

**TEXT OF INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS GIVEN BY PROFESSOR HUBERT MCDERMOTT, M.A., D. PHIL., UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, GALWAY, 1 JULY 1991, ON THE OCCASION OF THE CONFERRING OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF LITERATURE, honoris causa, ON EDNA O'BRIEN, AT UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, GALWAY.**

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Edna O'Brien was born in Tuamgraney, Co. Clare, and received her early education at Scariff national school and at the Convent of Mercy secondary school in Loughrea, Co. Galway. Later, she attended the Dublin Pharmaceutical College and became a Licentiate of the Pharmaceutical College of Ireland.

In 1959 she went to London and has lived there ever since. During her first month in London she wrote The Country Girls, a work she described as "my experience of Ireland and my farewell to it." The Country Girls was followed in 1962 by Girl with Green Eyes and in 1964 by Girls in Their Married Bliss. This excellent trilogy describes the journey of a country girl from childhood, through adolescence and into adult life. Many other novels, short stores, plays as well as works of non-fiction have followed.

The art of Edna O'Brien is intricately interwoven with an assessment of the person. She herself seems to have discovered fairly recently that it is her background which makes her the artist she is. As she says herself: "Up to a short time ago I would have said I was a writer who was just born a writer. But I know now that the way I write, the way I see things, my interest in story is very much the result of the race I came from ... Ireland is where all my association, all my dream and all my experience comes from" Of course all her fiction bears this out: her great gift was partly created by and permanently shaped by her childhood experiences. Clare impressed itself deeply on Edna O'Brien and even in 1991 she is still in thrall to the bogs, the skies, the country lanes, even the people of Clare. As one of her characters remarks: "no matter how high I soared, these people were still entangled in me."

One of Edna O'Brien's most remarkable gifts is her ability to accurately represent the mind of a child, and her books and the images in them bring back for me - and for countless like me, I presume - the numerous bitter-sweet memories of an Irish country childhood: the smell of new mown hay, half spice, half perfume; hens peck, peck, pecking on concrete flags and in noisy colanders; sad reeds sighing in grey waters; cakes being tested with knitting needles; shop buns with icing on them; wind-bent hedges and melancholy mountains; folding chairs with green canvas seats.

But there is even more to the fiction of Edna O'Brien: she explores, in Irish terms, some of the most fundamental anxieties of the human being. The novels feature a unique sense of isolation coupled with an intense desire to belong somewhere, anywhere. The characters seek an identity through a sense of kinship with the rest of humanity, but spectres of estrangements -- all those failed, previous attempts -- continually shadow their search for this identity. Almost all O'Brien's characters have powerful imaginations which they use to fulfil their innermost longings for identity: in this way they are able to

escape for a time from the prison-house of life. But their most powerful fantasies are crushed underfoot by reality; because disaster after disaster make them face the catastrophe of their dreams, the frustration of their deep-rooted desires. This is not to say that Edna O'Brien's characters are not resilient: they do bounce back after each catastrophe. But what we witness in the novels is a painful adaptation to the demands of reality achieved at the price of diminished humanity. The ultimate consequence is a feeling of rejection and acute loneliness, and the suggestion is that all humanity -- but particularly, perhaps, women -- suffer from this condition.

Mention of women, brings us to one of the most remarkable features of all, of the works of Edna O'Brien -- her representation of women. As Philip Roth has so aptly put it: "the world of Nora Barnacle had to wait for Edna O'Brien to be accurately represented." No Irish writer has so accurately, so impressively, so powerfully portrayed the feminine psyche as well as Edna O'Brien. Her novels all deal with the position of women in society, the repressive, shaping nature of their early years and their striving for fulfilment. This striving takes the form of a continual, desperate struggle for love. The fulfilment of love depends, unfortunately, on men, described as "the active enemies of women." But women, as one of O'Brien's characters notes, are like mistletoe having to live off a man's strength or not at all. The form of true love sought by the woman is seldom if ever achieved. There are odd moments of joy, of temporary happiness before the woman falls back yet again on the thorns of life. It would be wrong to suggest, however, that Edna O'Brien speaks only to or for women; rather does she speak to and for humanity, men as well as women.

Finally, one must say that Edna O'Brien has always been a diligent literary professional: she has never sought the endorsement of academics or the literary establishment: her high reputation owes nothing to career management and everything to her striking originality. But, Edna O'Brien's choice of career has brought her great pain, particularly in Ireland. She has declared herself to have been "very wounded" in the past. Might I suggest that this degree which we confer here, today, be regarded as a fitting salve for past wounds, as well as a fitting recognition of her artistic merit.

**PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS**

PRAESENTO VOBIS HANC MEAM FILIAM, QUAM SCIO TAM MORIBUS QUAM DOCTRINA HABILEM ET IDONEUM ESSE QUI ADMITTATUR, HONORIS CAUSA, AD GRADUM DOCTORATUS IN LITTERIS, IDQUE TIBI FIDE MEA TESTOR AC SPONDEO, TOTIQUE ACADEMIAE.