot of love story between a naïve woman and a man with ulterior motives.

In "Black Flower", the environment, for example, is coloured by allegorical aspects. Consider, for example, the hotel where Shane and Mona have dinner, where the narrative's climax also takes place: its garden is inhabited by three different species of trees, "oak, sycamore and ash", which are suggestively described as "meshed together, **fighting amiably as it were for ascendancy**" (O'Brien, "Black Flower" 63, emphasis mine). In Irish History, "Ascendancy" is related to the Protestant Ascendancy, the economic and political domination of the Anglo-Irish Protestant minority over the Catholic majority, which is in many ways one the roots of The Troubles. Thus, it does seem possible to assume that these trees, forced to share the same space, are symbolic representations of the three states also involved in a conflict: Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and England. This suggestion is made more intriguing by the name of the hotel: "Glasheen", whose roots in Irish language means "green", a colour typically associated with Ireland itself.

The hotel's building and surroundings have also their symbolisms, but they seem to borrow their traits from horror stories: the building is "smothered in a grove of trees", "sequestered" and "far below" from its gate (O'Brien, "Black Flower" 69). The spot where Shane and Mona park their car are in front of a high voltage box, with burps "that every few seconds rose to a growl" (O'Brien, "Black Flower" 64). Close to the entrance of the hotel "was a butcher's van" (O'Brien, "Black Flower" 64), and, on the step, there's "a child's tractor filled with toy soldiers" (O'Brien, "Black Flower" 64). In sum, there are signs of danger everywhere, anticipating Shane's tragical fate.

However, the most important symbolism in the short story is the black flower in the hallway. The narrator describes it in a very peculiar way, which is worth to reproduce in its entirety:

In the hallway, a nest of candles glimmered on a high whatnot and a luxurious flowering plant trailed and crept along the floor, amoeba-wise. The petals were a soft, velvety black, with green eyes, pinpoints, and there was something both beautiful and sinister about it. [Mona] had never seen a black flower before. (O'Brien, "Black Flower" 64)

It is particularly curious that this flower, that informs the short story's title, it is only mentioned in the beginning of the narrative, completely disappearing after

that. This may be an indication that there is more behind the symbolism of this flower, which makes it worthy of a more careful analysis.

Usually, a black flower is used as a symbol for death and it is tempting to believe that this more immediate meaning can be associated with the plot here in development, since Shane is shot dead in the end of the narrative. However, in the context of Irish history and literature, a black rose was also a code name for Ireland itself, when English laws prohibited the mention of Ireland as a sovereign nation (Innes 4). This use of the rose as a patriotic symbol for Ireland dates back to the 16th century, a reference to the Irish folk song “Róisín Dubh”, one of Ireland’s most widely known political ballads, which means “Dark Rosaleen” or Little Black Rose (Innes 4).

“Róisín Dubh” was originally a love-song, before it was transformed in a metaphor for Ireland. As the song itself, the tension between intimacy and politics is also present in Edna O’Brien’s plot. After recognizing the political dimension of the title, it is possible to read it the impressions the flower gives over Mona in a different way: since the flower is historically related to Irish nationalism and independency, and the short story’s plot itself is also related to The Troubles and the dream of a united Ireland, the tone in which the flower is presented to us changes almost completely. Which underlining meaning is being insinuated by the description is up to each readers’ interpretation. I intend to suggest here that its ambivalent features, its “beautiful and sinister” aspects, are a metaphor to the violence that has marked Irish history and also the most recent conflicts between the two Irelands. In other words, the ambivalence of the black flower means that the “fight for freedom”, as the Irish conflict is perceived by characters like McGreevy and Shane, has its inherently beautiful and sinister aspects, its glorious and destructive dimensions. The war for freedom can be a seductive and repulsive path at the same time.

Regarding Mona, it is true that she let herself be deceived: there are several indicatives that Shane has only decided to attend her classes as a way to show his good behaviour to the governor of the prison. Some of those indicatives are also disguised in symbolic representations. It is even possible that Shane was planning to abandon her in the countryside when he reaches his allies. During his time as Mona’s student, Shane decides to produce “a self-portrait” (O’Brien, “Black Flower” 65). The colours used in the painting are described by the narrator as “viscous gold and mustard yellows” (O’Brien, “Black Flower” 65). He is, in other words, making a golden painting of himself to her, presenting himself as mysterious and gallant man who has regretted his crimes. Mona cannot notice this narcissistic aspect of Shane’s aesthetic choices, but it is possible to affirm that the suspicion is somehow in the character’s mind, since she

identifies parallels between the painting's colour schemes and those of Van Gogh, the quintessential narcissistic painter (O'Brien, "Black Flower" 65).

Mona wants to believe that Shane can live outside his fight, his personal fight for a united Ireland. She struggles to understand the "two hims, the young invincible buccaneer and the man sitting opposite her, ageing and dredged, his deeds locked inside him", ignoring the fact the Shane himself told her that "the fight isn't over, isn't done" (O'Brien, "Black Flower" 72). He claims that he "had fought for what he believed in, which was for his country to be one, one land, one people, and not have a shank of it cut off" (O'Brien, "Black Flower" 69).

Shane is shot dead in a phone box, as a retaliation for his past crimes. Moments before that, he abandoned Mona in the hotel where they were dining, after realizing he has been followed. This ending is a depressive note about conflict and violence, foreshadowing the prolongation of the conflict between the North and South by reaffirming that the old wounds between the two countries are far from healing. After all, the bystanders who witness Shane's death, after discovering who he is, rejoice in the violent scene: "Looking down at the corpse, [one witness] recognized Shane and repeated his name with evident outrage and disgust. He seemed almost ready to kick him. The group recoiled, stricken, not only with fear, but with revulsion. The brief spate of pity had turned ugly" (O'Brien, "Black Flower" 75).

Like *House of Splendid Isolation*, the "the dark threads of history" also loop "back and forth" in "Black Flower", and the narrative suggests that the conflict will continue, since Shane's death will inevitable result in an "another death to undo his and still another and another in the long grim chain of reprisals. Hard to think that in the valleys murder lurked, as from the meadow there came not even a murmur, the lambs in their foetal sleep, innocent of slaughter" (O'Brien, "Black Flower" 76).

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<sup>1</sup> One example is when Josie asks him if his mother loves him and agrees with the path he has chosen for himself, to what McGreevy smiles and answers “yes” (O’Brien, *House* 96). The narrative does not provide any other information about that supposed relation between McGreevy and his mother, not even if his mother is alive and is aware of his whereabouts. The reader has to choose if McGreevy’s story is to be believed.

<sup>2</sup> A quote from Yeats’s famous poem “September 1913”. While the influence of James Joyce is vastly recognized in O’Brien’s writing, there is still much to say about Yeats’s influence in her perception of Ireland’s history and culture.

<sup>3</sup> The novel does not explore only violent episodes, but also cultural conflicts as well: one character, for example, tells his friends about his sister, who married a man from North Ireland and was rejected by her own parents as a result of that (O’Brien, *House* 187).

<sup>4</sup> However, as observed by Colin Knox and Rachel Monaghan, the agreement “did not, of itself, change the course of violent activity on the ground” (184). In fact, there has been “a substantial rise in the recorded number of security-related shooting incidents, from 131 in 1999/2000 to 331 in 2000/01” (184), and “the number of casualties as a result of paramilitary-





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style attacks rose from 178 to 323 in the same year (Report of the Chief Constable 2000-2001). All this in an era of ceasefires, peace and political agreement” (184-5).