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MODERN IRISH FEMININE IDENTITY: AN EXAMINATION OF ANTHOLOGICAL SHORT WRITING BY IRISH WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

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By

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For centuries, Irish women have be defined in Irish literature as secondary figures, in relation only to the dominant male characters. Maria Edgeworth was the most prominent of an early group of female Irish writers showing signs of primary identity definition in literature. The most profound advancement in Irish feminine identity and definition has come in the last twenty years. By examining anthologies published in the 1990s, this paper looks at the current methods and results of literary identity definition for Irish women. By examining these samples and using three anthologies with different editorial missions, a well-rounded perspective of Irish feminine identity is available for analysis. The analysis reveals a diverse sense of identity, shaped and molded by years of male hierarchical society and its teachings through religious, political, social and domestic policies. This diversity is established through a constant struggle of questioning former and current conditions of existence.

For my father, Milton Joseph Fleischer, Jr., who instilled in me ideals and lessons I shall never forget nor fail to pass on to those I love

For my mother and her husband, who encouraged me to pursue my educational dreams through their words and actions

For my sister, who offered advice whether solicited or not, yet always gave me the guidance I have needed

And finally, for Kristen Leigh, who endured this creation with surprising patience

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Introduction

The question of identity is a constant exploration of self. The curse of self-awareness, so to speak, burdens everyone at times, but more so, it constantly finds expression within those who have a small or a non-existent public voice. While some individuals have an external voice everyone can hear, the repressed and those in the minority (in gender, ethnicity, religion, et al) are often heard by few, if any at all. In the annals of human existence, the female gender has had this minimal external voice, in political and social and domestic venues. Without this voice, introspection of the self and the society which silences them develops and grows in tremendous volumes. Eventually this introspection found its way to the written word, perhaps the only avenue available for expression in many cases. Within these written words, history is learned from different perspectives than previously existed. These perspectives, hitherto widely unknown, give insight into the mindset of a large percentage of the population. The need to define oneself internally often leads to the common questions of identity: Who am I? What am I? Why am I here? What do I want? What role do I play in the grand scheme of the universe? While these are common questions for all human beings, the questions women have in addition to these are just as challenging and diverse. As the gender constantly reduced in history and the present to an afterthought, women question more than just their basic identity. They question how they fit into social, political and religious structures that have been built without their consent or input, what their role(s) can and should be in the familial domestic hierarchies, and how they can balance all the wants and desires they may have in the restrictive environments which with they usually are confronted. Without meaning to use an obvious stereotype, women are more complex individuals than a male-dominated historical perspective would suggest, and in a modern world changing daily for people of all gender, race, religion and character, women are

constantly questioning where they fit into the new world order. They are fighting for more, not necessarily in the male traditional hierarchies, but also on an individual basis in the home, the bed, the church and the work place.

While there are no concrete, across-the-board answers to the question of feminine identity, there are some constant themes to be found in the literature written by modern women. As mentioned, the increased opportunity for education and access to the written word has increased the female voice in all quarters, some countries and regions of the world more profusely than others. In the United States, for instance, feminism has been alive and thriving for close to thirty years, with both successes and failures. In the perceived most powerful country in the world, women are still struggling, however, to attain equality in the work place and in the political arena. Strides have been made — Geraldine Ferraro, Sandra Day O'Connor and others have gained entrance to the most exclusive boys clubs in the U.S. — but the road is far from complete. On the other hand, in a country like Ireland, where social progress has not come as far as the United States, where women still struggle with reproductive rights, employment and religion, Mary Robinson has been elected President. This shows the feminine experience and resulting attempts to forge an identity are finding mixed results and answers across the international landscape. In Irish literature, women constantly address these issues in various forums. In the areas of religion, sex, marriage, society, politics and domestic life — just to mention the obvious — the issues and questions of identity take on an exploratory and fascinating journey through the existence of an Irish woman, and not so much on what it means to be Irish, but what it means to be a woman in Ireland. On some levels, Ireland is struggling with issues of gender politics, yet in others Ireland is surging in the same venue. The collective experience needs to be examined for the good and the bad of Irish feminine life. Literature provides that opportunity. As the record of human experience, it allows one Irish female (or one million

of them, for that matter) to preserve their experiences and thoughts for others to read and learn. Most women would say if one reader learned from reading their work how to make their lives better, it would be worth the effort. The lives of Irish women are so diverse, from those in the urban centers to those in the rural environments, all struggling with questions of identity in their lives. This didactic method of writing is the basis for progress within the whole human race, including the Irish woman's struggle for identity.

The writing opportunities provided by non-fiction and fiction short stories are the perfect medium for expressing the exploration of identity. Quite often, firm definitions of identity come in epiphanies, spots of time, where the individual realizes precisely who they are, where they are going and what role they fulfill in the world they live in. In this brief moment, the answers are there. Most often, the moment is too brief, and with the realization of truth in identity, we are changed, thereby making our discovery of the "answers" a brief victory. With the changes provided by those realizations, we must now set off anew, looking for new answers to new questions. Every time we change, our questions change and our identity changes. The world is a state of constant flux, and we are just a part of that changing landscape. Therefore, these precious epiphanies are the more valuable, and due to the brief flare of knowledge they provide, they are best expressed in a short written medium. These questions and answers of identity are too necessary to hide in some forms of poetry, and they are too brief to be expressed in the length of a novel. Using the best form of direct literature, the short piece, the moments of realization ca be expressed succinctly and most beneficially for the reader. The truths of literature are more poignant, more full of impact and more meaningful when they happen so suddenly, as they frequently do in real life. The short story is the perfect opportunity to relate the searches for identity.

This paper is an examination of those powerful moments of identity expressed in Irish short fiction. Some of the moments are painful, humiliating and sharply blunt; these

moments reflect the struggle and rejection women have felt in Ireland's social order, dominated by religion and its antiquated male hierarchies, the effects of religion spilling into domestic venues and the economic realities of a struggling country. And perhaps only in a struggling country could Mary Robinson ascend to the position she did; desperate situations create opportunity for the most oppressed and hitherto rejected. As the literature to follow will show, Irish women question their families, their sexuality, their opportunities and their religion; they look for who they are in the middle of all the turmoil that is Ireland today. In the United States, we have seen some of this expression in the music of Sinead O'Connor and her nationally-televised act of shredding a picture of Pope John Paul II. While this is no way should represent every woman in Ireland, what it does represent is the legendary passion we all attribute to the Irish woman; right or wrong, happy or sad, oppressed or liberated, the passion to question, challenge and explore their identities is what drives Irish women to achieve their position, and this is excellently reflected in their literature. Irish writer Eavan Boland says "In availing themselves of the old convention, in using and re-using woman as icons and figments, Irish poets were not just dealing with emblems. They were also evading the real women of an actual past: women whose silence their poetry should have broken...those emblems are no longer silent. They have acquired voices. They have turned from poems into poets" (Boland 242). In transforming Irish literature from one mode of feminine emblem to the new mode of feminine voice, Irish women have forged many identities, offering the variety in Irish life, both male and female. The new perspectives give light to the old perspectives, and as a result, we see an Irish feminine collective identity with a voice needing to be heard, so the world does not adhere to the stereotype mentioned above, that of the fiery redhead, needing to be tamed. While that may hold for some Irish women, as we'll see further in this paper, there are also many other identities alive and

well in Ireland today, flowing through different types of women, never the same from one moment to the next, yet always constant in faith, determination and idealism.

By using anthologies to explore Irish feminine identity, it is also possible to examine the perception of Irish women writers by those who compile and edit the anthologies. Each anthology represented in this paper has a target audience; hence the selections from Irish women writers is varied and directed. What is achieved by these directives? In the three anthologies used in this examination, there are three different audiences and intentions. As a result, the included pieces are very different. Throughout the paper, the anthological source of the short writing is not a factor in analysis or discussion, but it is clear to see how certain pieces found their way into the respective anthology. In *The Vintage Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction*, editor Dermot Bolger suggests in his introduction to the anthology, "...new awareness of Irish writing is constantly growing..." (Bolger vii) and his editorial choices reflect the growth. Works by both male and female authors are in the anthology, and in the pieces presented here, the women writers are building the awareness not only for themselves as Irish citizens but for women as well. But Bolger has not really chosen the women and their works for that reason; the women and their works are in this paper for that exact reason, however. Bolger cites Ireland as "a society which has changed...more rapidly in the past quarter of a century than many European countries" (Bolger viii). Part of this change has been the emergence of women into society and consciousness. Bolger's audience is interested in Ireland as a whole, not merely in Irish women. He is interested in the diversity of contemporary Irish writing, but as a result of this editorial mission, the newly-forged identity of Irish women is well represented in his anthology anyway. In *Ireland's Women: Writings Past and Present*, three editors — Katie Donovan, A. Norman Jeffares, and Brendan Kennelly — have a distinctly different focus and concept for their anthology. Donovan expresses it best when she writes "Irish women have been written about from

the inside and from the outside and they have not always been portrayed in a complimentary way. Our selection is intended to give the reader a taste of the varied spectrum, from the courtly praise of men to swinish make chauvinism; from women's declarations of outrage against church and state to their celebrations of childbirth and motherhood" (Donovan xvii). The focus is upon women, in every way, but it also includes works written by male authors, to represent perceptions and interpretations of women. The editorial mission is in the title of the anthology as well, focusing on the past and present of women's roles in Irish literature and society. The audience is interested in Irish women specifically, and the editors provide a well-rounded view of the subject. In the third anthology, *Short Fiction by Irish Women Writers*, there is a distinct mission separate from the previous two anthologies. Once again edited by three people — Louise DeSalvo, Kathleen Walsh D'Arcy, and Katherine Hogan — the anthology features only works by women. With this in mind, the audience is directly interested in the thoughts women have on life, in every facet: contemporary, past, perception, vision, sense of self, idealism, etc. It combines Bolger's vision of contemporary Irish commentary, adds the Donovan view of focusing on women and finally incorporates the exclusive authorship of Irish women. As the editors say in their introduction, "We wanted our collection to reflect certain major concerns that women were treating in their art...Women writers in Ireland, we believe, have been innovators as often as they have worked within established literary tradition" (xii). Their anthology represents a pronounced approach to treating Irish feminine identity as its own unique presentation. Women have the license to express what women feel and want and need and seek; this third collection of short writing offers the type of writing Boland referred to for breaking silences and misconceptions.

The three different perspectives from the three different anthologies come together to provide a broad view of women in Ireland. Broad in the sense of delivery, for

each piece discussed this paper were written by female authors. However, from three different anthological missions come the variety sought for discussion and analysis here. Women are not emblems, as Boland points out; they are active contributors to a past, present and future Ireland, and through the literature which follows, we see them in good and bad lights, sometimes contributing to their own silences, sometimes finding the way to break those silences, but more often than not, they are also defining themselves by those success and failures, just as men have for centuries through the written word.

An Early Modern Irish Feminine Identity

Any discussion regarding the influence of current Irish women writers should begin with Maria Edgeworth, the first modern Irish woman writer. Her influence upon literature cannot be debated, as she is frequently credited with originating the regional novel. However, what might not be as easy to ascertain is Edgeworth's place as a woman writer, considering the time and place in which she wrote, and her identity as a woman in early modern Ireland. Did she forge a feminist identity? At times, she presents some very strong female characters, and she empowers those characters within the framework of her writings. At other times, however, her female characters are stereotypical for her time period, reduced to relational existences, dependent on the central male figure of the novel. It is worthwhile to note the difference between her "Irish" novels and some of her other writings, for there is a distinct difference in perceived feminist themes between the two types of published materials. In the Irish novels — *Castle Rackrent*, *The Absentee*, *Ormond* and *Ennui* — Edgeworth does not read like a feminist author interesting in forging a distinct identity. In other works — *Belinda* and *Rosamond* — Edgeworth presents a distinctly feminist identity, albeit still to varying degrees depending on perspective. What does this say about the way Edgeworth perceived herself? Her identity was in a constant flutter, as related through her various writings and written positions. This is also reflected in her personal life, as she fought to preserve traditional feminine expectations while promoting progressive ideas at a pace she was comfortable with at the time. She clearly exhibited progressive thoughts on gender in her published discourses, but as we will see, her feminine identity was quite ambiguous.

What accounts for the difference in these approaches and in her ambivalent perception of feminine identity? Her father was a strong presence in her life, if not the

strongest. Her Irish novels were often written with his input for an Anglo-Irish audience, while the other two works were written for a drastically different audience — juvenile women — and that difference may account for the contrast in perceived feminist themes. With her dominant father present, she was a pliant daughter. Without his influence, she found the freedom to explore ideas and her own identity. Her traditional beliefs are reflected in the Irish novels. In her often-interpreted biographical fiction targeted for younger audiences, Maria Edgeworth frequently illustrates empowered females making their own decisions and women demonstrating ability and prowess in a man's world. Few of these feminist themes are blatant — in fact, Edgeworth goes to great pains to dull them, in light of the radical feminism of her time stemming from post-French revolutionary thought. However, it is also apparent Maria Edgeworth believed in advancing her gender beyond its present station, and for that reason, her feminist identity is evident. She was clearly a woman torn between position and place and identity, a struggle we will see often in present-day Irish literature Edgeworth's situation is somewhat ironic, however. Without her father's strong influence, she would not have been as educated she was. Without that education, she may not have had the identity struggles reflected in her personal and professional lives. She had to balance the two, and quite often, the dichotomy of identity is evident. As noted, she avoided association with the radical feminists of her time, so retrospectively determining where Maria Edgeworth fits into a discussion of modern feminine identity is not clear-cut. The aforementioned ambivalence is laced through her personal and literary lives. "They seem to have attracted her strongly, yet she could not bring herself to yield to that attraction..." (Tracy 19). Although this comment refers to Edgeworth's inability to commit to contemporary Anglo-Irish marriage themes, it can just as easily be used to define her attitude toward the feminism of her time. Edgeworth's ambivalence can be maddening to both readers and critics. Again, this feminist ambiguity is also present in Edgeworth's

personal life. "Like many women of her time, radical and liberal and conservative alike, Maria Edgeworth was particularly interested in the education of women, one of the major concerns of the century. Her first published work, Letters for Literary Ladies (1795), was a discussion in letters for and against female education...by arguing that education...discourages vanity, gossip, and petty quarrelling; most important, it makes women more delightful wives for educated husbands. The general education she recommends would turn girls into rational creatures who would embody the feminine virtues of modesty and delicacy rather than the feminine vices of coquetry and duplicity" (Atkinson 96). Edgeworth was clearly a proponent of female education — her presence as a published writer alone is evidence. Is this above attitude evident in her novels? The above quote accurately pegs *The Absentee*'s Miss Broadhurst. She is the example of this thought Edgeworth publishes years before *The Absentee*. Is it condescending to her own sex to suggest women should be modest and delicate? Perhaps slightly, but many women want the best of both worlds — femininity and intelligence. Edgeworth suggests this almost 200 years in advance of the "1990s woman." Her ideas are not necessarily new, but her voice as an author and as the originator of a certain genre of literature is new.

From this platform, in part established with the support of her father, Edgeworth promotes certain aspects of feminist thought. "Although Maria Edgeworth put the advocacy of women's rights in a forbidden category, she did not dismiss women's education or their dignity" (Atkinson 113-14). How does Edgeworth want it? She does not want to come off as a "radical" feminist, so she condemns them to one audience, yet promotes education to another. What is the difference in her attitude and approach to this ambiguity of feminine identity? Are not education and dignity part of women's rights? By promoting certain aspects of the feminism in her own way, Edgeworth clearly began to forge an early Irish feminine identity, one of education for young women; where

education exists, thought exists, and the silent voices Eavan Boland refers to begin to find an avenue for expression and exploration. The key was Edgeworth's choice to carefully court the ideas she believed in. Rather than embrace the aggressive feminist movement and possibly alienate her family and social circles (thereby negatively impacting the causes she believed in), her calculating decision to promote her thoughts where applicable and acceptable found success. In terms of her identity, this decision is very revealing. She does not want to rock the boat, and as is today, the family plays a tremendously influential role in her decision-making processes. Yet she is also determined to open up the opportunities made available to her for others to benefit and thrive.

With the Edgeworths, there is a repeated and fierce avoidance of the contemporary feminism referred to as "radical" feminism. But in truth, what kind of man was Richard Edgeworth if he assisted his daughter in writing and publishing? "Maria Edgeworth was the principal supporter, collaborator, and disseminator of [the Richard Edgeworth] program, but as a matter of personal, political, and rhetorical necessity she did so within the acceptably feminine practices and discourses of her time. She assisted her father's reform of the Edgeworthstown family, house, and estate and acted as his political, social, and scientific secretary; if these were unusual activities for a woman of her class, they could be performed in the domestic rather than the public sphere and thus did not transgress conventions of gender. As an author in her own right she did operate in the public sphere...but she did so in decorous collaboration with her father and in acceptably feminine genres. Her nonfiction was written with her father, thereby shielding her from the imputation of transgressing gendered boundaries of discourse" (Kelly 91). She knows her role, and hence, her identity is shaped by these boundaries. But she also pushes those boundaries, allowing her sense of feminine identity to come forth and eventually pave a path for future Irish women authors. Her identity had enough

respect for father and family to accommodate his vision, but even his vision is partially responsible for Maria's feminine identity. It is said if a man is not a feminist, he will be once he has daughters to raise, and Richard Edgeworth gave his daughter ample opportunity for education and public presence. What she did with those openings was also somewhat developed by Richard, but she also had the fortitude to forge her own identity from those chances. Richard gave Maria opportunities few other women had, and his role in Maria's life — her writings, her voice, her ideas — cannot be dismissed too easily when it comes to analyzing Maria's identity. Traditional family values were very important to Maria, and they would not be sacrificed for anything. We still see this value today when examining the current Irish feminine identity; the belief in the value of family is quite often still held highest, as we will see in a later chapter.

In a straight literary sense, Edgeworth is primarily known for her influence upon the regional novel. Reading those texts as "feminist" is probably not the reader's first instinct. However, the identity Edgeworth forges in her literature is indeed feminine. "...(minor female writers) get recognized for extraneous reasons...Maria Edgeworth as the developer[s] of new genres not considered the property of men (Gothic and local-color fiction, respectively)...the local-color fiction angle provides a tremendous opportunity for the female voice at this particular time (1804). Since there are not many females of prominence in society at this point, where else can the stories of women be told? The woman writer is the local writer, and her voice is the feminist voice of the time" (Atkinson 95). Edgeworth originated the regional novel. Is the regional novel, then, a feminine genre? Not particularly, but through this genre, a feminine identity could be expressed, and the feminine identity could be influential. This is the role Maria Edgeworth is able to play through her Irish novels. The four aforementioned novels do not stand out as feminist novels, but certain character portrayals and plot developments can be viewed through a feminist perspective to lend insight into Edgeworth herself as a

budding feminist of her time, whether she wanted that identity or not. "During the 18th and 19th centuries, women were increasingly enjoined to be delicate in body and mind, to pursue ...a sedentary life, a low abstemious diet, and exclusion from the fresh air 'to insure the continuation of that physical frailty which was the source of...many of the finer and more delicate feelings, for which we value and admire them.' What may be considered a revolt of a few women against this prescribed, restricting form of ...femininity' continued throughout the 19th century..." (Atkinson 107). By all accounts, we see Maria Edgeworth wanted to avoid being associated with this "revolt." But as a woman and a writer of some influence upon both literary and social worlds, how could she balance the internal struggle of radical feminism versus her own budding feminine identity? As a woman herself, she was able to step into various parts of the man's world — would she not want the same for any other woman of her place and station? Her success, on a personal level, would demand similar opportunities for other women in her relative position.

However, we see Maria, and her father, also denying this. "In ridiculing a few of the arguments for Women's Rights, Maria Edgeworth had not espoused the romantic-conservative rejection of the education of women. The Edgeworths took it for granted, as did...all but a minute number of 'feminists,' that woman's destiny was domestic" (Atkinson 114). Edgeworth was clearly lacking in vision; she was resigned to her place in society, but that still did not stop her from promoting education. Why? Could domesticity and education go together, hand-in-hand? In her vision, yes, a young woman could have an education and still remain in the home. In her feminine consciousness of her time, she may have seen it as the best of both worlds, so to speak. And again, recalling Ms. Broadhurst from *The Absentee*, a woman could be domestic and intelligent and be the highest quality of woman in society that way. It appears Edgeworth benefited from a practice which differed from her beliefs. Even if part of her

life was domestic, she was still able to explore life beyond the realm of that domesticity, through her writing and her publications. Did she feel rather hypocritical? What did Edgeworth want for women? If she had children of her own, how would she have felt? She did have younger siblings — did she encourage her younger sisters to explore their possibilities and to push the boundaries of expected feminine domesticity as she herself did? "Maria Edgeworth, as we have seen, professed little interest in tradition..." (Tracy 20). If so, why did she maintain her views of feminine domesticity? She herself was a break from tradition, and sometimes we may wonder if she understood this. She may have not, for we have seen how she wrote under the guidance and tutelage of her father, from within his predescribed idea of her domestic realm. She did not see herself as a feminist at all, and she recoiled from the notion as well. In this sense, she probably did not realize her potential role as a "woman," even as she forged her unique and progressive feminine identity, both in private and public life.

We must briefly examine the writings of Maria Edgeworth to finalize our conception of her early modern Irish feminine identity. In a first reading of Edgeworth's four Irish novels, there is very little evidence of a pronounced feminine identity, whether it be feminism as we know it or the radical feminism of Edgeworth's time. One common thread through the four novels is the presence of the "marriage plot," a theme which infers a traditional domestic identity. "For the most part, feminist critics have found the marriage-plot novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries disappointingly unsuccessful at challenging the patriarchal ideology of the period, an ideology best characterized as teaching women to view themselves as subordinate to, dependent upon, and at the service of the men in their lives" (Shaffer 21). Through the use of this plot contrivance, Edgeworth's identity is back in line with the traditional feminine of the time. Most of the women characters (Grace Nugent, for example) fit this persona, in spite and despite what we know of Edgeworth. As an author, she is ambivalent. As a

person, she is ambivalent. A reader gets the idea she has a budding feminine identity, looking for a chance to express herself through literature but also fearing the break with traditional she may favor. "Each one (of Maria Edgeworth's four Irish novels) resolves a plot and represents a conventional happy ending, but the novelist herself seems uneasy about the rewards she confers. As the end of each novel approaches, she deliberately foils the plot she has developing — the marriage which seems inevitable and desirable — and creates an alternative marital outcome. At the same time, she contrives to suggest that somehow the earlier plot and marriage have not been foiled after all and have indeed been validated and brought to a successful conclusion" (Tracy 1). How does this habit coincide with her identity ambivalence displayed in other writings? Are they related? These plots decisions in themselves show Edgeworth's reluctance to provide any clue of a true feminist identity. "...The genre remains capable only of presenting women as relational creatures and as objects of other's desires — not as desiring, acting subjects with their own autonomy. By consistently concluding with the heroine's wedding — by presenting marriage to the male protagonist as the virtuous heroine's best reward — such novels compromise their challenge to conventional views of proper femininity both by suppressing the heroine's movement toward autonomy under the plot of her movement toward relationality, and by reinscribing even refreshingly unconventional female characters into the conventional role of subordination for women, the role of wife" (Shaffer 21). We will see this same sentiment echoed in current Irish literature, the good marriage as a best reward and opportunity for the good life, where the woman is considered a success with a good marriage, and this idealization of feminine traditional identity is promoted by family and religious thought. In *The Absentee*, if Grace Nugent were more than a relational character in the life of Lord Colambre and the Clonbrony family, perhaps Edgeworth would have given her character more value and temerity to marry without legitimate familial decent. As it is, the contrived

marriage plot twist involving Grace and Colambre is one of the weakest parts of *The Absentee*. Regardless of conventional marriage perceptions of the time and society she was writing about, Edgeworth missed a golden opportunity on two fronts: to assert some sense of feminist identity and pride even in a small step and to improve her already enjoyable novel.

Along these lines, Edgeworth's novel *Ormond* presents another female character with feminist potential unrealized. She is a relational character only, who appears to have little control over her own destiny, much like Grace Nugent. "[Dora] is perhaps Maria Edgeworth's most interesting Irish woman, and the interest she arouses seems to bar her from the role of heroine" (Tracy 17). Why would the fact a character is "interesting" bar her from being a heroine? Keeping the relational existence of female characterization intact, Edgeworth will not allow focus to shift from Ormond to Dora. Understanding the novel is about Ormond eases this disappointment, but since Dora plays such a large role in Ormond's development, why can she not be a heroine? She is relational, but she is also potentially integral, and Edgeworth's refusal to focus too much on this character shows her continued traditional perspective and reluctance to assert more of a feminine identity in her Irish novels. Where does Edgeworth stand when focusing her novels on women characters? We still are not sure from her Irish novel examples, although her feelings lie along the traditional, and in these relatively traditional Irish novels, she holds that line firmly. The characters are relational, as Shaffer writes, and Edgeworth finds no room for full exploration of these female relational characters. She chooses to make them sidebars, and in doing so, reveals once again her adherence to a traditional identity modern Irish women are still trying to overcome, as we will see in the current literature.

Contrasting with these mostly-pliant female characters is the theme of absenteeism. The theme itself asserts a strong feminine identity, for many reasons. It is

the wives of Irish nobles who want to be in London, to be a part of the London society and to often distance themselves from Ireland. Whether this represents a serious lack of nationalism or feminine assertiveness, it is clear in the examples of Edgeworth's Irish fiction the women are the reasons the Irish men are often absent from Ireland. In this fashion, the women are holding major influence over their husbands in determining the fate of the family. The women's ideas forge the path of familial discourse and direction, in a sense determining the domestic end of the men in the family. The women are dictating the family life; this is an assertion of familial power not often seen in Edgeworth's own life. It is a small slice of domestic identity, showing strength and leadership in the home, but it is a significant one finding its way into Edgeworth's Irish fiction nonetheless.

Edgeworth's two most strikingly feminist works are *Belinda* and *Rosamond*. Being semi-autobiographical, Rosamond herself is the literary embodiment of what Maria Edgeworth represented, a small first step in the direction of liberated women: "The impetuous, fallible Rosamond, based by family tradition on Maria herself, is one of the first real heroines of children's literature" (Butler 160). How can a character of children's literature be considered feminist? Considering a new generation of Irish children, both male and female, could be exposed to a young girl with spirit and learn from her, Rosamond (and Edgeworth) opened up doors for the future of Ireland and other countries. In modern terms, the character and children's stories are read as feminist by scholars: "...the *Rosamond* series can be read as an alternative kind of early feminocentric fiction. Edgeworth replaces the usual heterosexual romance script fusing female self-definition with relations between the sexes by a mother-daughter educational narrative thematizing domestic realism and enlightened choice...episode after heuristic episode demonstrates that girls need not fall prey to culturally conditioned sensibility and romantic fantasy; that they can indeed think, judge and act for themselves..." (Myers 71).

These themes are too deep for a child to perceive as he/she read these stories, but the underlying framework is understood by anyone who reads the stories. Rosamond is thinking and acting for herself, and even for a parent reading these stories, the implied lesson of motherhood is evident as well. She has an identity, which is more than many of Edgeworth's female characters can boast. There is also the didactic value of *Rosamond* and the feminist value of the didactic subject Rosamond. The strong mother figure is drawn from Maria's perceptions of Honora, her stepmother, and their relationship in Maria's youth. But separate from these biographical details, there is still a strong sense of individuality with the female character: "If Rosamond is (as we shall see) Maria Edgeworth, she is also Everygirl, blessed and cursed with those qualities usually attributed to females in her society: expressivity, imagination, a volatile mental set that hops from one thing to another and never stays to connect consequences" (Myers 72). This is both good and bad for feminist interpretations, as Myers uses "blessed and cursed" to describe Rosamond. But either way, there is a distinct Irish feminine identity being forged within the text of *Rosamond*. There is the self-expression, and there is also some irresponsibility within the character. Rosamond herself, positive and negative, is a step forward for literary depictions of young women. She embodies the ambiguity and the duality and unpredictable nature of "woman," even in her youthful state. This ambiguity cannot be emphasized enough, especially in the case of Rosamond the character, for it mirrors Edgeworth's life, and to some extent, the lives of women in general during this time period. In doing so, it creates the notion of identity as well, for this character is not a relational character — she is the character.

Deeper than *Rosamond* on feminist levels is the novel *Belinda* and its female characters. Briefly, it is the story of a young girl's introduction into society life and her resulting challenge to find the right husband. At first, this looks like yet another marriage plot contrived to satisfy the expectations of readers, but the novel carries deeper feminist

themes than any of the Irish novels. With two distinctive feminist characters, "Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*, too, undermines the appeal of the lover-mentor convention by demonstrating that women may be better prepared to lead in some areas than the men in their lives" (Shaffer 31). This is a bold statement to attribute to Edgeworth, considering her defined feminist ambivalence, and it's very possible Edgeworth did not have this perception of the work at the time she was writing *Belinda*. But is it true? Within the framework of this novel, it can be construed. The title character is a female taking control: "The novel also undermines the authority of the lover-mentor convention by revealing that Belinda teaches to more successful ends than Hervey does himself — by revealing, that is, that a woman can be a better mentor than her male protagonist" (Shaffer 32). Combining these last two statements, we see a novel and an author which clearly promote the general advancement of a woman's place in society. This is a strong new identity, both for author and character. But to define Belinda also by a masculinist viewpoint, we see the same strengths in the characterizations: "*Belinda*...demonstrates that male perceptions of reality may be incomplete and that males' desire to lead women may be ill-advised because not grounded in an ability to do so adequately or intelligently" (Shaffer 33). This quote might appear incoherent as it's printed, but the point is clear. The novel, as it is written, empowers a woman to make decisions her male counterparts cannot or will not. If that is not a firm feminist identity from author and character, it is very close. Edgeworth, in her first full-length novel, builds this type of characterization, based on "...Maria Edgeworth's own personality and environment, conflicts between reason and feeling, restraint and individual freedom, society and the free spirit" (Harden 50). As a reflection of Maria's own existence, the novel pushes her identity into publication and establishes that identity as "female Irish writer." We know she did not see herself as a feminist, nor did she aspire to be a feminist. However, there was some part of Maria Edgeworth that was feminist, and this identity was never stronger than in *Belinda*.

Beyond the overall implications of the novel and its plot, the female characters are excellent examples of Edgeworth's budding identity, all at once subtle, direct and controlled. There is no implicit feminism in this plot, but the voice of the novel itself is the source of feminine study. If a male author writes *Belinda*, do we have this same identity? Edgeworth's voice must be taken into account.

Through that voice, a distinctly strong female identity firmly emerges: Harriot Freke. There are not too many critical commentaries on this Edgeworth character, but she provides a distinct view of the author's tenuous relationship with her individual feminism. "...much fuller example of the usually peripheral ...masculine woman character, she [Harriot Freke] argues explicitly for the ...Rights of Women. Considering the didactic nature of the author's works in general and her concern for the education of women, one may ask what she was trying to teach by means of Harriot Freke" (Atkinson 95). Women's rights are not publicly addressed in the United States until 1848 at Seneca Falls. Were they addressed elsewhere in Europe previously? Considering the rights of man were still being debated, with most of the revolutionary nature of the late 1700s and early 1800s had little to do with women-specific rights, Edgeworth's inclusion of this character and her character's voice are striking. "Mrs. Freke must be seen as a version both of the type character of the traditional ...masculine woman and of the contemporary, real, ...dasher....Can Harriot Freke also be seen as a warning against the radical feminism of the period?" (Atkinson 100). As known, Edgeworth firmly wanted to avoid association with a radical feminist identity. While she empowers Freke with some feminism, she also punishes her for her "arrogance." This is probably the more conscious decision of Edgeworth, the didactic meaning mentioned earlier: push feminism and suffer. Without attempting to psychoanalyze Maria Edgeworth, her strange indecisions present a identity crisis in full literary swing. Why punish a woman character for being assertive, let alone for being herself? Edgeworth's perception of her own life is

dominated by a faithful devotion to her family. Subconsciously, her writings reveal more despite the outward attempt to distance herself from any movement resembling feminism. Harriot is outspoken and aggressive, but she suffers for her persona. She is punished ultimately, thereby leaving a fairly anti-feminist impression. This does not sit well with a modern reader, who revels in the aggressive nature of Freke yet recoils at the author's unwillingness to deliver upon the promise: "Many of Mrs. Freke's ideas are, to the 20th-century reader, acceptable feminist attacks on the patriarchal system. Placed, however, in the context of late 18th-century ideas, they take on a different light. Maria Edgeworth has contrived this debate, quite out of keeping with Mrs. Freke's character, to discredit radical feminism. Though the author's espousal of women's education — indeed, her own career — might categorize her as ...liberal,' her satire here of a Woman's Rights advocate might tempt one to call her ...conservative.' Harriot Freke is not a satiric portrait of any particular feminist but, rather, an amalgam of radical views echoing sources that readers would have recognized as representative of social philosophies which underminded the hierarchical social order" (Atkinson 108). What does this suggest about Edgeworth in conjunction with other analysis? Edgeworth contributed to the patriarchal social order when she took her place next to her father, yet still outshone him in many ways, both in her time and in the time since she lived, establishing firmly her identity as a social and literary figure.

It is a consistent picture we see of Edgeworth as an author and as an individual, a picture complicated in nature, not quite definable, but clearly ambivalent: "Harriot Freke, for all her inconsistencies, reveals Maria Edgeworth's comprehensive vision of woman's place in society" (Atkinson 118). Edgeworth herself was rather inconsistent, and Freke's character reflects this. She is assertive, aggressive and distinctly her own woman, but she also pays the price for displaying these characteristics in a man's world. What prices did Edgeworth pay for her "entry" into a man's literary world? What did she

fear her price would be? Maria Edgeworth's life is a fascinating study, as her relationships rarely seemed to revolve around her needs or wants, or rather around the needs and wants her modern readers may suspect she ached for yet never received: "Edgeworth's fictional and actual maturational patterns imply that woman's access to rational discourse may be bought with a price, but her achievement also testifies that relational needs must be met too" (Myers 85). This statement could relate to the character of Harriot Freke, as well as Edgeworth. What sacrifices did Maria Edgeworth make to establish her place in literary histories? She had no family of her own, and her life was devoted to her father and his brood. Were these the sacrifices she made, the loss of her gender's power of reproduction? Her identity therefore suffers on a personal level. On the surface, Edgeworth does not sacrifice as much as Harriot Freke. Underneath the surface, she may have sacrificed as much, both knowingly and unknowingly. "...Edgeworth's dual reconceptualizations of the female developmental plot emerge as fantasies of power indulged within domesticated boundaries — the satisfaction of rational achievement, the fulfillment of relational need" (Myers 84). Was this a conscious choice for Edgeworth or was it forced upon her? As for the relational needs, Edgeworth's needs were domestic, and she firmly realized those in her life, both through reality and her writings. There was also a duality to Edgeworth's life, that of the traditional domestic female family member and that of the published and esteemed author; we see this duality reflected in *Belinda*.

To conclude, Edgeworth's role in the development of early modern feminist identity is still distinct and important. "Three gynocentric fictions...address two post revolutionary problems relating to woman. The first problem was in sustaining the impulse of revolutionary feminism, by now a dangerous subject for a woman author, while resisting the persistently seductive figure of courtly woman, now represented by both the decadent women of British high society and the transgressive heroines...The

second problem was developing the call...for upper- and upper-middle-class women to assume a domestic and local, and thereby national, role in the social and cultural reform necessary to overcome a revived Revolutionary France" (Kelly 92). We have seen Edgeworth resisted revolutionary feminism, and we have also seen her desert feminine courtliness. However, in her life and writings, she displays a progressive attitude towards the role of women in her time. Whether she promotes this as identity is another question, for we see most often she does not. But introducing some of the themes, regardless of intent or end result, she gives those themes ,and as a result the identity of woman, validity. "In nonfiction argumentative writing she took the acceptably feminine role of co-author. Prose fiction was conventionally gendered as feminine, but she used it to incorporate discourses that were conventionally gendered masculine. In addition, she consistently promoted the Enlightenment discourse of reason, even for women. In this way, she exemplified in both her fictional heroines and her own implied identity as author a figure of woman at once intellectual and domestic. This figure enabled her to subsume the revolutionary feminism of the 1790s without sacrificing her feminine character as author..." (Kelly 92). Edgeworth gets it both ways; she is within the accepted limits of her gender, but she also seeks to push those limits in a sensible, methodical way, to forge a new feminine identity for Ireland. She has controlled whatever feminist urges she may have possessed and channeled them into her writings, always doing so with a conscious approach, so she did not come across as radical or offensive. "...Edgeworth's tales nonetheless discreetly echo the Rights of Woman's demand that women achieve...power...over themselves': girls who acquire ...self-command' and ...power over their own minds' may ...be left securely to their own guidance" (Myers 73-74). Maria Edgeworth may eventually have reached this state, but without her father and other influences, she may have never attained the heights she did. But to her credit, she took her opportunities and initiated a literary movement in the form of the regional novel,

and she helped shape a new image and identity for the Irish woman of the nineteenth century and beyond. As we will see in the next four chapters, the Irish feminine identity has remained somewhat constant since Edgeworth's time — always the sense of domestic and traditional responsibility, although the development of modern feminism constantly competes and quite often supercedes this established identity.

Irish Feminine Identity, in Generic Terms

If we jump ahead two hundred years from Edgeworth's time, we see many things different and the same. A woman has been elected to the Presidency of Ireland, yet women still struggle to assert themselves in every form of life. Their battles are the same as Edgeworth's personal and public struggles. The times have changed, yet they remained the same. Perhaps the most tremendous difference, though, is the fact there are so many more Edgeworths, so to speak, now than there were then. Women have a voice, not only on paper but in politics. Many more voices are now heard, each with different and interesting perspectives on feminine identity. Eavan Boland has pointed out the problems of the past and its literary portrayals of women: "When I read those simplifications of women I felt there was an underlying fault...almost a geological weakness. All good [literature] depends on an ethical relation between imagination and image. Images are not ornaments; they are truths" (Boland 241). The truth is the presence of women in literature was simple — like we saw in Edgeworth's literature, quite often the women were relational characters, put in the plot only to complement the main male characters. Very rarely were they real women, and if they were, the real women were incomplete women, portrayed only as necessary without actually being portrayed fully as people, as individuals. Women were not seen that way, and no male author cared to actually explore and discover the woman herself.

Even the female authors, when they existed, did not fully explore women as characters because the readership did not demand it. An author writes to an audience, and it was not until a certain time the readership wanted to know more about the women. When Boland uses the term "geological weakness," she means there was a structural fault with the construction and stability of women's representation in literature, both from the creative and receptive perspectives. Imaginations supply the ideas, and the images

complete the ideas, but from Boland's perspective, these feminine images were not truths, they were still imaginations of unknowledgeable authors and uninterested audiences. She is one of many Irish writers to fight that pattern; she can supply the truth to the images, thus making the imagination more realistic and interesting to an audience which has changed its mind about what it wants. In Ireland, as well as in other countries worldwide, the hollow images and ornaments need to be replaced with tangible realities. And they have been, by numerous Irish women not necessarily determined to change the mistakes of the past, but determined to make the present truths known through their writings. Sometimes, they can improve the perspective of the past with their recollections of earlier days, told now through a different lens, an angle only an Irish woman could provide and was hitherto never used or looked through. This new identity we now can see, through the words of a new generation of Irish women writers. Most of them are relatively young, born in the latter half of this century, raised in an Ireland changing rapidly. As individuals, they change, too, with each moment, and they struggle to redefine their own identities with every word and paragraph they write. While feminine identity should never be confused with feminism, the two concepts do share a common spirit: "Feminism is more than the women's movement, however: it is a way of interpreting life and it has a protean quality in its diversities" (MacCurtain 209). The writer's exploration of female identity is their way of interpreting life, and in a sense, that leads to creating life for women who may not have had the opportunity to do so for themselves prior to their moment of awakening. More than anything, it is clear there is no firm definition of Irish feminine identity, but instead the endless opportunity to continually explore themselves and women and Ireland through their written expressions.

While there are some dominant themes in Irish women's literature, there are also just generic expressions of feminine thoughts. They are expressed not in expected

feminine modes, sometimes in writings not even featuring women. They are subtle yet profound observations of humanity, expressed by women for a change instead of men. They are social commentaries, from women instead of men, discussing daily life and its intricacies. Yet it is a viewpoint rarely heard until recently, thus making the perspectives offered fresh, intriguing and contributions towards a greater and more accurate view of Irish humanity. Some of these perspectives have been developed throughout the course of social change. Jennifer Johnston, for instance, was born in 1930; she does not qualify as a young Irish woman writer for this discussion, but her perspective is a new one, not only for current themes but for past themes as well. Much of her award-winning work has focused on events in the past, before she was born, but her short story *Trio* cannot be placed chronologically in place. It's themes are universal and timeless, a reflection of a woman who has life experiences and can share them. The story is about three men, awaiting their moment with destiny. Two men together, one man alone, moving towards each other and their fate: "Murphy sighed. Talkers. He was always lumbered with a talker. Voices always nagging away, nudging their way into his head, never letting him be at peace with his own thoughts. Silence was good. Golden, his mother used to say" (Johnston 171). These are the thoughts of one of the men in the group of two. The attitude towards speech may reflect the ideas Johnston was raised with in the middle part of the century. "Voices always nagging away" reflects a genuine disregard for the power of speech and its end results. They are an invasion of Murphy's privacy, in this case — he cannot concentrate on his own thoughts as his mind is invaded by someone else. Considering the female perspective of the author, this is a reflection of feminine existence. Whether being told what to do or having others voices dominating one's own voice, Mother used to say silence was golden. Was it Murphy's mother or Jennifer Johnston's mother who offered the original inspiration for the thought? This is Johnston's feminine identity, her female existence shining through in a man's thoughts.

Johnston's piece switches back and forth between the two men and the solo individual. The single man reflects on time in numerous passages, minimizing its power and insisting he controls it: "What does it matter anyways? Late or early. Nobody else worries. No one gets agitated. We all have our own obsessions. I like to treat time with care" (172). He has a reverence for time, but not for abiding by it. He has a callous attitude in the face of nature, developed only over the course of hard living and experiences, yet he has retained his observance of time well enough to regard it or disregard it, but always to acknowledge its presence. Is this the attitude of a woman who has seen everything and lived through everything in her lifetime? Again, Johnston's voice has to be considered in these inner reflections. She is the storyteller, she is the source for the sentiments expressed. She has the wisdom and the temerity to interpret time and life: "What precisely do I consider myself to be late for? The small preoccupations of domestic life. The kiss on the cheek. The careful arrangement of glasses on a tray. Clink, clink across the hall, taking care not to slip on the Persian carpet" (172). He is clearly dissatisfied with his domestic life, much like many of the female characters we will meet later. This is a man reflecting on the unfulfilling nature of his home life. The sarcasm drips from the final sentences of this passage — so concerned with trivial matters, overlooking the grandest of rewards available in domesticity. How does Johnston's female voice help form this man's identity? He is the one disenchanted with what awaits him at home. If both men and women are discontent, what can be done to improve the situations for both? Johnston presents these questions in a way that challenges a reader to see both sides of the story. There is no singular fault, Johnston tells us — both parties need to work harder.

Her feminine voice offers this suggestion, an offer of truce without blame and finger-pointing. It is a realistic, tempered voice, not a passionate fiery one. It is the voice of reason — and of introspection: "No dreams. No time for dreams. The stir and tumult of

defeated dreams...who could have said that? From those years when I read books and nervously brooded on the meanings of things...What happens I wonder when you, for a moment, realize the emptiness of the future, oh and God the past. The dreamlessness even of the past. Forget it. Impeccable safety" (172). The voice talks of disillusionment with the dreams and ideas put forth — the safety is not in dreams but in direct reality and truth, whether uplifting or not. Johnston is telling us to not rely on the dreams we may have, her experiences coming through this man's somber voice. What is her intent with this perspective? It is a somewhat depressing commentary, but life can be that way, and she is attempting to relay this in a truthful way, hoping it can be taken as positive motivation for self-improvement. As the scene switches back to the two men, the same tone continues to share Johnston's perspective and sense of self-identity with the reader: "The way of the world, thought Murphy, one goes, another comes. Apart from his own somewhat amazed arrival into the world, he had no close, touching experiences of either birth or death. It didn't do to look at the whole thing in a broad, emotional way. Achievement was what mattered" (173). This man's unemotional detached sense of existence is similar yet different from the solo man's perspective discussed above. He is focused on achievement, not the feeling sensory existence. In this sense, he is opposite the solo man because time is of the essence to him, to achieve in the space allotted. Yet his grim perspective is similar to the solo man's because of the narrowness and minimalist attitude. Life is broad, yet each man treats it in a very closed way; they are limited by their lack of vision, and Johnston tells us humanity is limited in the same way when she expresses the sentiment through both these men: "Time, as usual, being wasted, maltreated. Then suppose, just suppose that I treated time as if it belonged to me. I am no longer time's servant. What then? It becomes at once a precious commodity. The only one worth having" (173). The solo man's perspective on time begins to change as he realizes he alone controls his destiny. Johnston begins to

empower him with a sense of strength hitherto unseen. He sounds more optimistic and appreciative of what he does have.

In a sense, this is a feminine trait Johnston expresses through the solo man, providing light at the end of a dark tunnel of reality. She is showing the reader an optimism which gives the oppressed hope and determination never to acquiesce in the face of adversity: "Hate is a word I haven't used since I was a child, and now, having used it, I feel myself filling with it, feeling it burn inside me. It feels good. I must be having a little madness of some sort. I don't want to hold things together any longer. Not even at home. In the words of the immortal Greta Garbo, I want to be alone. Free. Me and my servant Time. Unobtainable, before it is too late. Christ. To have to watch yet again the great triumphal renewal of the earth as we ourselves decay" (173-74). This is an interesting statement to interpret, as it represents individual triumph over societal defeat. That is Johnston's message, and her identity coming through this piece: we have to save ourselves even as society falls, because without the individual, society will fail anyway. Women are those representative individuals, and even though this piece focuses on men (there are no female characters in the short story), it also focuses on humanity, of which women — and Johnston herself — are a part. Society will not succeed without the women and the roles they must play, and if society will not realize this and save the women, the women will have to save themselves. Johnston is showing this by cleverly using men to relay the theme. But she is showing the experiences of these men to be universal experiences, for both genders: "So many wrongs decisions I have made all the way down the line. I never searched for courage, never realized the possible need for it. Can I summon that neglected asset now, before it is too late?" (174). The epiphany is reached by the solo man, a recollection of failure and an acceptance of such as well. The resolve is expressed to change the future before it happens as it happened yesterday — the sad irony of the story and Johnston's message is the solo man, soon

after this epiphany, is gunned down by the two other men in the piece (including "Mr. Achievement" Murphy, who in some way achieves something with his gun). The best intentions are often mislaid by ignorance, or as Albert Einstein said, great spirits often encounter violent oppositions from mediocre minds. Johnston's piece ends on a down note, in actuality an examination of two hitmen and their target. The violent and sagging world once again defeats the inspired, uplifting individual poised for action and success. The delivery is doubly effective: despite any intentions, the world sometimes is a bad place, but it doesn't have to be, only if we make it so. As a feminine voice, the message is clear: we control our own destinies and the destinies of others as well, so we must constantly find ways to make our lives and the lives of those around us better. This is a distinctly feminine experience and identity being relayed, for so long not given any opportunity, finally being freed to the truth through words, Boland's concept of imagery becoming truth through the female voice Johnston provides in this piece.

While Johnston's piece reflects feminine identity through an unexpected method, an article by Mary Holland provides another viewpoint, the celebration of life and art in the female physical expression. In her 1992 piece from *The Irish Times*, "Unforgettable Meeting of Life and Art" Holland reviews a performance of *Electra*. As a journalist, she has a different talent for writing than Johnston, as she takes a certain sense of reality and repackages it for an eager audience. But in reviewing this performance, her language takes on a life of its own, one of appreciation and love for the being...ness of femininity: "We have just been watching Ms Shaw play the title role in Sophocles' tragedy, consumed with a grief that cannot be assuaged, driven by the desire for revenge. Her whole body, it seemed, had become an instrument for expressing these emotions. Her eyes blazed from sunken sockets and her hands scraped frantically at her flesh, as though the only way she found it possible to dull the pain was by doing physical damage to herself" (Holland 311). Holland sees this as a truly feminine Irish

performance, in a role somewhat relevant to the current situations in Irish society. The use of the whole body, the whole female body, by the actress to express the emotion of the role is the strength of the performance. The character of Electra herself is age-old, but dynamic and extremely empowered in literature, unlike many Irish women. The awe and admiration is evident in Holland's written voice as she analyzes the performance of Ms. Shaw. The body as an instrument — how often is that phrase used to describe a man's stage performance? While the question in itself is rhetorical, the use of the body is an extremely feminine identity tool. The subsequent violation of the body at one's own hand is a feminine marker of self-possession, as well, described again with pride by Holland. The temple belongs to me, the actress says through her actions and through the role. This is a theme we will see in other Irish literature by women — the theme of self ownership of physicality. Again, this is a journalistic piece reviewing art, yet Holland's feminine perspective is revealed not only in the review and the choice of words, but in the passionate retelling of the performance and her interpretation of the action onstage. Holland is not alone in her assessment: "One woman spoke of the actress's performance as Electra: 'I thought of Mrs Kelly, whose son was killed on Bloody Sunday, and the way they would find her, even years afterward, lying on his grave with her face smeared with earth.' " (313). This audience member relates the onstage passion with the real passion of an Irish woman's misery and pain as a result of nationalism. Electra is Irish to both Holland and her subject and the audience in the theater, and by showing the connection between the onstage character and the real-life character, Holland's identity shows through — she is the Irish woman onstage and in reality as well. They all are, and they all speak through one unified voice, at least on this night when Electra owned the stage. They are all devoted, they are all strong, they are all principled, and they are all in pain. They are all Irish.

With Mary Robinson's election to the Presidency of Ireland, this identity became more national and more recognized. As she said in her inaugural speech, "The Ireland I will be representing is a new Ireland, open, tolerant, inclusive" (Robinson 253). This was not only apparent in the fact she was elected in the first place, but also in the sense of widespread changes coming to Ireland. Women are the strongest reflection of that change, as they began to assert themselves in all areas of public and private life: "...the celebration of Robinson's victory as a triumph for Irish women, in which so many women participated, is evidence of a new confidence and spirit of self-assertion" (Meaney 232). Through the literature following, the identity of the new Ireland is revealed through words hitherto unheard and unwanted. Robinson tapped into that sentiment when she said "As a woman, I want women who have felt themselves outside history to be written back into history, in the words of Eavan Boland, 'finding a voice where they found a vision' " (Robinson 255). Citing Boland's words, the tone is set for Ireland and this paper. Robinson realizes the new perspectives will be heard, acknowledged, understood and appreciated for what they are — reality in all forms: good, bad and ugly. But they will be heard and shared, for all to enjoy and revel in together as one nation, both at home and abroad. The pride will be learned and strength will be drawn from the sharing of that pride, for as Robinson says, "I am of Ireland...come and dance with me in Ireland" (256). The literature and identity of Irish women beckons us to dance, full of passion and truth as it exists for women and for those who interact with them.

Irish Feminine Identity, in Societal Terms

In the eyes of society, Irish women's roles are changing drastically. While some of the perceptions alive and well during Maria Edgeworth's time are still prevalent, they are starting to be challenged by the ever-changing political climate and Ireland's failure to thrive under the traditional rules. In simple words, the traditional male hierarchy society was not providing the best for the nation's people. In fact, some would argue the religious and political strife drowning the nation is a consequence of minimizing women's roles in society. In her commentary *A Kind of Scar*, Eavan Boland addresses the issue of identity and nationalism: "The tendency to fuse the national and the feminine, to make the image of the woman in the pretext of a romantic nationalism — these have been weaknesses..." (241). The weakness was to make "woman" a romantic notion in context with Ireland. Why not make "woman" a vital notion in the context of Ireland? She makes up half the country, so to speak. The inability to fuse the real identity of Ireland's women into the present and future (let alone the past) of the country leads to the failure of the state as a whole. "The role played by both church and state in...Ireland has shaped not only the more traditional thinking behind some of the major institutions but has also been responsible for the extremely conservative ideology for which the province has become infamous" (McWilliams 79). The traditional and the conservative forces have continued to educate women about what they should be in these terms: the same women they've been for generations.

This weakness, as Boland calls it, to overcome traditional perceptions of Irish women has been a tremendous factor in the struggles of Ireland's nation. With the advent of feminism in Ireland, these perceptions have begun to change, if not in entirety then in reality, and Mary Robinson's presidency is a result of this change. But what brought about these changes? While the change is not entirely a result of women's

literature, the new wave of Irish women writers definitely have contributed to changing the perception of women and their identity in Irish society. When audiences read what women have to write, when they realize this writing is different than the content they may have been reading for years, their ideas and perceptions are destined to change, to incorporate the "new woman" into everyday Irish thinking. In the past, the Irish woman was perceived at times as that romantic notion, but also as an afterthought. Residing on a secondary mental stage, if that, women were not given their due consideration when piecing together Ireland's past through the literature of the nation. The new literature presents women as women see themselves — sometimes just as they have been, fighting to free themselves, but also very differently. For instance, Linda Anderson's *Blinding — Lucy* is a spirited piece of prose, to be sure. Anderson's very short story is a strangely woven recollection of life from a woman condemned to die by man's decree — for not playing by the man's rules. This is a traditional position for women, but Anderson's piece lends insight into the woman's perspective, at once spirited, passionate, deranged and pained. The first words are telling: "I put out my eyes" (Anderson 401). While it's not clear what is meant right away, for the words merely relate to the story's title, but when followed by the next two sentences, everything is clearer: "Because I must be invisible. Out of your sight" (401). She is trying to hide, she is trying not to be seen, and by not seeing herself, she feels she can accomplish her goals. She does not want to be noticed by the "you" she is addressing; at this point, a reader can assume it's a man, although we do not know for sure yet. As the story unfolds, Anderson explains why Lucy must be out of the reader's sight as well. She continues to describe herself in abhorrent terms: "I am a honeycomb of holes. A holey woman. Pores, sense organs, orifices" (401). She has gouged her eyes, we know not yet why, but these holes are not confined to her physical senses. She sees herself as an incomplete woman for some reason, she is not complete because of what has happened to her. She speaks of

a man who loves her, in biblical terms of milk and honey. This man's attempt at defining her is confined to his religiosity, while she sees herself as something else altogether: "I am fire and gall. He called my hair a redgold flame and said my eyes burned as if from caverns. But he imagined a tame fireside, not a blazing forest" (401). Her definition is different than his, as is her expectations of self and life. That traditional interpretation of the Irish redhead is evident, although in the male fashion, he wanted to tame that fire. Caging the bird for his own purposes, he neglects to see the fact what he loved in the first place would no longer be there. Men have been obsessed by the idea of possession traditionally, and Ireland is no different. To men, love is often possession; to women, love is often freedom. Her blazing forest would not be tamed by this man; she asserted her independence from him, despite his best intents to contain the blaze in a fireside possession.

This difference is the turning point in the story, as we see the conflict: "I refused to marry. I would not be impaled beneath him...I am I. Sole. Unwon" (401). She asserts her identity in the face of the man who loves her and wants her to be something she is not and will not be. She sees herself as an individual, a strong entity unto herself, not needing his love to be complete or happy. She insisted on maintaining her individuality and her own identity, "sole" and "unwon." The use of the phrase "impaled beneath him" indicates she saw marriage as a sort of death, being sexually stabbed by the man to the point her fire would go out and she would be dead, if not physically then spiritually, broken by the institute of marriage. The possession referred to is just this, a sort of death for the Irish woman. She is confident, self-sustained woman, who refuses to be diminished by traditional union with a man: "I was happy before his glance felled me" (402), indicating she is unhappy now because he loved her. Why? We find out soon enough: "Love made him spiteful. He denounced me to the persecuting authority. The judge ordered me to be violated in a brothel. Tortured. Hot lead poured into my eyes. My

breasts slashed. Love broke me to bits" (402). While the imagery is firmly horrifying, the circumstance is evidence of the mindset of the woman (Lucy). She has rejected the male hierarchical perception of love, and thus, she is being crucified for it. She had two choices: death or marriage. For someone describing themselves as "fire and gall," there was but one choice, and she made that fateful choice. She lives it now, although still alive. She had the marriage death or the physical death. She chose the physical demise in order to preserve her spiritual existence. Her act of undying spirit was apparent from the story's first sentence. "I put out my eyes," although when she returns to that point in the telling, the details emerge more fully. "I gutted my eyes. I wanted to tear out the tear ducts forever! I sent the mess to my lover. Tidbits on a dish. Two glistening globes. Yes, feast your gaze on that! You will never be rid of my terrible stare" (402). She sends her eyes to her lover in act of defiance and to remind him of his smallness. The use of the term "globes" in reference to her eyes has a double meaning, for not only did the man say her eyes "burned as if from caverns," but the glistening globes are her breasts as well, slashed from her body in an act of perverse masculine authority directly from this man's actions. After this act of defiance, her sanity begins to wane: "But why has no one ever seen me?" (402) she asks. "I live in my body, not his mind." What this shows is the continual perception of woman from man's traditional ideals, not from stark, blazing reality in this case. She also does not want to be a martyr: "Don't invent a serene uplifted face...No missing eye grows back" (402). She is who she is, that fire and gall in the face of man's idealisms.

A key moment comes in the penultimate paragraph, when she once again adds a definition of self to the long list already pronounced: "And do not tell yourself that I was passionless! There was a man who could make me howl and claw the ground. I was true to him though we never met" (402). The explanation for her behavior (the rejection of marriage from such a well-to-do suitor, one with enough power to punish her thusly) is

that she was passionless — she does not want anyone to believe those lies men have told about women who have rejected them. She was full of passion, not only in life, but in love for the ideal man in her man, the man who would not attempt to tame her, but who would love her as she was — the man she was true to, the man she never met, but idealized so many times in her head. In the film The Firm, Jeannie Tripplehorn's character makes a similar observation at the end of the film when speaking to Tom Cruise's character: "I've loved you all my life, even before we met." Lucy never met her man, but loved him faithfully and passionately nonetheless. "...my punishment is not over. The judge has ordered me to be burnt. 'Better to marry than to burn' the churchmen say. Now I know what they mean" (402). The judge, the church, the churchmen, all foisting their views of female behavior. She is a heretic, she must be burned at the stake, for she has forsaken marriage and the church and holy reproduction, etc., according to the divine will of a god invented and purported by men. She will be made an example of so that others will not fall out of line. While her punishments may have been metaphorical, the message is clear — if you do not conform to society's expectations, you will die horribly. Spirited, individual women are trapped, and a traditional Irish identity has been transformed into a modern interpretation of that tradition. Anderson herself was born in 1949 and has seen the changes as they have happened in Irish society, and her voice and identity she shares with readers in this piece reflects her experiences.

Moving from fiction to fact, the perception of women and their identities in society has also changed. But what has been that process? It surely hasn't happened overnight, and it sure isn't finished, either. Women have sought different answers at different times, depending on their needs, growth and opportunity. As social researcher Eileen Evason points out in *Community Women's Action*, "Women have been increasingly visible at the grass roots in Northern Ireland...Women filled the gap in, for

example, the civil rights movement when men were interned" (Evason 245-46). This concept is not strictly Irish; when the U.S. sent its male populations off to fight in World War II, women stepped into some of the traditionally male society roles, in economic and other various venues. However, at the return of the men from war, the women lost the positions they'd attained, but the impact would not be forgotten. These experiences eventually led to the strong movement of women's liberation in the United States. In Ireland, the results may be the same: "It may be acceptable for women to take on new responsibilities when men are absent but assumed that things will revert to 'normal' when the men return...husbands may be less enthusiastic when notions of equality and challenging authority in the political arena intrude into the domestic sphere. The pressure on women to 'stand by their men' and to be faithful and supportive, regardless, is also not suggestive of radical change" (246). This is why the process is slow; women make slow advancements, because the men who are still in power, whether consciously or not, resist the change bringing women towards an equality. It's not that men resent the women's advancements for what they are; they merely resent the change and the impending loss of power. An example is a vice president of a major corporation — he hears rumors he may be replaced, fired, released. Does it matter who will replace him? No — he will react the same way whether his rumored replacement is a female Stanford graduate or a male Harvard graduate. The fear of losing existing and possessed power automatically granted by society is what men fear. This sentiment is expressed by clinical psychologist Maureen Gaffney in her work *Glass Slippers and Tough Bargains*: "Waiting for the New Man and helping him find himself as a way of changing sexual politics had a fatal flaw. The issue of power was forgotten. In fact, even the issue of politics was forgotten. What had started as a revolutionary enterprise had become a kind of grand-scale therapy instead" (490). The concept of that "new man" who will search within himself to accept equality is not the challenge. As Gaffney writes, the issue of

power is forgotten. It's not about equality in the man's mind, it's about the loss of status he has always taken for granted. How was this going to be overcome in the human psyche? Not simply the male psyche, for any woman given power then asked to give it up would react the same way. And the problematic methodology of looking to men to give them the equality they sought was not the answer, either. Once again, it was women depending on men for their respective feminine needs: "When were men going to free up women at home and change their way of relating so that women could begin to realize their full potential? Women found themselves, once again, doing what they have always done: playing the waiting game with men" (491). Why play the waiting game instead of a proactive approach to liberating themselves? This is a post-1980s commentary, but the question is why wait for the men to liberate women? While the support of some men will always be necessary on an individual basis, this makes it sound like the women have no control of their own destiny, thereby making their "full potential" contingent on what man allows them. The inferior attitude projected by that approach limits women from the start and only re-emphasizes their predicament. However, Gaffney sees another fallacy with the approach: "The problem with a concept like the New Man is that it implied that the problem with men is their personalities. The problem with men is their power...In reality, it has much more to do with being dominant in the power structure than with male personality as such" (491). This goes back to the question of removing power in society men have been raised with and always taken for granted. Is it their fault? Not directly, for women would react the same way if stripped of a granted power. But the fact men are raised from birth with certain expectations and guidelines re-enforcing the societal power structure only makes their interactions with women on any level seem domineering: "Inevitably, men bring all their skill and practice in power dealings into their relationships with women. They don't, by and large, do it consciously or maliciously. They do it automatically...The idea that other people should

service your needs is part of being powerful. And it is women who do most of the servicing of men's needs" (491-492). The women are raised by traditional methods as well, feeding this power structure from the downside and again re-enforcing the traditional hierarchy. So women are fighting the societal approach to power, the men and their upbringings, and themselves and their upbringings. Who is there to tell them women should have equality? It is a power they have to find on their own or with the help of already-liberated women. It is rare a man will step in and show the way: "Men, whether of the Old or New variety, cannot and will not liberate women. It is not in their interest to do so. Because it is in the nature of power and privilege that if one group gets more of these scarce commodities there will be less for the rest" (492). It is a struggle in a zero-sum environment, where the perception is there is only so much power, and if Man A loses it, either Man B or Woman C will acquire it. Whether this concept of the power spectrum is accurate remains to be seen, but acquiring power in society starts with establishing control of your own actions and destiny. Without that, you have no true power. Women, and the identities they project in literature, show this initial challenge, to acquire control over their own lives, bodies, destinies and existences. As Lucy showed us, she was alone and unwon, by choice. It cost her so many things, but it never robbed her of her power of self. That has to be established before anything else can.

Religion has always been a strong force in maintaining the male hierarchy in society, and this is very true in Ireland as well, if not more. Religion plays such a firm role in the domestic and social avenues, women are constantly subjected to its male-dominated ritualism and tradition. The word "religion" itself should probably be replaced by the term "Christianity," for in the pagan days in Ireland, prior to Christianization, women's roles in religion were prominent. According to Mary Condren, they lost this privilege and prestige with the advent of Christianity in Northern Europe: "Needless to say, women could not be bearers of the new 'life' brought in by Christianity, for whereas

in the old religion, the Goddess could be found in the trees, the bushes, and holy weeds, now access to God the Father took place through the meditation of the male priests" (Condren 338). This is a loss of power as Gaffney described, from a position of prominence to a position of subordination. With the proliferation of Christianity and its dogma, the role and identity of women was further buried by the male leaders. Whether intended or not, it happened, and the result is women were considered inferior afterthoughts from that moment to the present. The myths and ideals put forth by organized Christianity only perpetuated the problem for women: "As the 'guardian devils' of men, women occupy the negative side of dualism men have established in the theological world between good and evil, heaven and hell, spirituality and sex, God and the Devil. The tragedy, ambiguity, and cyclical regeneration of early Irish religion have been replaced by a harsh code of ethics and one in which women are the constant reminders to men of the depths to which their precariously established 'souls' can fall" (339). An extension of the Eve and Pandora mythologies, women were seen as the reason for man's fallibility and suffering. The psychological effects of this dogma, for young boys and girls, kept the hierarchy as it was, both in the Catholic and Protestant religions, always contributing to the social programming Gaffney writes. Men are power, women are inferior — the social messages supplied by religious leaders provided this social doctrine for a very long time.

How can this change? With certain awarenesses growing and the women to pay attention to such fallacies and expose them when possible, the attitudes are changing. In an interesting yet scandalous account, Nuala O Faolain's article "Bishop Casey and the Conflict of Public and Private Lives" discusses a bishop who got a young woman pregnant and chose to resign his position. Appearing in *The Irish Times* in November 1992, the article examines the social impact and effect of such an event: "The Roman Catholic Church persists. Worship persists. And there's a way around everything...after

the consecration, when you pray first for the Pope, then for the Bishop. But the priest did lead us in saying a Hail Mary for him. 'And Blessed in the fruit of thy womb...' " (O Faolain 354). An obvious contempt for the church is present in her tone, and it is deserved. While not able to pray for the fallen Bishop directly, the priest finds a way to include him in the normal prayers. O Faolain finds certain irony in the line above, for the Bishop has impregnated a young woman, and if the Church is to be believed, the child would be blessed. It's persistence in the face of adversity and change is what drives the author. And in her commentary, a reader can see she feels the Church wiggles through every controversy as only they know how, finding one way or another to continue when they have just been faced with a reason for shame. The reference to the womb is obviously a sarcastic dig at the male hierarchy of the church, who deserves no such quarter. Using this event as a springboard to other thoughts, she examines the hypocrisy associated with famous Irish Catholic men of note, including one former President of the United States: "Further up the Cathedral is the chapel commemorating John F. Kennedy, a place I haven't visited since I learnt that he was a man who used women like waste-disposal units. A man who lived with the same disjunctions Bishop Casey seems to have lived with — loving people, but not the person. Impeccable with the general — lost with the particular. There are no heroes" (354). The author makes an excellent point. The idea of embracing the collective and neglecting the individual is common in positions of power. The Bishop can claim he loves God and his kingdom in generalities, but when he impregnates a young woman, can he love her according to the divine doctrine he preaches? He has to if only to remain whole, and therefore his position must be resigned. With the inclusion of President Kennedy in this commentary, the author has clearly taken the facts of JFK's womanizing to heart, and she lumps his kind together with Bishop Casey, men oblivious to every day truths in front of us.

We can see the hypocrisy of the religion dominating Ireland's social structures. But how does this relate to feminine identity? The patriarchy itself has an end result of maintaining the subordination of the female gender, both in a public (religious) avenue and the private (domestic) avenue it dictates its law upon: "...The story of the Bishop and Annie Murphy — if what we have heard is true — is about patriarchy. It is about the relative claims of the public and the private life" (354). If the Bishop could have, he probably would have maintained the separation of personal and public lives, hiding this from the common parishioners knowledge. But keeping that assumption in mind, how much would he have contributed to his illegitimate child's life? He would have to balance the responsibilities of employment and of fatherhood, a task most men do not relish in Ireland: "Most men don't enjoy or very much value the rearing of children. When it comes to the choice then, having fathered a child, between continuing a dynamic and useful and rewarding and self-affirming public life, or setting up a simple private household in which to nurture that child, there wouldn't be much of a conflict. Many, many men avoid as best they can the ennui of caring for their children" (354-55). Given the chance, Bishop Casey tried to choose his "self-affirming public life." Only when confronted with the truth in public did he acquiesce to the private life to nurture the child. At least the public scorn and humiliation forced him to do what is right. This was only possible because he was a public figure. For John Q. Sullivan on the streets in Dublin, there would be the instant choice of the former — no acknowledgement and support for the child and/or mother. However, O Faolain doesn't fault Casey for his initial instincts: "Not only men but women have absorbed the values of patriarchy. If I were a Bishop and believed my work to be terribly important and was loved and respected and acclaimed and constantly praised, I wouldn't want to leave all that just to rear my child. I don't value the task enough. I'm not open enough to its beauty or importance, or to the responsibility entailed in using my body to make a child. If we all did think that the raising of children is

the most important task on earth then women, because they do it, would be valued. We do not think that. We do not value the domestic" (355). The author herself places more value on the public life than the domestic because she has been conditioned in her upbringing by society to think so. She also is acknowledging the easy choice for the man, while also acknowledging the lack of choice for the woman. The woman must bear the child, by the Church's law, but the man doesn't have to choose his domestic responsibilities. Where is the Church's law for that societal necessity? The author's tone drips with sarcasm and direct truths, and she acknowledges the syrupy content and certain tabloid essence of the event itself: "The story of Bishop Casey and Annie Murphy is a lurid and exceptional one, but basically it is about that question: if a man and a woman equally make a child, should they not equally bring that child through to adulthood?" (355). O Faolain comes to the point: equality in the domestic. Why isn't it happening? It happens when it has to (rarely), not when it should (always). But she also sees this occurrence as a sign of progress, one step at a time in a fight to last longer than anyone can perceive: "But things do progress, sometimes, through the suffering of individuals. There has been so much that has counted for nothing — has affected nothing. All the lonely furtive silent women — made such by the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church" (355-56). This has to be an anthem of feminism — the suffering will pay off for the next generation. It is a lament of many movements, not only the feminist movement. Sacrifice breeds eventual success for the cause. But as the author notes, in general that is fine, but on an individual basis? The pain and suffering cannot be ignored, especially in the present time. The religiosity of society is to blame for harnessing the female and squashing her identity through religion. The writing of such a piece is an attempt to break those bonds and assert the feminine identity, pride and belief. The piece goes on to talk about the concept of abortion and the Bishop's righteousness in the face of sin ("He didn't use a condom" so he's a good Catholic, etc.).

The battle between the old guard and new ideas is discussed, too. This is an exploration of hypocrisy of the times, the struggle between the church and modern reality as it applies to women and feminine identity.

What happens in Ireland when men are not as "noble" as Bishop Casey? More often than no, single mothers are left with no recourse and no man to help them raise the children. As O Faolain noted, it's not a glamorous job even if it is a very important one. Without the structure and support of two parents, a child's life can not be a good one. Many times, the life of the single mother is impoverished as well. In Aileen O'Meara's *Woman and Poverty*, there are several facts worth noting:

- "...In 1988, the Combat Poverty Agency revealed that there are over a quarter of a million women living in poverty in Ireland..." (O'Meara 223).
- "Less than one-third of Irish women earn an independent income through paid work, compared to 60% of men. Over six in ten — 61% — Of women who work outside the home are low paid" (223).
- "...The single parent family. At least 80,000 such families existed in the 1986 census, most of them headed by a woman. Most of these are dependent on social welfare, or on private maintenance from their husbands or partners" (223).
- "Surveys of poverty amongst women point to one central fact: women's responsibility to care for children reduces their access to an income of their own, and therefore heightens their risk of poverty" (223).

What does a quick glance at these statistics tell us? The obvious answer would be there are a lot of women who are single mothers with no jobs: "Women enter and participate in the labour market as existing or future wives and mothers, unlike men who are workers first and last. This difference is crucial, both on the part of workers themselves and for the way they are treated. Women's family responsibilities impinge on their work in many ways" (Daly 133). As O Faolain wrote, it is easy for men to choose to be elsewhere, for if she was a man she would choose the same thing. If she had the choice as a woman, she would choose the same thing. These women reflected in the statistics above do not have a choice — the right to an abortion in Ireland is nowhere near as widespread as it

is in a country like the U.S., and there is so much more social and religious stigma attached to an abortion in Ireland as well. Where do these women go? Their identities become the statistics seen above, and they are forced down a path of misery and hardship. Their identities never even have a chance to the path of Lucy's — they are destined to be statistics. In Ruth Riddick's *Towards a Feminist Morality of Choice*, she provides examples and statistics on abortion and choice in Ireland. After relating two bad-ending stories (15-year-old girl dies in childbirth; social attack on a woman giving birth to a separated man's child): "The lessons of these cases, and the social attitudes they reveal, are not lost on other women with unplanned pregnancies" (Riddick 412). This impact of societal expectation can only burden a woman in these cases, as noted. As if the choices were not hard enough on an individual personal basis, the complications of society can add pressure to a time that should be a joyful experience or a decisive choice. But society makes sure there is no easy answer for the woman. The religious and social conformity suggested by generations of a male-dominated hierarchy has guaranteed any choice a woman makes for herself will be difficult.

Sometimes the choice is not even hers, and she is not even aware of the choice itself. In Sara Berkeley's *The Sky's Gone Up*, the author traces the evening subway ride of a middle-aged man fixated on a young woman passenger. He imagines scenarios between them, follows her as she gets off the public transit system and walks through town. A few times he is tempted to reach out to her, but eventually he senses her distress and silently returns to his lonely routine. There are some obvious issues here: the isolated man's fixation on the female as an object of desire (regardless of sexual or emotional status), the lone man's stalker-like pursual of the female walking through darkening city streets, the emotionally detached man unable to cope with the idea his idealized female beauty is emotionally distraught. All these factors lead to the painting of a impotent man in the face of tormentuously fierce feminine identity characteristics. "He

liked to see a pretty face on the tube. He liked to know without looking that a slender leg was three feet from his own; the hollow of an ankle could arouse in him a particular melancholy that was pleasant...Sometimes he thought of his wife for a little: not in clear pictures, but in words and abstractions. She was a gentle woman" (Berkeley 387). The objectification of female sexuality is clear; he does not need to see a face or know a personality. The mere presence of a slender leg or the ankle excites him. This is purely sexual, with a little bit of the unknown goddess thrown in for good measure, to taunt him. The brief consideration of the wife is meaningful; she is not what he wants. She is gentle; he seeks something more volatile, or at least he feels he does. The mystery women on the trains suggest the volatility and passion lacking in his own marital life. The key word "abstraction" lends to the idea he does not even feel his wife. He knows she exists, but he neither knows her or cares to. She just exists for no apparent meaningful reason. She is not what he aches for. The woman on the train apparently is. He has affixed her an identity without her even knowing it — while she may "know" it because men do it all the time to her, she doesn't know it on an individual basis such as this. She may see a train full of male passengers; each one of them may see her as something entirely different.

The man in question finds her to be something he aches for: "Certainly she was striking. She had the bone structure of a very lovely woman, her hair was silky...He realized he had never seen another woman like her. But it was not her face that kept him in this suddenly heightened state — it was her expression. She stared a little to one side of him with a look of wildness..." (388). The initial fixation with physical beauty is actually overtaken by the inquisitive exploration of her facial expressions. She may have caught his attention initially through physical beauty, but she keeps his attention with something deeper. "She might leave. In ten seconds he could be staring at an empty seat, unable to believe she was no longer there. He had to look at the face one more time" (388). The

objectification is always close to the surface, but the fascination with her imagined state of mind is what keeps the fixation strong. He takes careful observation of her physical presence: "She wore no rings. Her eyes were still closed: he allowed himself three agonizingly long seconds taking in the lashes, the cheekbones, the perfect skin...My god she's lovely. He thought the words once, loudly, then felt a delicious, tantalizing power" (389). He empowers himself with this realization of physical beauty and accompanying attractiveness. The objectification continues, but a reader doesn't see it in a sexual so much as an appreciative, worshipping way. Does this make it healthy? Not particularly, since he still has not exchanged words with her. This fixation on her physicality leads him to follow her off the train: "His rational side was sitting back, far back in the shadow of this thing, whatever it was, that was driving him forward in her pursuit. Having left the train he knew there was no turning around. The balance tipped, his excitement tampered with the valves of his heart, he was passing through fire. He could just see the tails of her coat billow as she turned the corner" (392). He is motivated by the irrational, and while love perhaps is irrational, what he is doing is not right. She is the prey, perhaps innocently, but still prey to his stalking undercover. He is fed by a passion, while it may be considering romantic in some senses, she is not aware of this passion, and she may not want the attention.

The quest continues for this man and his object: "He was following this woman. Something in a stranger's face had made it impossible to remain on the train he traveled on every evening to his home...He had done something unaccountable; now he felt as though the gesture had launched him into an uninterruptable state" (394). The readers see he is hooked by something in her face, perhaps that look of wildness or some sense of emotional fragility and/or vulnerability. Is it possible he cares about her? Yes, it is, although his curiosity and care is still fueled by her beauty. If she was an ugly woman with the same aura of tenderness, would he have followed her? Probably not. He is

captured by her feminine vulnerability, and we cannot forget she is still some sort of prey for him to stalk. That is her assigned identity in his mind, and she doesn't know it. She also has no idea as to the level of his perceived affection: "...He held her warmly in his eyes. He wished to speak to her, silently in his head, but he could find no words. I am here, he wanted to say. Whatever it is, do not despair" (396). He seeks contact, he seeks to soothe her, and his intentions seems honorable. How often have we been touched by the kind words of a stranger in public? It is a noble venture to offer that affirmation to anyone in need, and perhaps she would be receptive to his attention and compassion. He genuinely feels it for her, and it's clear there is no predatorily violent nature in his actions. As he closes in on her, he notices something new: "She looked tragic now, standing like that...once again as close to her as he had ever been since leaving the train...she tipped back her head and shouted. The words were blown to him, fouled by the same wind that carried them. He made out sounds, sounds only, they made no sense. For a blind moment, it occurred to him to stop, approach her, touch her shoulder. As soon as it was conceived, the idea of intruding on her distress revolted him" (397). Her words, perhaps the most meaningful thing he can gain from interaction with her, are fouled by the wind. Why? Because they are not what he wanted to hear? Because she spoke first instead of him speaking first? The "foul" nature of her words reiterate the fact he really is not interested in this woman for who she is, only for what she is and what he perceived her as. Her realities frighten him, as does her true identity. Her words make no sense to him; they are only sounds. Is it because of the wind or is it because he cannot conceive her words? Perhaps her method of communication is above his understanding, quite possible since most of his fixation stems from physical communication, not verbal communication. He still is moved by her fragile state, but when the moment arrives, he is repulsed (or probably afraid) at the idea of actually making contact with her. Is it fear, apprehension or insecurity which prevents him from

doing so? He clearly is no match for this woman he has fantasized about for the past hour, both on the train and throughout the city streets. His moment of truth comes, and he shows himself to be a coward in the fact of her truths. She is not what he imagined perhaps, because his sense of her existence was skewed to begin with. He cannot handle what she presents to him. In the end, it is not the wildness he seeks; sometimes it's the idea which excites, not the actual act itself. The difference is imperceptible; the effect can be tremendous. His total involvement with this woman, whatever the intent, was sparked by the identity for her he created in his own mind, and as soon as she showed her true identity, he lost interest instantly, his idealistic woman tarnished by her realistic woman.

It is easy to see the problem in a story such as *The Sky's Gone Out*. Once again, the man (male hierarchical rule) is dictating and defining the identity of a woman (women in general). When she comes forth, whether forcefully or naturally, she shows her true colors and ruins the man's idealization and fantasy. Unable to cope with the sudden shock and incredulity of the woman's true identity, he abandons her, leaving her alone either in solitary status or punished exile. As seen in the fiction and non-fiction, religion and society play a strong role in setting up this repetitive scenario, and the literature of women reflects this problem.

The Society Dictates the Family

We've now seen how society has contributed to the predetermined feminine identity and how difficult it can be to break the harnesses of that identity. Sometimes dire consequences are the result, and sometimes nothing can be done to break down the barriers women face every day. From the societal mandates the family order is derived. On a smaller yet more powerful and intimate level, the social constructs are applied to the familial hierarchy, and once again women are subjected to a subordination they have not chosen. The same time these constructs have been bred into thought processes all across society, so when the female individual faces them outside the home, she also faces them inside the home in a dual battle to overcome oppression and assert her true feminine identity. Is there a choice as to which to attack first? Logic would dictate the breakdown of the family patriarchal structure first, but without that familial structure, the societal structure could not be maintained as it is merely the sum of many parts of itself, i.e. family, religion, politics, etc. Yet because the societal structure feeds the familial order, the family can not be weakened when maintained by external strengths. The society and the family are interdependent organizations, each relying on the other for strength and discipline. They both have to break down simultaneously before the woman can put forth her true identity.

The family structure keeps the woman subordinate in many forms. Already we have seen the religious strength, although we will see it again. But what are the other forces in the family set up against the feminine identity? Much of it is traditional, some of it is non-traditional but just as strong. Sometimes the binding aspects of femininity can be passed down unknowingly to the next generation, until a young female has an awakening of sorts and begins to see the world in different lights. Then she must not only take on the patriarchal format of the family, but she must battle the matriarchs as

well within that patriarchy. The patriarchy cannot extend itself without the willing support of its female members, and quite often the older women have no desire to rock the boat, upset the men or see the younger women do something they themselves could not do years before. Women in the family fight multiple battles inside and outside the home. An example of the way tradition and roles and identities are passed down by female descent is presented in Bernadette Matthews' *Granny*, where the narrator has many recollections of her grandmother. In reading this piece, the identity of both the grandmother and the granddaughter can be examined: "My brother was a hunter and gave bacon and ham (all the best game) to my granny who cooked foul temper and my own peculiar hatred of pig meat from it. She did this to feed the swine who attended her doorstep in frocks of light with whiskers twitching in the air and grunting. She was everyway contented in those days holding the world in her apron strings" (Matthews 39). The relationship between brother and sister is interesting in the sense the brother's efforts are wasted on the sister's tastes. She does not like the meat he provides; he fulfills his role, she does not appreciate it. Does she feel jealousy? Grandmother partakes in the process, cooking and feeding with the meat provided by the male hunter. Why does the sister not partake with the grandmother as a role model? She is hesitant and obviously reluctant to follow in her grandmother's footsteps. The swine on the doorstep — who are they? What are they doing there? Are they neighborhood boys or children, needing nurturing from a matronly icon? The matronly icon, with the "world in her apron strings", plays and relishes the role. The sister/narrator does not understand this, and she does not share this same matronly instinct or identity. The grandmother, however, also appears to look down upon the granddaughter's Christian practices, instead representing a pagan attitude: "The days have shattered since my granny danced before the fire controlling witches and hobgoblins with the blazing line of her heritage. She gobbled the fat on my lines of grace like an animal and fed me molten wax

images instead" (39). The grandmother was of another time, a time of pagan instincts. The reference to "lines of grace" infers a religious meaning, and the grandmother would have none of it, offering the false idols banned by Catholicism. Her grandmother seems like a throwback to the old days before organized Christianity came through Europe and changed the landscape. But does she want her granddaughter to follow in her path? The narrator doesn't express that in clear terms: "...Once I remember she caught me in her orchard eating one of her apples all ablaze and munching. Her eyes were colder than ice then and her mind a haunting song holding me there. Her tickets for fire and brimstone she sold to itinerants and travelers" (39). The dichotomy is interesting, suggesting the fire and ice within. But why? What lesson is to be learned from that, not only from a reader's perspective but from the narrator's viewpoint? The references to the strangers receiving the grandmother's passions suggests the narrator resents her grandmother for receiving only the cold scolding and never the warm encouragements. But the relationship was definitely a beneficial one for both individual females: "She blew out my candles when I was five with a wish from her eyes and I never knew I had looked on her with such certain knowledge and called her mother and Mary and creation...when she blew (on your birthday make a wish) I wished for the rest of her rising and billowing like thunder in myself" (40).Very eloquent and profoundly written, this passage indicates an undying respect and love for this protective guardian and mother figure. The young narrator realizes who she is and where she came from, if not at that time, then now with the hindsight and maturity necessary to comprehend such things: "She gave me good notes on fowl appetites and a reason for living I keep forgetting. She promised no century would be without me witnessing her. I found her when I was looking in books. I read her last look, a story about an apple and something I can't see clearly yet — her undying realm of stitching" (40). The affection is very present, but in a sad way, for the narrator cannot remember it all or understand it all at this point. But the mutual respect is

there despite the oddities and differences. The familial bond has been passed down from one generation to the next, and the identity of the female has as well. Not through recipes and stitching, but through memories of behaviors, beliefs, habits and affections — these are Grandma's legacies, as the young woman can sometimes define accurately who she is and where she came from. The reader may not know about her current sense of religion or domesticity, but the reader does know the memories of the female family line still pervade and endure. That, in itself, is identity for the narrator.

Whether a grandmother or an aunt, the family identity can be passed through generations in many ways. In Eilis Ni Dhuibhne's *Blood and Water*, a young female contemplates the role of her "crazy" aunt in the family life and, subsequently, her own life. The tale ends in a shameless rejection of familial identity. Both gender and self come into play, but from the start, the reader knows something is amiss: "I have an aunt who is not the full shilling" (Dhuibhne 113). Right off the bat, the stage is set for a tale of a screwy relative, a black sheep of the family. But the narrator lets us know this is not an individual story, but the story of two related women and their respective identity: " 'The Mad Aunt' was how my sister and I referred to her when we were children, but that was just a euphemism, designed to shelter us from the truth which we couldn't stomach: she was mentally retarded." (113). There is a fear of weakness in the way the sisters hid from the truth, that they may be stricken with such affliction later in their lives. But it also sets up the difference which will be prominent later in the story. No one wants to be like the aunt, for now obvious reasons. There is a descriptive section in the story, outlining the typical family visits per annum. The title comes from an analogy used describing the routine of a visit to the aunt's house. The author recounts how she would do chores — "...I had the personal responsibility for going to the well to draw water. For this, my sister envied me...it was really hard work, and boring. Water is heavy, and we seemed to require a great deal of it" (118). The blood relation to a retarded female which threatens

her own existential potential is heavy as well. The narrator provides another water reference as she also talks about spending time at the beach and a nearby lake when visiting her aunt: "I always stayed in for ages, even on the coldest days, even when rain was falling in soft curtains around the rocks. It had a definite benign quality, that water. And I always emerged from it cleansed in both body and soul" (119). Does family have the same quality for her, if not at the moment of the events described, but now in retrospect as she relates her story? Family can be cleansing if you allow it to be — bonds with a family member can cleanse if let so. But it is clear the narrator is not willing to continue any family traditions of feminine expectation of behavior: "Unlike our mother, we spent much time away from the kitchen, my sister and I" (118). This is not merely a generational break from domestic responsibility, but a separate break from the family women and the potential of mental retardation.

The key to the story lays in the bitterness towards the aunt as she cries before the family leaves at the end of each annual visit: "...grown-ups do not cry. My sister was tolerant. She'd laugh kindly...But I couldn't laugh, I couldn't forgive her at all, for crying, for being herself, for not being the full shilling" (122). There is a reason for this, as the author explains, establishing that female identity link theorized earlier. "There was one simple reason for my hatred, so simple that I understood it myself, even when I was eight or nine years old. I resembled my aunt physically" (122). This physicality similarity extends to fear for the young girl, as she associates the mental retardation with herself, or at least she fears the possibility of it. If the aunt had actually been a male relative, say an uncle, would the fear or even the physical similarity have played such a large role in her hatred? Not at all — this is a uniquely gender-based feeling of familial fear. Her feminine identity, even at such a young age, is threatened by this aunt: "Unable to change my own face, and unable to see that it resembled hers in the slightest...I grew to hate my physique. And I transferred that hatred, easily and inevitably, to my aunt" (122).

Hating the physique is part of the female identity problem. Looking for someone to blame for her feeling of uneasiness with her physique (and as a result, her identity), she blames her aunt. Not for any practical reason, but out of resentment for the similarities, she rejects her surface identity. The climactic conflict in the story is explored when the author (identified to readers as "Mary") has summer school near her aunt's home, and she chooses to ignore her aunt while there. In a painful confession, the author "melts in shame" (124) when choosing to refute any knowledge of the woman who is her aunt. Not only does she refute her aunt, she refutes herself, for she is her aunt in many ways, and she knows it. Denial of self-identity at such a young age for the author is a strong memory. Years later, looking back, the aunt suffers a heart attack and Mary suggests the aunt come stay with her while recovering instead of being alone in the old house. But Mary is secretly relieved when her sister takes the aunt instead. How is this resolved? The author was feeling the guilt of feelings past and the shame of denial and avoidance since that climactic moment. "I am still ashamed, you see, of my aunt. I am still ashamed of myself. Perhaps, I suspect, I do resemble her, and not just facially. Perhaps there is some mental likeness too. Are my wide education, my brilliant husband, my posh accent, just attempts at camouflage?" (125). This is more denial of identity through denial of her familial likeness. Her female identity was shaped by the presence of her aunt, much to her chagrin. It enters her adult thought processes and makes her question her adult life, all based on an identity crisis she first faced as a pre-adolescent girl.

It is a more complex relationship the father and daughter share in an Irish family. Does an Irish man become a feminist when he has a daughter? That is an open debate, for we see stories relating both good and bad relationships and intents between father and daughter. In Helen Lucy Burke's *All Fall Down*, the story revolves around a young girl and her drunk father. The plot is intricate and painful, showing the complexities of love and misery within this family relationship. The narrator (the daughter) suggests

early the difference between her father and the stereotypical drunk: "Among this crew my father was an oddity. He did not beat my mother or me. He drank alone. He showed no loud enjoyment of his drink...Quite simply, I hated him. At night, lying with the blankets drawn over my head and tucked in the far side of the pillow, I used to scheme how I would kill him before I was eighteen...Most of the time I think he did not know I was there. If by chance he noticed me, I embarrassed him so much that he gave me all his loose change" (Burke 178). Again, no identity as "daughter" because she feels is not noticed. She dreams of murder, a quite unreasonable suggestion powered by her sense of abandonment and embarrassment. When her Dad is ill, and mom must look after him, she sends the girl to a convent school: "There are strange paradises in this world. Mine was compounded of long dark corridors smelling of paraffin polish and disinfectant, a playground paved with cinders, staircases hollowed out of the mouldering walls, a corner of the nun's garden where we dug plots for seeds...All this was paradise because my father was not near. In fact I spread it around that I had no father. Died while I was small, I said, and basked in the caressing sympathy of the older girls" (179). The girl has problems with escapism, denial and illusions. How does this effect her identity? She feels she has no father, for she would not admit to the one she has, because of his drinking problem and resulting behavior. She escapes his presence while he is sick, she feigns his death and finds a certain type of freedom and paradise. While she never gives any concrete details of abuse, it is clear she is ashamed of him and that is enough to cause her to act as she does. Her identity is his identity, and his identity humiliates her, so she must separate herself from him to forge a new identity, even if it is a false one. The narrator realizes this, however, eliminating the denial aspect, although the narration itself maybe in retrospection: "Life was taking place on two planes, and the plane of imagination was the more real" (179-80). She is not deceiving herself, merely those around her. From this deception, she draws the care and attention she probably wished

she had from her father. Her friends give her an identity she has never had, and even though this identity is illicitly attained, she thrives upon its effects: "We all cried a little each night, and the other girls petted me and stroked me because my father was dead and I was so brave. Frances Boylan, who was two months older than me, said she would be my best friend. The sun shone and my whole body seemed to blossom and send out green shoots. I knew at last that God lived and loved me. / I prepared with fervour for my Confirmation" (180). She writes about religious confirmation due to imagination and illusion in a convent school, feeling God's love as a result of her disowning her father. The disowning has given her strength, and she attributes the happenings to her religious internment.

Eventually, her mother writes her father is well, out of the hospital and they're coming to confirmation. The girl writes back, admits her fault/lie, and the mother says she'll be coming to the confirmation with the girl's "uncle." The parents come, father disguised as uncle, and he is sober: "My mother and he kissed me. I noticed at once that he did not smell of drink. There was a carnation in the buttonhole of his suit. It was a new suit, dark-brown fine tweed...Each time he caught my eye he tried to smile, but could not quite make it" (181). Her father has apparently cleaned up his act, and by his actions, it is clear he is trying to win back his daughter although he also feels ashamed for his past behavior. Some of the girl's friends find her "uncle" attractive. He charms them, but then falls down the stairs: "The saints smiled at us from the walls. He turned back to wave to my friends and his footing went" (182). Despite the best of intents, her father has embarrassed her again, just as she was beginning to believe he could be something. She picks up his stick and starts beating her father with it: "It took the combined strength of my mother and two nuns to get me away from him. As I struck, his eyes looked up at me for each blow and winced away as the stick fell. He said nothing, although his mouth writhed. He did not cry out...A few weeks afterwards I got word that

my father had died. It was alcohol poisoning, I learned later" (182). She has killed her father, just as she imagined and fantasized. He has a shining moment when he returns to her sober, she appreciates him, then he screws up and embarrasses her again, so she attacks him in rage. Since he died of alcohol poisoning, the question is obvious: did he start drinking again after the fall, so ashamed of himself and his daughter? Probably. She wanted him dead, she imagined it, she told everyone it, and finally, it happened. This father-daughter relationship, strained from the start, displays a turbulent ride of emotional high and lows before the daughter snaps and can no longer function with her alcoholic father. While his fall may have been simply a fall (since he no longer smelled of alcohol), it represented more to the daughter: a final broken promise, after so many previous promises broken. The promise of an identity for her and her family was left buckling at the bottom of the stairs, for everyone to see. Empty and left without an identity she felt she deserved, she finally faces the reality and forges her own identity, that of a patricidal daughter. It was probably not her intent, but in her own mind, she had no choice. She relied on her family, her father, for an identity; when none came, she was left to her own device. This example has some high points, as the reader feels the father genuinely loved his daughter, never beat her in a drunken rage. It was his clumsiness and awkwardness at being a parent which caused her much consternation; she blamed the drinks. Two family members, each searching for an identity in different ways, neither able to find what they were looking for as their relationship ends in tragedy.

A more disturbing example of the father-daughter relationship is presented by Susan McKay's "Report on the Kilkenny Incest Case," an article from *The Irish Times*' September 5, 1993 edition. It is a very real account of a girl raped and impregnated by her father, and the complete inability of the family (or society) to overcome the difficulty. Needless to say, what kind of identity can this young woman ever have? Family and society have contributed to robbing her of a chance to find herself: "Alison had friends,

and they knew her father was violent. She thinks at least one of them 'had a fair idea' about the sexual violence, but she did not break her father's injunction to keep it secret. 'When you are living in total fear like that, you just don't tell,' she said" (McKay 28). While never is this expected to be taken as a representative instance of Irish life, it is at least consistent with the same types of violence in other societies. Fear and shame prevent a victim from sharing the abuse with anyone, and in a case like this, how could any young girl tell anyone her father was raping her? She has no ability to see herself as a human being; she has been robbed of her basic identity by her abusive parent. The father clearly has issues beyond the family boundaries, however: "Alison's father was not just violent to his family. 'Anything I ever cared for he killed,' said Alison. 'He went for my puppy with a slash hook, and he strangled my canaries. One I had, she was a real old pet. She used to stick her tongue out. After he killed her, he told me she had sung for him while he had his hands round her throat' " (28). There is a violent pattern, which has very little to do with sex. Power and control are the key operatives, but when it comes to exerting power and control over women, sex is often the easiest way to attain the overlording position. To repeat, this is in no way specific to Ireland, but consistent with universal rape cases. The raping continues until the inevitable happens: "...when Alison was 15, her periods stopped. When she found she couldn't zip up her jeans, she told her mother, who 'didn't seem exactly surprised.'...She did not reveal who the father was. 'I suppose I was stupid enough to think my mother could sort this out, make it go away,' she said" (28). Her identity has become her father's identity, both physically and mentally. She protects him by not revealing the father. Whether out of fear or shame, either way she takes on her father's identity and sacrifices her own. She is now seen as a pregnant teenaged whore, whether or not she wants to be. She has protected her father's identity at the expense of her own. Pretend for a moment this is not a rape case (if possible); she has been taught by society and her family to accept the role of

motherhood at any cost, even if it is her own sanity and dignity. This is her identity as well.

Her mother knows about the abuse, yet she seems powerless to stop it. How does this effect the female mentality in the family structure? The mother cannot protect the daughter from the abusive father, the female is subjugated under the male rule in a dual sense, and both the women suffer from the situation without seemingly any ability to resolve or correct the situation. Acceptance is the norm, and the long-term effects are horrendous for everyone involved, save the abusive male who just keeps on going until he is stopped. Meanwhile, those left in the path of destruction suffer the most: "Alison was confused. She wanted to die, and drank washing up liquid to poison herself. Then she thought about the baby, and made herself throw up. Her father continued to rape her until about a week before she went into labour" (29). She has very low self-esteem for obvious reasons. But she has a sense of survival instilled by the ability to give life, something men can never take away from women and a clear source of strength, as Alison notes. She is starting to pull away from the identity thrust upon her by feeling her own way, regardless of the prior path. She accepts her upcoming role of mother: "...Natural birth. She refused pain relief. 'It was agony,' she said. 'I think I had to get 28 stitches. But it was worth it to have Ben.' She laughed. 'Actually, it was bliss being in hospital. There was no one there to hurt me, and I had the baby. It was peaceful.' She said her father came to visit and joked about throwing the baby out the window to see if he would bounce" (29). Her peaceful sanctuary is eventually violated by her father. But she finds solace in the baby. Again, the reproductive capabilities of women develop strong bonds that sometimes can be squashed (like the mother unable to defend her child from a rapist father). But the father in this reality is reprehensible.

Alison and her mother relate the abuse/rape to a social worker, and tell the worker life is hell: " 'The social worker said that it was a family matter and she couldn't

get involved.' Because Alison was 16 by this time, the health board would have been unable to initiate care proceedings. They went home" (29). The system (i.e. society) cannot do anything for her, and she is forced back into the house of hell. The reader thinks about the male hierarchy discussed earlier — is it at fault here? Society will not step in a stop the abusive father. Thinking back to the interdependent circle between society and family, both are relatively powerless to stop this abuse. With no recourse, her mother loses sanity finally: " 'My mother just sort of totally gave in then. She just let herself go. She really lost interest in herself,' Alison said. 'From that time, my father started to treat me as if I was his wife.' Within a week of childbirth, he raped her again" (29). Without her own family supporter coherent enough to be a factor, Alison cannot escape her predicament. Her mother has been shattered by the experience, and as a result, she is not strong enough to help her daughter get out of the situation. Her daughter now has a baby to worry about, and her motherly sense of self overpowers her internal sense of self and identity: " '...in the end, I just gave up. You were going to get beaten and you might get sexually attacked as well' " (29). Alison was totally helpless in this situation because her family let her down, in every way possible. Her identity, forged by others and society's dual unwillingness to support her, is cast, and she will have little chance of escaping the identity placed upon her.

With two examples of negative father-daughter relationships in Irish life, one forcefully violent and abuse while the other was neutrally indifferent until it was too late, there is still room to examine another form of this family bond. Fathers and daughters can also be very close, although the father may still be adhering to time-honored and traditional perspectives he was raised to understand and accept. His daughter may fight that, they may have intelligent discourse on the matter without resolution, but still maintaining love for each other. In June Levine's *Sisters*, the reader is treated to an exchange between a liberated daughter and her traditional father, never quite

understanding each other. They actually start on the same page, as may be expected when a daughter is raised with certain familial lessons: "The night I became engaged to a Canadian Jewish medical student, I knew I had pulled it off. My father, especially, would be well pleased with me, and he was" (Levine 137). This is the stereotypical definition of female success and possibility is defined by marriage. She had learned the expectation from her father and family, and she feels she has done well: "To have done something so right, by accident I thought, was very exciting. It was wonderful to float around in a cloud of tribute for months until the wedding, feeling approval everywhere, the fulfillment of everyone's expectations" (138). The excitement of success is apparent, but her tone is curious — what does "by accident I thought" mean? She thought her life was being spontaneously decided, but she also have an underlying feeling this was no random event. Had she angled for a successful marriage by only choosing to let worthy men court her? Subconscious or not, she saw the successful marriage as her pathway to success. She'd like to think it was random chance, but she maneuvered towards it out of necessity. But even then, she had to balance her own budding feminine identity with the expectations and identity provided by her father and family: "What, I asked my father, would I do about the job I had got myself in Fleet Street? Ah. Forget the nonsense, he said, this worth more" (138). She sacrifices and forgoes her own career for the marriage, another sign of the mentality of the Irish woman. Forget her own individual opportunities — the marriage is the true ticket. This fallacy will com e back to haunt her, but she also has the temerity to analyze her father's thought processes: "Did he really see marriage as such an opportunity for a woman, the ideal for his daughter? Years later, when I got divorced, he advised me: 'What you should do now is look for a husband...' To this day, there is still no greater joy a daughter could give my father than to tell him she was getting married...Other good news would be pregnancy, a husband achieving something, sons doing well, news of somebody else's daughter getting married. The solid

achievement of looking so well that you deserved a good husband came high on his list, as in: 'She's a beautiful-looking girl, is there no sign of her getting married?' ... 'Daddy, she's a surgeon...' ... 'You'd think that girl would have lots of fellows after her. Maybe she's too particular.' " (138). This passage reflects the prime problem and battle a young woman must face within her family. Even after one failed marriage, her father still sees marriage as the answer. The achievements of family are what matter, not the individual achievements in a woman's life — a surgeon is a respectable career for a man, but for a woman it only begs the question about why the female surgeon is still single. These myths, perpetuated by society, promoted and taught within the family, leave the Irish woman with little direction toward a perception of self and identity. The constant reinforcement of the traditional, even if the face of stark failure of that tradition, can only limit the opportunity for Irish women.

The most direct feminine relationship in the family lies between the mother and the daughter. The bond may seem strong, but the actuality of the relationship can lead both parties in diverse directions. A traditional mother or a traditional daughter? A liberated mother or a liberated daughter? The dynamics are vast, and as a result, Irish women's literature exploring this relationship is diverse as well. Sometimes mother-daughter relationships are the most tempestuous, influential bonds possible. In Deirdre Madden's *The Birds of the Innocent Wood*, a woman recounts the death of her mother and her emotions in the time of turmoil: "It would be good...if she could bring herself to speak of the time of her mother's death. Would he be shocked or sympathetic if she told him the truth?" (Madden 481). There is the notion she is somewhat uncomfortable with her feelings on the issue, and she can't share them with her husband. In her own mind, she recounts her mother's death and the emotional aftermath: "...one great change had been permitted — that her mother had died and would never be seen in the house again — had seemed shocking to her. It was an affront to reality" (481). She appears to be

remorseful as a daughter should be at the passing of a maternal parent. But those were merely the immediate emotions spurred by the passing. Given a few days to recover, her outlook changes drastically: "...on the fifth day after the death, she awoke in the morning to the exact converse of these feelings, for she felt relief and a great sense of lightness, as though some terrible constraint had been lifted from her. Rolling over in bed, she had whispered into the pillow, 'Thank God she's dead.' " (482). Once the initial remorse is over, Sarah has time to clearly think about the role her mother had in her life, and as a result, the above expression is released. She tries to rationalize her emotions to herself: " 'I did love Mama,' she thought, 'I did, I did.' But only now when her mother was safely dead could she admit to the knowledge which qualified that; she had been afraid of her too, and had often hated her for her cold self-possession. She had been quietly scornful of anyone who fell short of her own level of self-sufficiency" (482). As a daughter, Sarah was the primary target of her mother's scorn. The death is liberating for her, but what of her mother's intent? As a self-sufficient woman, was she disappointed in Sarah for not being such? Her mother tried to play a role in shaping her daughter's identity, but the daughter resisted: "All her life, Sarah now saw, had been an unconscious struggle against her mother, for she had been afraid that she would grow up to be just like her: just as cold, just as calculating, and just as self-contained" (482). So, in a battle of different feminine identities, which is right? Both are right for either woman — Sarah's mother saw her independence and self-righteousness one way, tried to instill it in her daughter, but Sarah resisted in order to form her own sense of self, independent from her mother's. The struggle in itself is a good sign, for the daughter is strong enough to attempt her own assertion of person. Even if her mother did not approve of the path chosen, the mother also had to be pleased her daughter chose her own path. While sometimes her glee shown through, not until the end of the passage does Sarah voice her sentiments to her family: "Catherine cried while her sister looked

indifferently at the fresh dark earth and the fading flowers, and suddenly she heard her own voice say, 'I don't care that she's dead. We're not. We're alive.' " (483). Sarah means that in the sense they can now live whereas they were not able to live as they wanted during her mother's life. While the mother did not limit them, she did voice her disapproval. This shows a overtly strong sense of invasion on the daughter's account, for Sarah may not realize her mother gave her the strong example which allowed her to choose as she did. While taking her mother's self-sufficiency for granted and resenting it, she does not realize the empowerment it provided her at the same time. This is a mother-daughter relationship where the two chose different paths, could not respect the other's choice and the relationship splintered as a result. Both identities were strong enough to survive on their own, but they could not exist together.

While Madden's narrator provides a darker perspective, Kate Cruise O'Brien's *The Homesick Garden* also examines a mother-daughter relationship, albeit in a lighter tone. The story is a brief episode about a girl arriving home late after a bike accident: "I think I'd prefer the old unworried Mum. Mum, worried, was just like all the other mothers in the world" (56). She likes freedom, she likes to be unburdened with her mother's seeing eye and overly concerned viewpoint. Her mother usually was an unworried mother, but because a boy brought the girl home, the mother takes a different approach to her daughter's well-being. The young girl does not think too much of the boy who helped her home: "He was brave enough to instruct anyone, including A Mother, but an Emotional Mother was another thing entirely. I could see that he wanted to run. So very male. I couldn't help being pleased that there was something predictable about him" (56). The author decision to change the mother references into proper nouns indicate the powerful entity the mother is in the piece. She is a force to be reckoned with and worthy of the proper nouns used. Her comments on the boy are condescending and perceptive, thereby proving her own self-confidence levels and ideas on the opposite

sex. She equates maleness with running away from confrontation, finding it predictably male at that. What are her experiences lending to this perspective? The reader is not told, but the extremely self-confident little girl derived her strengths from some unseen source. Meanwhile, her mother continues to glow about the boy, saying in reference to the bike accident: "I'm glad some good came of it" (57). At least her daughter got to meet a nice young man, her mother thinking this is the best thing to happen. This is a matriarchal perspective, as well as the patriarchal seen in Levine's Sisters, where the father promoted the all-important role of a male in a female's life. Both parents in the Irish familial structure are capable of promoting passive traditional identities to their daughters. Considering such circumstances, the reader realizes the difficulty in escaping society and familial expectations and burdens.

This escape is seen in a sad piece by Bridget O'Connor, *Postcards*. A young girl living alone with her mother contemplates life with her mother, without her father, without her old siblings, who have gone "across the water" and left their mother, their past, their family behind. She knows she will leave, too, but in her mind evaluates the impact of such an action upon her mother. Her only connection to her father is through the mail: "We get postcards but they are from different places and, sometimes, different lands" (O'Connor 79). Eventually the reader discovers the postcards are from the father who has left the family, but sends his regards in postcards to what's left of the family he left behind. This begs the question: do men in Ireland leave their families with any regularity, and if so, why? As shown in the previous chapter, many women are single parents, left in dire straits by deserting fathers. Also, as O Faolain noted in the previous chapter, raising children is not glorious, and if she had the choice, she would choose to avoid it, too. Therefore, men leave. This leaves the mothers with tough tasks and hard memories: "...My mother has a boxload. To her they are like love letters. I do not understand this. There is no love there that I can see" (79). The mother clings to these remembrances,

momentos, because they do represent love to her. What kind of love? Hopeless romanticism perhaps at first, but after a time it becomes desperate romanticism. Reminders of love once shared, still remembered by her because she raised the family while the man ran away from family responsibility. They are reminders of why she made the choices she did. The child's perception is full of clarity, the mother's is distorted by obligation, faith and social gender constraint. The postcards mean different things to mother and child: "I have three of my own. They all say 'Hope you're doing well.' They arrive on my birthday. Not a day early or a day late. On the right day. I suppose that might be love but I think it is good timing" (79). These are token efforts from the father to keep touch with the family he deserted, in a way that probably helps him relieve any sense of responsibility he may feel for the family's welfare. Postcards forge this mother's desperate and fading identity, while also creating the escapist identity of the young girl. The departed siblings send checks and money orders, but the mother does not cash them: " 'I would not give them the pleasure,' she says, 'I would not.' I would. I do not see where the pleasure lies but I cannot say that. I cannot say very much to her" (79). She is a proud mother, holding fast to what is left of the life she once knew, she once dreamed and hoped for, which no now longer a reality but a sad story. Again, the child has the clarity the mother lacks. And the communication has broken down to the point mother and child cannot communicate anything, even love. Why would the last child choose to stay? What does the mother do to make this situation worse for everyone? While initially not her fault, is it now her fault? The child feels no hope, no promise of an identity from her mother, so she would naturally seek to follow her siblings elsewhere, to a place where identity can at least be represented by money earned and shared. The mother's continued hopelessness obviously burdened the other children as it now burdens the last child. The mother was stripped of her chance at life when the man left her with the kids and the responsibility — her identity was forced upon her, and she did not do well

with it. While not a fault, her inability to escape her identity also doomed her to her identity as each child she raises ends up leaving her just as the man did. She is a failure; her children have somehow found the strength to escape and forge their own identities. They have learned from her, and unknowingly, she may have passed on the best family strength she could, although it leaves her weak and alone in the end: "...One day I will go, though my mother does not know this yet" (80). The child indicates schooling is the chance to get away, but the mother keeps her from attending school knowing this: "She could not do without me, she says, I am her Love and she kisses me and pulls me to her. But she will not let me read or get on. She does not like my head in a book" (80). She keeps the child in isolation from society in order to keep the child to herself and prevent her own isolation. She is desperate, for the parent should want the child to "read" and go beyond her own existence, to happiness across the water. But that fear is what burdens the matriarch: "...my mother does not sleep at all. She does not like to be still. She says she does not know how to be" (80). This probably does not need exploration, but the theme of independence (or the lack thereof) hits home. What is this woman without her family? What is she without her kids? Who is she after all this time spent in a life serving other's needs and interests? She does not know who she is — she has no identity of her own, only that forced upon her by society and family. She has no concept of self beyond those parameters because they were never offered or explained to her. In Ireland today, this is slowly changing: "Women's groups have begun to enquire about the origins of these...beliefs. They do not accept that their traditional role within the family giving them their only identity as mothers and wives cannot be changed" (McWilliams 82). The mother in *Postcards*, however, has no notion of that change. She sees only her failures in these roles, and she has no concept of who she is beyond those failures.

The child does not know her mother, either, for the child rarely expresses any sympathy in the narration. There is a cold detachment to the detailed narrative, as if it was all matter-of-fact. How does the life of the mother effect the life of the child in this way? Like the other siblings, the youngest child seeks to escape and find a better identity elsewhere, far from the misery of the mother's home. At the end of the story, it is told how the mother has a nightly ritual of examining old photographs, of the family as it once was and every time ending with the wedding photo, where "My mother and my dad are young and they are smiling. And my mother has white flowers in her hair and pinned on her blouse. They are so white they are like shining lights so that is what you notice first" (82). The promise of a new life and a true identity were quickly tarnished by the actions of another, from which the mother could never recover. Her life is over, for all intents and purposes, her identity destroyed beyond repair. Her children cannot even save her, for they do not know how. The narrative ends with the sentences "And soon the house grows quiet. And it becomes still" (82). The nightly ritual over, the mother reminded of her own emptiness, reflected in the house, soon to be entirely void of children. Her life's work done, what is left for the mother? The loss of her last shred of identity might just the thing to break her entirely. An identity and a life dependent on a man, she has nothing. Her children learned from her and will avoid the same mistakes, regardless of gender.

In all these family situations, the different dynamics of identity are revealed and explored. The female family members can be entirely dependent on these identities, and they can be created and destroyed by the men in the family very easily. The women can pass on identities, wanted or not, to the children. The children can learn and assimilate if they want or choose their paths. Regardless, there is a clear force in the Irish family dictating the future and well-being of Irish women. Depending on the particular family influence and accompanying societal pressures, a young woman can either find herself

on her own or she can be forced into a traditional and quite often heart-wrenching result. It may appear to be a choice, but the choice belongs to fate, not to the individual.

The Family Influences the Domestic

The family exists in a domestic environment, and as a result, family members hold a tremendous influence over the domestic identity of women. Irish females are given their domestic identities by their families, and their futures are determined by the family. The domestic identity is an extension of the family identity, although as examples will show, the loss of the family can often either liberate or imprison the woman in Irish society. The difference between the domestic and the familial/societal identities is the domestic identity is a role where others are dependent on the woman for certain aspects of existence. The domestic identity actually empowers the woman, although as Nuala O Faolain pointed out, it is not a respected power. However, it is a power nonetheless, and it can be used and lost very easily.

In Margaret Barrington's *Village Without Men*, an interesting predicament is introduced when a seaside village loses all its men in a storm. Left without men in their domestic society, the women struggle to find meaning in their lives. The experience is a difficult one: "The ears of the women rang with the thunder of the ocean against its giant face. Salt foam flecked their faces, their cloths as they struggled along in knots of three or four, their heads turned from the wind as they searched the shore and looked out over the rolling water. But in all that grey-green expanse of churning sea, nothing. Not even an oar. All day long they wandered" (Barrington 228-29). Beyond the description of the moment of their search, the final sentence of this excerpt is the most profound. The women are wandering, lost without their men. It is a precursor of their lives to come after the tragedy. As they continue to search for survivors, the reality of their situation becomes more apparent to the women and the reader: "It was not until the turn of the tide on the second day that the bodies began to roll in, one now, another again, over and over in the water like dark, heavy logs. Now a face showed, now an outstretched hand

rose clear of the water. John Boyle's face has been smashed in the rocks, yet his wife knew him as an incoming wave lifted his tall lean body to hurl it on shore. For two days the women wandered until the ocean, now grown oily but still sullen with anger, gave up no more" (229). Their persistence is the first sign of their identity; they refuse to believe in the loss and tragedy. But soon it becomes apparent they will be living in a man-free society. Another facet of their identity is revealed in the way Mrs. Boyle knows her husband's face. Her identity is not only a reflection of his, but it is developed within his presence. Without him, how will she continue in her identity? This is the question these women must face as they move into a life without their husbands and oldest sons.

Without the men in the village, the women assume all the duties, and they forge ahead to keep their society as intact as possible: "Driven, bone-tired, sick at heart, they rose early and worked all day, stopping at midday as their husbands had stopped, to rest in the shelter of a stone wall, to drink some milk or cold tea and to eat some oatbread the children brought to them in the fields. At night they dragged their bodies to bed. There was no joy, no relief to be got there now. Nothing but sleep, easing of weary muscles" (230). They are now experiencing both sides of gender-based domestic identity. They do the difficult labor as well as the in-house chores, although they are forced to choose and prioritize responsibilities: "Their work in the house was neglected. The hearths went untended, their clothes unwashed. They no longer white-washed the walls of the cottages or tended the geraniums they grew in pots. They did not notice when the flowers died" (230). In the process of choosing and prioritizing, some of the men's responsibilities impede on their ability to perform the usual duties. Some of the more aesthetic duties go by the wayside in favor of providing for the families they have left. The women do not even notice the flowers have died. The reader sees the identity of the women change in an instant, due to the loss of every mature man in the village.

This is the nature of domestic identity — it can change very quickly with the loss of a partner or contributor to the domestic environment.

As a result of these changes, the village starts to break apart, slowly at first, as the first defection occurs: "The midwife was the first to leave the village...The women watched her go. A few called God-speed but the others, thin-lipped, uttered no word. Silently they went back to their houses and their daily tasks. From now on their bodies would be barren as fields in winter" (229-30). Without men, the village could experience no reproductive capabilities. There is no need for a midwife. In this sense, without the men, the women also lose their reproductive identities, not to mention their sexual identities. They have been stripped of a primary sense of self and body with the loss of the men. As the reader discovers, the women live in relative isolation, where their village survived on its own without much outside interaction. With the departure of the midwife, the loss becomes more obvious to the women, some of which may have tried to overlook this specific identity change. However, soon the exodus continues, in a way certain to cripple the village: "The next to leave the village was Sally Boyle. She was to have married...At night in bed she could not control the wildness of her body. She pitched from side to side, moaning and muttering. Her whole mind was darkened by the memory of soft kisses on warm autumn nights, of strong hands fondling her. She felt bereft, denied" (231). Her fiancé dies, and she is left with no sense of direction in the village. Her identity was based on her future with him; without his presence, she has no identity in this village and is forced to seek her identity elsewhere. The loss of domestic partnership and sexual potency reduces her to nothing in this particular situation. She is not alone: "...In ones and twos the young girls began to leave. With the coming of the spring their eyes brightened, their steps grew lighter...They became irritable, quarrelsome and penitent by turns. Somewhere out there across the bog, across the sea, law a world where men waited; men who could marry them, love them perhaps,

give them homes and children" (231). They have no reason to stay in the village, for they need more than the village can provide. Without men, there is no hope of a future. Instinct and learned habitual behavior force them to leave the village as well: "Nature fought against kindness in their young bodies. Here no men were left to promise these girls life, even the hazardous life of this country. They gathered their few garments together and departed, promising to send back what money they could. But their mothers knew that it was not to get money they left. It was the blood in their veins which drove them forth. And though the women lamented, they understood" (231). The women understand the need to seek elsewhere, for their own identities have been compromised without the men to complement their existences. A life of sexual isolation compromised the identity the young girls had been raised to expect and demand. They needed what the village could no longer provide, and without obligation to children, they were free to leave. On the contrary, the women who remain in the village have that domestic identity which demands they stay and provide for the children they have produced.

With the loss of the men, only time could provide the next generation of men to fulfill the domestic needs of the women in the village. One young man suddenly found himself in what he perceived to be the catbird seat: "Larry Boyle found himself the only lad in the village. The other boys were many years younger and those who were older had been lost with their fathers in the storm...He saw himself, in coming years, stronger and taller than any man, towering over humanity...For as yet the outside world meant nothing to him and women had no power over his dreams. They existed but to serve him" (232). His identity has been changed by the events. Without any real men, his identity assumes that role. Without any men, the women's identities have changed to be more needy, and Larry is the beneficiary of those changes. His physical appearances reflects his perceived change: "The stubby quiff vanished and a crop of thick, fair curls crowned his forehead, giving him the obstinate look of a fierce young ram. He became

particular about the cleanliness of his shirt, refused to wear old patched trousers and coats. Gradually he dominated the whole village" (232). He slides into his opportunity provided by the change in the women's identities. Prior to the disaster, the women probably wouldn't have given Larry much notice. Since the disaster and the change in their own roles and identities, they realize the value of Larry's potential, and they need him. As a result of this need, the women turn ornery in defense of what they think is theirs. When the schoolmarm seduces Larry, the women turn on her: "Such happenings do not long remain hidden in a small world. Without a spoken word, the women came to know. Primitive anger seized hold on them. They said nothing to Larry. Their belief in man's place in life and the fact they had denied him nothing shut their mouths. All the rage turned against the young teacher whom they had thought so modest and gentle. They became as fierce as hawks at the theft of their darling" (235). Instead of developing anger towards Larry for not choosing one of them, they turn on the woman who is taking what is theirs. They have to protect what chance at their old identity they may still have, and that chance is represented by Larry. When it becomes a possibility he may not reproduce with one of the village's own, they are suddenly different women: "From behind the fuchsia hedge the girl saw them coming like a flock of angry crows...Their voices raised in some primitive battle cry, they surged up the road towards her" (235-36). Like an angry mob, they converge on the schoolmarm, ready to show her their true identity and desperate state of mind. Whether rational or not, the women are scared and threatened their way of life will die. They have to preserve what they know how to do, and they see Larry as the only present way to do so. They do not kill the schoolmarm, but they injure her and ruin her home. The message sent, they return to their normal way of life, although they lose Larry in the process. After witnessing the attack on the schoolmarm, he leaves the village as well. In trying to protect their identity, the women contribute directly to their continued demise.

To keep their spirits up as their fates decline, the women gather and tell stories to each other. A favorite story relates a situation very similar to theirs: "Over and over again they told the story of the women of Monastir, who, when widowed and alone, lured with false lights a ship to their shore. What matter that their victims were dark-skinned Turks. Their needs were great" (237). The needs are great for the women of this village, as they have no identity and no future without their men. In an isolated civilization such as theirs, the world is an interdependent environment. Without the men to complete that circle, the women had no identity to sustain themselves. Eventually, the women are saved by fate and their own wishes: "Six men lay huddled in the bottom of the boat. Great, strong men, now helpless. The women turned to the helmsman. He looked at them with dull, sunken eyes. He moved. He tried to speak. His grey face was stiff, his lips cracked...The women cried aloud as they lifted the heavy bodies of the men. Their voices sang out in wild exultation" (238). Without men, they cannot survive. With men, they can survive. What does this example of Irish literature tell a reader? It cannot be taken as a rule, for this is a hypothetical situation, but it does reveal the attitudes of Irish society. Whether written as satire or commentary, the theme of the story is clear — women are dependent on men in certain domestic environments, and without men, women often have no focus or definition.

With men, women are often relied on to maintain a certain domestic identity — as a wife, women must be a certain way, and any deviation from that expectation is perceived as dangerous for all involved. Fiona Barr's *The Wall-Reader* provides an example of this, where a mother's seemingly innocent actions endanger her whole family. The story starts out with a simple observation: " 'Shall only our rivers run free?' The question jumped out from the cobbled wall in huge white letters...'Looks like paint is running freely enough down here,' she thought to herself, as other slogans glided past in rapid succession. Reading Belfast's grim graffiti had become an entertaining hobby for

her, and she often wondered, was it in the dead of night that groups of boys huddled around a paint tin daubing walls and gables with tired political slogans and clichés?" (Barr 46). Her world exists in these messages, and they are her escape from reality. The narrator calls it a hobby, but the depth of analysis seems to make it more than that. The woman herself examines the hobby: "She thought of how she read walls — like tea-cups, she smiled to herself...A whole range of human emotions splayed itself with persistent anarchy on the walls. 'One could do worse than be a reader of walls,' she thought, twisting Frost's words. Instead, though, the pram was rushed past the intriguing mural with much gusto. Respectable housewives don't read walls!" (46-47). She justifies her pastime to herself, saying one could do worse. Of they could, but why does she say this? As she says herself, respectable housewives (as she thinks of herself) don't read walls. Why not? They are there for reading, and she has the time to read them, and the inclination. Perhaps a housewife shouldn't be so bored and lonely as to desire to do so. She should have other responsibilities and interests, but her life doesn't provide that for her. The walls do. She sees that as both good and bad, and sometimes embarrassingly shameful: "They were simply ordinary (she often groaned at the oppressive banality of the word), middle-class, and hoping the baby would marry a doctor, thereby raising them in their autumn days to the select legions of the upper class" (47). Her life is just okay; it's clear she wants and desires more. Don't we all? She puts her hopes on her child, hoping the doctor dream becomes a reality and rescues them all from their current middling existence. But what does her husband do? There isn't any mention at this point, save the middle class reference and the apparent discontent. As a woman, she has no outside job, just the housekeeping, childrearing duties. This is her identity at this point — domestic and somewhat discontent. She feels limited and contained by her life, and she is definitely looking to expand her identity beyond its current existence: "She had convinced herself she was happy with her lot, and yet felt disappointed at the pangs of

jealousy endured on hearing of a friend's glamorous job or another academic and erudite husband. If only someone noticed her from time to time, or even wrote her name on a wall declaring her existence worthwhile; 'A fine mind' or 'I was once her lover.' That way, at least, she would have evidence she was having impact on others" (47). The reader sees her needs now — she wants to be noticed, she wants to influence other's lives beyond her immediate family. Not much can be added to this statement. She aches for attention, success and excitement in her life. She does not have it, is jealous of those who do, and she wants to be noticed. She is trapped in a quiet, boring existence not suitable for her personality and expectations. Her family identity is not enough for her, her domestic identity is not enough for her, and she wants to forge a new life as reflected above. All this thought stimulated by her penchant for reading graffiti on walls: " 'Fantasy time' her husband called it. 'Wall-reading time' she knew it to be" (47). The reading of walls is her personal identity at this point.

The appearance/mention of the husband directly indicates the dichotomy of domestic attitudes. He sees her wanderings through the city as a fantasy; she sees it as her hobby. This can only contribute to the rift already growing in their relationship, as evidenced by his aforementioned discontent. However, their lives are about to change as the woman's adventures lead to the stimulation she is looking for: "A foot patrol of soldiers strolled past, their rifles, lethal even in the brittle sunlight of this March day, lounged lovingly and relaxed in the arms of their men. One soldier stood nonchalantly, almost impertinent, against a corrugated railing and stared at her. She always blushed on passing troops" (47). The description of the rifles indicates a longing desire by the woman to be in the place of a rifle: lovingly lounging in her man's arms. Her relationship does not offer that. And, a soldier notices her — just what she wants. She starts a verbal relationship with a voice in the park. It gives her what she needs — attention, interaction, dreams, hopes: "Each week the voice and the woman learned more of each other. No

physical contact was needed, no face-to-face encounter to judge reaction, no touching to confirm amity, no threat of dangerous intimacy. It was a meeting of minds..." (49). This is a safe adventure for her; it gives her attention, preserves her life and the loyalty she has for her family. But it also gives her what she wants, a chance to impact others and make her life more exciting. Where will the relationship go? It may not be important, for the fact it exists gives her the shot in the arm her life needs: "She wanted to be remembered by writing on walls, about them that is, a world-shattering thesis on their psychological complexities, their essential truths, their witticisms and intellectual genius. And all this time the city's skyline and distant buildings watched and listened" (49). They share sentiments, and this is hers. By being preserved on the walls, the city would always recognize her and give her the attention she desires so much. But as the passage notes, the city has been listening to her, and she will receive what she wants. However, one day, her husband comes home to find wall-writing on the side of their house: "The four-letter word covered the whole wall. It clanged in her brain, its venom rushed through her whole body. Suspicion was enough to condemn. The job itself was not well done, she had seen better...The workmanship was poor, the impact perfect" (49). The word "tout" was written on the wall — what does it mean? It upsets their relationship, and the woman never considered anything she was doing to be harmful. In her mind, she is innocent; in her husband's mind, she's guilty of some sort of betrayal. Her quest to forge a new identity outside the domestic has directly impacted her domestic identity.

The woman is not sure what to feel, although she instantly reacts to her predicament: "What was the point of explanation? She lifted her baby from the floor. Pressing the tiny face and body to her breast, she felt all her hopes and desires for a better life become one with the child's struggle for freedom. The child's hand wandered over her face, their eyes met. At once that moment of maternal and filial love eclipsed

her fear, gave her the impetus to escape" (50). She draws strength not from her husband, but from her child. Feminine strength and resolve through traditional means, fighting for a non-traditional outcome. It hadn't always been this way for her: "For nine months she had been unable to accept the reality of her condition. Absurd, for the massive bump daily shifted position and thumped against her. When her daughter was born, she had been overwhelmed by love for her and amazed at her own ability to give life" (50). This feminine, motherly identity takes precedence over any domestic responsibility she feels. She has priorities, and they are only indirectly domestic. They are primarily motherly and self-centered. This is reflected in her thoughts: "By nature she was a dreamy person, given to moments of fancy. She wondered at her competence in fulfilling the role of mother. Could it be measured? This time she knew she could. She did not really care if they maimed her or even murdered her. She did care about her daughter. She was her touchstone, her anchor to virtue. Not for her child a legacy of fear, revulsion or hatred" (50). Her fortitude is revealed, the lack of care for her own life and the tremendous concern for her child's future. The decision is made to leave the area. All because of one word? "Tout" can be defined as "to solicit customers, votes, or patronage, especially in a brazen way." Was her behavior in the park seen as solicitation of some illicit sort? "She had seen women who had been tarred and feathered, heard of people who had been shot in the head, boys who had been knee-capped, all for suspected fraternising with troops. The catalogue of violence spilled out before her as she realised the gravity and possible repercussions of her alleged misdeamour" (51). She endangered her family for the attention she sought, even as innocently as she did. The family decides to make a midnight escape from Belfast to Dublin: "As they approached the motorway bridge, two figures with something clutched in their hands stood side by side in the darkness. She closed her eyes tightly, expecting bursts of gunfire. The van shot past. Relieved, she asked her husband what they were doing at

this time of night. 'Writing slogans on the wall,' he replied. The furtiveness of the painters seemed ludicrous and petty as she recalled the heroic and literary characteristics with which she had endowed them. What did they matter?" (52). She has realized what's important in her life, after her trial and inner examination — her family, and not the things she had wished her life had been full of. Her quest for an identity has come full circle, from the original domestic to the external needy and returning to the domestic priority. While on one hand she had the opportunity to explore and find herself a new identity, one more excited than what she had, she also has a moment of realization where she realizes her quest for attention is no as important as her child and family. Given the chance, the resulting experiences help the women determine her own identity.

Sometimes, however, such a change is forced upon the Irish woman. In Mary Beckett's *Heaven*, the author examines the life of a woman after her children have grown up and moved on with their lives, leaving her to her solitude. Heaven is her empty house and the silence in it. She comes to savor the silence, until her husband retires and joins her. She feels violated by his presence. "Gradually, she realized that this was not an occasional luxury, this solitude, but a routine. So she fixed a time every morning to sit and relish the quiet...She was not aware of the happiness it induced until she resumed her household activities and found herself smiling" (Beckett 243). The solitude represents her time, her separate peace from the rest of her life. She begins to associate this silence her perceptions of heaven. Why? It is her time; it is not time for her now-grown children, it is not time for her husband, it is not time for her familial responsibilities. It is her time to savor and enjoy as she wishes. She wishes the silence as her heaven. She can choose to do anything with her time, and she chooses this silence, mostly doing nothing, save enjoying her time: "She had no thoughts, no contemplations...She began thinking of heaven. She imagined deep silence. Innumerable people stood in rapture, no

one touching another..." (243). Does she know herself? After years of devoted "service" to her family, she has the opportunity to do anything, and she does not know what to do. By using her time to contemplate heaven, is she hastening towards death as the only liberation? That may be a stretch, but clearly she uses her time to fantasize about heaven, and this is her favorite pastime. She does not really enjoy the silence itself, she enjoys the opportunity silence affords her to dream of something else impending. But even then, her dreams are of silence. Does she know what she wants or desires? Probably not, as she has no definition of self in the present, merely a vague idea of what she may want in the future. Her concept of now is completely void. "She began hurrying home in the mornings to shut herself in...Sometimes the silence caught her up out of doors so that she drifted past people without seeing them or speaking to them...No one would miss her, she had done all that had been asked of her, she could fade out any time" (243). Her silences disguises her to the public, and she relishes the anonymity. Why? Again, she has no sense of self. Her husband's retirement shatters this inner sanctity she has established. She begins to question her marriage and its attributes: "She had seized on the prospect of marriage with him as the only way to a real life — her old life had no sense or meaning. They had been well-suited, neither until now interested in the other. She had had her children, her house and then her silence. He had had his job and his children to a certain extent. Now he had nothing and, she thought indignantly, he was busy seeing that she'd have nothing either" (246-7). If her old life had no sense or meaning, she clearly attached meaning in life to marriage, children, etc. But that was not the case, as she still has no definition of self, with or without her husband. She thinks, therefore she is, but she thinks nothing, therefore she is not. She and her husband find themselves in closed quarters finally, and they have nothing to share. The children gone, her silence invaded, she resents his presence. He is threatening her new sense of identity.

The changes take a toll on the woman as she is forced to adjust constantly to changing situations. She turns to religion for guidance: "Before the winter set in she told the priest at her monthly Confession, 'I have feelings of hatred for my husband, murderous feelings. I am afraid I will do him an injury...' She was then afraid of losing her peace in heaven as well as the peace in her home. All the beautiful broad shining avenues of silence would be shut off from her and she would be condemned to some shrieking cacophonous pit" (247). Her hell has materialized in the form of her husband and his invasion of her silence and heaven. Hence, being subjected with her hell, she imagines malevolence as a solution, or at the very least an option. Eventually, the grandchildren enter the equation to relieve the tension between husband and wife, temporarily delaying her eventual heaven. "Now and again, though, she did catch a distant glimpse of calm corridors and vaulted roofs all soundless and it gave her a feeling of great sweetness in anticipation" (249). She has put her heaven on hold. She realizes she is temporarily trapped in this existence, and she cannot accelerate or escape the process without seriously jeopardizing her chance at her heaven. Therefore, she is resigned to her fate, accepts it, but still longingly aches for the future, the death it brings, and with that death, her idea of silence and heaven. The main feelings this story conveys is one of being trapped in a domestic identity, resigned to the station assigned. The woman has no sense of self, and every time she tries to pursue a identity, something changes to thwart her. She has no concept of want, need, desire beyond nothingness, which is better than the "something" her life has been. She sees death as the only escape, reminiscent of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and the feminist theme often seen in literature. This is identity at its bleakest, totally dependent on a structure provided and totally related to those around her in the domestic arena, very similar to the mother in Bridget O'Connor's *Postcards*.

In a final look at domestic identity, the role of men has already been examined, but Anne Enright's *Men and Angels* offers a different look, that from men's viewpoints as the women in their lives seem to wither without their identities being reinforced by the men's support. Enright's piece is a fragmented piece, and it takes some time to put the individual pieces together and understand the author's intent. The first segment has some interesting imagery, with a clockmaker borrowing his wife's wedding band to achieve the final perfect balance in a clock he's built. The effects of the loss of her wedding band is reflected in the wife's anguish: "...[his] wife could not rid herself of the shame she felt for her bare hands. She sent the maid on errands that were more suited to the woman of the house...Her dress became more somber and matronly, and she carried a bunch of keys at her belt" (Enright 481). The loss of the ring strips her of her married identity; she therefore doesn't feel comfortable in the role of the "wife" without the symbolic ring. Why? Does the ring have that much significance? To her it does, and that must be respected and examined. It is the furthered idealization of marriage in material terms. But it is all she sees — the ring means she's married outwardly to those who care to notice; it is not enough to simply be married. The ring must validate the marriage in her eyes. However, the ring as a part of the clock in the house also diminishes the marriage in the wife's eyes. The husband's somewhat blatant disregard for the symbol she holds so dear punishes her every day when she looks at the clock. It could be argued the husband may have subconsciously chosen the ring to finish his clock because it was so important to him, but the wife clearly sees it the other way. "Like Eve, [his] wife had been warned. The ring must not be pulled when the clock was striking the hour...Her mistake came five years on, one night when [he] was away...There are many reasons why [his] wife pulled the ring at that moment. He put the action down to womanly foolishness" (482). She endured the building mental anguish for five years before she snapped at the loss of her identity, in the form of the ring.

The second segment concerns the wife of a glassmaker. The man had a tremendous understanding of glass and its beauty, but he could not see into his wife with the same depth and clarity. But who can? People are complex, and only the man's passion for glass impeded the view of his wife. "Sir David's life work was to make light simple, something he did for the glory of man and God. Despite the way her eyes sparkled when she smiled, and the molten state of his heart, Sir David's work was strenuous, simple and hard. He spent long hours computing angles, taking the rainbow apart" (485). With the most tremendous beauty in front of him in the form of his wife, he continues to focus on other distractions in his life. Instead of seeing his wife's beauty in a mirror, he examines the wonders of the mirror itself, thereby missing the true beauty in nature. And beyond a physical sense, the emotional and mental neglect takes its toll upon any person, specifically in this case the young bride/wife. "It is difficult to say what broke her, a chance remark about the rainbow perhaps...Or looking in the mirror one day and licking it" (486). It is insanity from neglect. In a moment of visitation from his wife's ghost, Sir David was more interested in the light refraction abnormalities than his wife's spiritual presence.

The third segment is not so clear. Ruth and her mother, who is deaf. Ruth became so in-tune with sound in life, she overlooked most everything else. Men and their words, etc. "...men never stayed with her for long. She caused the sound of their bodies to be played over the radio, which was, in its way, flattering. What they could not take was the fact that she never listened to a word they said" (489). On her mother's death, she was cold: "When the body beside her was no longer singing, she thought, she might as well marry it, or die" (489). This leads to the final statement of not only the third segment of the piece, but the entire work itself. "She really was a selfish bastard (as they say of men and angels)" (489). We see the selfishness presented in the clockmaker and the glassmaker. In a reversal of sorts, Ruth is the selfish character, but in a different

way. She has no significant other to spurn, only her deaf mother, who made her what she was, the student of sound. The clockmaker and the glassmaker neglect their wives for love of their work; Ruth neglects her mother for her love of sound. She is just as capable of misusing someone's love as the men were/are. Thereby proving women are no different than men in many cases, and perhaps humanity is to blame instead of testosterone.

We see a woman's domestic identity is often interdependent on the presence and the behavior of others in the same domestic system. Sometimes it is men, sometimes it children and other times it is merely a sense of self needed for fulfillment. The unique aspect of the domestic identity shows a reader Irish women live complicated, intricate lives. They are dependent, they are depended upon. They take for granted, they are taken for granted. The domestic identity is so interdependent upon other factors, it is quite often more beyond a woman's control than any other facet of her identity.

Sexual Identity

In the domestic environment, a sexual identity is often formed and developed by a woman. In Ireland, a country of religious fervor, there is no exception. Women develop their sexuality openly, and this is reflected in the nature of women's literature. Not a sexuality defined by wanton and crude pornography, the Irish woman has an identity as a thought-provoking sexual entity. Her body and her mind contribute to this identity, and there is an introspection into the physical makeup of the body as well. It starts out at a young age, as it might for any young girl, and develops into a older, more mature understanding of the body and sexuality. The female body itself plays a large role in women's sexual identity, as the body's constant hormonal cycle and development play into the woman's mindset, both as in individual identity and sexual identity. No simple words can express what the Irish woman goes through from the prepubescent stages through the menopausal stages; therefore, the literature on the subject can be quite varied and full of introspective depth.

Sexuality starts a younger age than the mere physical suggests. This is evident in two pieces of literature, Ann McKay's *Checkpoint* and Joan O'Neill's *Daisy Chain War*. Each piece looks at relatively young girls and their ideas about sexual exploration and involvement. In *Checkpoint*, a woman looks back at her first "love," a young boy with no more experience than she, and the affection they shared for one another at a tender age where the excitement of what was possible dominated sexual identity. She recalls him fondly years later: "Of all those heroes of my wet dreams, he was the one. His image haunts me, like some glamorous good angel, or a battered photograph which leaves more and more to the imagination as time goes on...I don't know why, but even the thought of him makes me ache and damp and smile, the way he used to get so husky tender and fumbling" (McKay 239). Young people have a variety of crushes and

flirtations when young, but the narrator reflects upon this boy who was "the one." Even as a mature adult, the reader can see she is still excited by the mere thought of the boy and the situation. The tension of such relationships is often not present later in sexual existence, and it is a tangible reason for such times of look back to the past. The woman narrating is very comfortable with her sexuality, as she discusses her physical reactions in plain and open terms, and she has fond memories of sexual inexperience and the excitement generated by it. The boy was not threatening, but instead the perfect crush: "We would meet after school, uniformed and blushing, walking down town the long way, rather than pass queues of merciless innocents and precocious fellow sixth-formers already in the know...I gazed at your warm neck when you had undone your school tie, you stared at my grey woolen breasts, and we gladly guzzled tea and chips, the only sensuality our rigourously inbred Protestant morality would admit" (240). The narrator freely acknowledges the inexperience, as the others in the school already knew what "it" was like, or so she thinks. Time has given her a perspective on such beliefs, but the physical description of the suggestive clothing and the religious restraint is used by the author to perfectly relate the excitement of such simple acts. Sex itself was not really allowed; sexuality itself became something to do with non-sexual moments, suggestive moments of imagination, anticipation and high hopes. This is the sexual identity of a young girl, told through the mature perspective of a woman later in life: "...both our faces beamed with smiling, so relieved we might almost have dived into a kiss, but never did, running away after different buses...A warm and tender pause. While in my secret head I'm screaming, howling with laughter, lowly sobbing...And in the breathy silence of the telephone we shift and laugh, wishing and wondering and waiting" (240). The recollection involves some interpretative analysis, as the mature woman looks back the young girl. The narrator relates the seemingly unmeasured passion of the encounter — screaming, howling, sobbing; all the outward emotional bursts associated with strong

cases of puppy love. The difference in this, however, is the memories still excite the narrator, years later. She is still that young girl, aching for something since lost in her sexual identity — the notion of naive romance and passion. A part of a young person's sexual identity, it sometimes gets lost later in life, as marriage, stability and responsibility replace spontaneous sexual exploration. The narrator aches to re-live these moments, the second time around knowing then what she knows now: "...hearing in his voice all the wrapped-up misery I knew in his eyes, I would gladly have fucked off and come back a new woman, bird-bodied, a painted lady with wings to enfold. Not this ingenuous fledgling who coyly coveted her swelling breasts and welcomed in secret the sordid monthly rituals with towels and talc. Sweet consolation for the tenderness and pain" (243). She wants to return to make love with this young boy she aching craved for the only way she knew how at the time. Sexual remorse is common among everyone; with maturity, many people often wish to go back and have a more intimate moment with those they cared so much about but never consummated the relationship. She compares womanhood with fledgling female sexuality, wishing she had made the monthly experience of menstruation more worthwhile by actually participating in an act of womanly sexuality. She had the physical ability to be a woman, but not the emotional ability. Since these moments, she has blossomed from the meek sexual identity of a 13-year-old girl to the firm sexuality of a mature woman. The fantasy still exists: "Will I bleed? Will you come? Will we cry or laugh or turn away from our eyes with the shame and the disappointment. And should we wait for a bed with champagne and candles or do it as the fancy takes us on the road. Behind a tree unclothed and lie in the wet among midges and twigs..." (243). The narrator would do anything to relive the moment as a mature woman, to bring her present sexual identity to an old relationship. What does this say about her identity as a sexual woman? She has a need to improve upon past performance, a need to explore a relationship to a fully extent than she was able to. She

doesn't necessarily have anything to prove, she doesn't feel she had been slighted by the situation. What she is doing is fantasizing about a former beau, a completely normal and healthy action. More than anything, this shows a healthy sexual confidence and identity, comfortable with recollection of past trysts and fantasization.

In *Daisy Chain War*, the narrator is again remembering a memory of sexual tension in her youth. This is a short piece, describing the effort of a few young girls to play "Doctor" with a neighborhood boy. The narrator seems like a reluctant participant in her recollection of the event: "May Tully was standing at a long scrubbed table in the middle of the big empty room of their disused basement. 'Hullo,' she said as I turned away" (O'Neill 77). The narrator turns away because she is not comfortable with the proposed situation of playing "Doctor." This is a common games many kids play while exploring their sexual at a young age; not all kids are comfortable with it. Even though she was not the one being "operated on" in the game, the narrator still shies away from the moment. However, she does stay and partake in the game: "Vicky's face was wreathed in smiles and I thought I'd better stay if it cheered her up" (78). This is peer pressure in the classical sense, staying involved in a situation in order to not let down a friend or to reveal fear at the impending action. A young girl, sexually unsure and insecure, may not want to be involved, but she will stay in an attempt to win friends or respect. Again, it is interesting to note she is not even the one who will be exposed in this instance; she will be one of the group going after the individual boy. Yet she still does not want to be a part; she is not curious enough in the sexual tensions she may be feeling. The boy, however, is the isolated individual: " 'We're performing an operation. You Jimmy, strip off and lie up on the table. I'm going to scrub up.' Jimmy made for the door. Our hands reached out and grabbed him and pulled off his shirt. He was forced to lie on the table while Tess, Pauline and Vicky held him down. I kept nicks on the door" (78). The girls are controlling the boy, instead of the predictable other way around. And

Jimmy wants no part of it. Furthermore, the reluctant narrator has now become a somewhat willing participant, as evidenced by 'our hands' and the door patrol. Possibly against her wishes, she is now involved in the situation. It is curious to note the situation's specifics. These are girls pinning down a boy to strip him; usually, the reader might think it would be the other way around. Boys tend to be more sexual aggressive than girls, especially at such a young age. It is a product of societal imagery and suggestions that have inundated the young, impressionable minds since they were aware of such things. However, in this case, it is the girls wielding control and desire and aggression — they want to see the boy naked. They are the ones out for the fun, so to speak: "May was obsessed with bodies and bloodthirsty rituals. She had a glazed sadistic look in her eyes as she diagnosed Jimmy. 'Appendix,' she pronounced. 'It's about to burst. We'll have to remove the patient's trousers...' " (78). The lead girl is aggressive and bloodthirsty. She exhibits stereotypical male characteristics, and the idea they have been transferred to the female in this case leaves an impression on the reader. These are not the girls a reader may remember from childhood. These young girls are sexually aggressive, and they feel confident, if not secure, in their budding sexual identities. They have curiosities, and they are willing to violate a boy to satisfy those curiosities. Even if these curiosities are innocent in nature (i.e. just looking for visual answers), the girls are being pro-active instead of passive in this sexual encounter. The tables turned on him, the boy is scared: "Jimmy went to leap off the table but Vicky, with a piece of a rag tied around her mouth, pushed him and held him down..." (78). The female power is asserted physically, in a somewhat suggestively sexual way. The idea of four young girls pinning down a young boy and stripping him echoes of a sexual power struggle, one of the traditional male methods used to attain supremacy and one traditionally used by women to overcome oppression. However, the power is the issue here, both physically and in the slight sexual way. The girls start to strip the

boy's pants, but are caught by the mother of the household before it gets that far. Ironically, albeit it predictably, the mother blames the boy for the incident: " 'What in God's name are you doing lying there half-naked, Jimmy Scanlon? In front of all these girls. You ought to be ashamed of yourself' " (79). It would never enter Mom's mind the girls had been the source of the mischief and the boy was actually relieved to have been found. These girls switched their sexual identities with that of a stereotypical boy their age, and they were almost rewarded for it by attaining what it was they wanted. The narrator never expressed any remorse or opinion about the event itself; she merely provided the details, and the reader must derive the underlying attitudes from those words. What the reader sees is sexually aggressive girls, fully aware of their sexual power and identities, even if their intent was still purely innocent.

As girls mature to womanhood, both physically and mentally, they become more aware of their bodies — not only as sexual objects, but as functioning life-giving physicalities which shape and define their actions and identities. As Ann McKay wrote in her short story, young girls are very aware of their bodies' potential, but only as a mature woman do they fully grasp the possibilities. McKay also briefly discussed menstruation and its impact. For young girls, it can be both an exciting event and a burden. For mature women, it can be a sign of fertility and youth. For older women, it is many things sometimes to complex to accurately define. Regardless, it is a outward messenger of gender identity and a unique function of the female body, one which can predicate a woman's sexual identity through its regular or irregular behavior. Two pieces of Irish women's literature deal with this bodily function in different ways, both as the curse and as the life-giving reward.

In Brenda Murphy's *A Curse*, a young woman is suffering from menstrual pains. The reader knows nothing else as the story begins: "She awoke in stages, aware of the humming sound that filled the space she was in. The fan, they had said. But that was not

what had tugged her out of sleep. Cramping pains gripped her lower belly, holding her, then tightening their grip by spasms. A deep ache in the small of her back. She lay huddled, knees drawn up, face to the wall, eyes closed to block out the constantly burning light" (Murphy 226). This woman is not in a comfortable place, and her body pains are making her more uncomfortable. The humming fan, the small space, the burning light — are these things really so bad or is the pain in her midsection causing everything else to be bothersome as well? Are her surroundings as miserable as she describes them or is she projecting her bodily pain into the environment? Either way, she is in serious discomfort because of the menstrual cramps. As she slowly comes to, her surroundings seem more real to both the reader and the girl: "She sat up and looked about her. The yellow dimpled walls covered in graffiti stared back. She coughed and felt the ooze between her legs, the familiar ooze, the heat, the wetness. Her mother called it 'the curse.' A curse it was for her right then" (226). Her room is not pleasant, but neither is her physical state. The use of the word "ooze" to describe menstrual flow is not pleasing, but the inclusion of the words "heat" and "wetness" almost bring a sensuality to the description of menstruation. In some ways, the femininity projected by menstruation is sensual; the woman's body is fertile, alive and flowing with renewal every month. However, with the influence of this woman's mother on her as a child, the reader can see this is not a sensual experience for her. It is the curse referenced in the story's title. But has it always been a curse for the woman in the story? The narrator used the phrase "right then" to indicate this woman does not always see menstruation as a curse, only at this particular moment. At other times it might have been pleasant; however, it is not at this time. She desperately desires to be free of the curse: "She could smell her own sweat, sniffed under her arm as if to confirm it. She felt a desperate need top wash herself, to be clean again" (226). The reader begins to see the predicament at this point. The woman is isolated, dirty and irritable — she is also in jail. She asks the policeman

attending for help with the mess from the curse: " 'I've taken my period, ' she said simply. 'I need some sanitary towels and a wash. I've not been allowed to wash since I was arrested, days ago.' He looked at her with disgust. 'Have you no shame? I've been married twenty years and my wife wouldn't mention things like that.' " (226). The man is unsympathetic to her, not only from societal position but also from a personal standpoint. What can the reader derive from this exchange? This young woman is probably extremely liberal, not only from the fact she uses such language the policeman's wife would never use (thereby proving the older woman to be too traditional to mention the curse), but also because she's in jail, showing a lack of respect for something in society. They haven't let her wash since she was arrested, either. At this point, her femininity is the curse, lowering her to sub-human conditions while incarcerated, humiliating her before society's authority figures. Her menstruation is a burden, not a symbol of feminine strength or identity. She has been shamed by her period and society's reaction to public discussion of the issue: "What is the colour of shame? All she could see was red as it trickled down her leg" (227). Her badge is the blood, her shame is the condition she finds herself in because of her feminine body functions. Her identity is shattered by the untimely presence of her body's discharge. Irish society has no toleration for such signs of weakness.

On the contrary, in Mary Morrissy's *Possibilities*, the opposite view is taken yet also muted. This is a brief piece about a pre-menopausal women and her body. While not very long, it is graphic and precise in its message — menstruation is both a blessing and a curse, especially for older women. The main character struggles with her bodily changes: "At forty-one, Grace Davey's biggest fear was that she would dry up. When she rose in the morning she would be relieved and delighted to find her loins pleasingly damp. The milky secretion of mid-cycle was a cause for secret celebration. So, when she discovered the greenish discharge she was not at all alarmed" (Morrissy 31).

Grace's sexual identity is comprised of her bodily perception of self. She has a fear, and her body eases her fear by generating dampness in her "loins." Her confidence as a sexual entity stems from this dampness, because she feels it is normal and beautiful. To her, it does not matter what the discharge is, but the fact it exists puts her mind at ease and enables her to enjoy her life and body. The pride and security Grace feels in her body is evident. She sees it as a reassuring security every morning to know her body is still flowing with moistness. She does not understand the bodily processes, however: "The workings of her own body were a mystery to her. She took great trouble with her appearance...Yet of her innards she had only the vaguest notion — an impression of oiled, livid organs performing languid, primitive rituals unquestioningly — which was why the discharge did not bother her at first" (31). She puts a blind faith in the body, for she doesn't understand how it works. She just knows that it is and that it acts a certain way. Her blind faith in her femininity shows her strength and confidence as a woman, but she also feels the need to keep her appearance up. If her appearance sagged, would her blind faith and confidence in her body fade as well? Perhaps on the outside, but if her moistness continued, she could also reassure herself with that knowledge. She is proud of her sexual, organs and their functions.

She does acknowledge the side effects of that moistness, however, but she also basks in the light of its glory: "She took to bathing more often, ware that the acrid odours of one's own body are always more pleasing to oneself than others" (32). She finds her body luxurious, even as she realizes she may not want to offend anyone. It's the battle between her inner woman and her outer woman — the need to be pleasing to others against her own satisfaction with her own body beautiful. Sooner or later, fear wins out, though: "...As the weeks wore on she would panic if anyone so much as wrinkled a nose in her presence...Grace sat in a damp pool...She was afraid he would catch the smell of fear from her which was now stronger than the other smell..." (32). Her pride in her body

has deserted her in the face of this odor and adversity. Eventually, her lack of knowledge about her own body gets the best of her and overrides her sense of inner woman. The effect of this is her sexual identity crumbles because her body betrays her, and she betrays herself by not understanding her body's actions. There is no mention of a male/lover figure in the novel, reaffirming the strong sense of self this woman has, both within her body and without, even in the face of adversity.

Beyond bodies as instruments of femininity, the sexual entity itself needs to be explored. Women are more aggressive sexually now, at least in a public sense. They choose to pursue men in public rather than in private, and they take a certain pride in making themselves into the decision-makers in sexual situations. Evelyn Conlon's *I Deserve a Brandy and Port* deals with the common meeting in a bar of strangers, one man and one woman. Told from the woman's point of view, the reader sees some sharp commentary on the female mindset and sense of sexual identity in a public place: "I made it clear to all patrons that I was on my own and was here for the duration of the night, or as much of it as I could stand. The new confidence had come with the drink" (Conlon 468). Wary of the meat market that is the bar/pub, the woman puts up her defenses in the form of advanced warnings to stay away. She is confidently defensive and defiant, as she notes, bolstered by the consumption of liquid courage. This begins to change slightly as the night progresses and the alcohol is consumed: "The place was getting busy. People meeting people. All talking to each other. Human nature as it is I suddenly longed for conversation. Just a little conversation. I've only myself to blame. I'm the one who thought it would be a good idea" (468). After putting out her signals to stay away, she now longs for interaction. Natural and human, nothing compromising about it, although a complete reversal from her earlier defiance and defensive attitude towards others in the bar. She evaluates her own sexual strength: "Say if I start a conversation with someone really nice, can I trust myself? Will I be able to control myself? Will I be

able to get through it without making a pass at him. You know what men are like about women making passes at them. I won't worry" (468). Feeling the effects of the alcohol, she softens, yet still thinks everything through to the last perspective. She is not comfortable with where she is going, yet she is sensible enough to examine the possibilities and pratfalls. Her prospects are bleak: "By the looks of things someone really nice is elsewhere tonight. So I start talking to this man. I kind of like him. It's now 9:30 and I've had plenty of pints" (468). She's starting to compromise even more, settling for whomever instead of the "right" guy. Is she lowering her standards? Yes, but she remains in control of her thoughts and remains in control of her own sexual destiny on this night. She remains in charge of her sexual self: "I'm thinking how clear-headed I am. Drink does that you know. You can spend hours marveling how clear-headed you are. Mornings you usually forget" (468-69). This is the first time we begin to think this is a habit for the woman. She talks about the clarity of alcohol-induced thought processes and the wry comment about forgetting in the morning. She has a sense of humor, relaxed in the knowledge she may compromising herself: "Anyway I'm talking to this man. I think I like him but I'm not absolutely sure. At least he's letting me talk. Unusual." (469) He appeals to her because he appears to be more considerate and interesting in her thoughts. This, combined with the alcohol, begin to produce the desire in her mind, now coming completely around from her initial attitude in the bar.

He makes a comment about his wife, and she is stopped cold: "I can't bloody believe it. And I was just beginning to know that I liked him. Does he think that I started drinking yesterday or that I was born with an inbuilt sympathy detector for men or whatever other cliché a man like him would know?" (469). After the shock, she reverts to her initial attitude about the bar. She also confirms this is not a new habit for her, coming to the bar alone, with the intent of staying alone before eventually succumbing to the atmosphere and the drink. The cycle is complete as she continues to express her

disdain for the formerly alleged nice man. She tells him off, and he turns the entire situation on her. "He was flabbergasted at my cheek...He winced. 'I feel sorry for you,' he said in a low menacing voice and then, warming to his own menacing, 'You are so bitter and unreasonable. You must have had some terrible experiences in your life.' " (469). He turns on her, blaming her for her rejection of him, based on his marital status. She sees this as a typical male reaction, to blame the woman. He ends the conversation with a thinly-veiled, threat-like warning, and she is returned to her opening stance, reinforced by her now-routine experiences with men in the pub. The strength of this piece lies in the woman's ability to maintain everything she set out to do in the bar that night. She does not compromise her position; she always remains in control. Her judgment may have been influenced by alcohol and loneliness, but she draws the line when she needs to and stands behind her position. She is a liberated, sexual woman, and she does not lose her edge when the man shocks her. She does not crumble and subject herself to a humiliating experience. She stands firm while insults her for being so uppity. She retains her pride, dignity and identity throughout the disappointing affair.

Turning from fiction to non-fiction, Rosita Sweetman's *On Our Backs* provides a realistic look at Irish women and sexual attitudes. As the title might suggest, this piece is just what it seems like it should be about — women and sex and men and expectations: "I always find it amazing if you got to bed with a guy and he turns out to be really gentle and affectionate. Being gentle is very intimate and personal, it throws me off my track! You know, the first night you're trying to prove something" (Sweetman 91). Without diving into the age-old discussion of "what do women want," this sentiment is typical of sexual stereotypes; the women ache for something yet when they get it, they are thrown off guard and not entirely comfortable with it. Perhaps it is the result of too much simplification and extreme definitions. Women do not always want a gentle man, or maybe some women do. It's an individual preference, but the stereotype tends to be

woman wants gentle man. Cass discusses how it throws her off guard, even though it's what she wants. And the expression of trying to prove something is a tough standard/stereotype for women; they feel they have to live up to expectations or else they may never share the bed again: "I used to feel if there was a really good sexual attraction everything else would flow. Now I don't think it works like that. For it to develop into a relationship you've got to get to know the person a bit rather than just hopping into a fucking thing. The really good relationships around now are the ones that didn't just start on a fucking basis" (91). Marianne relates a basic concept of mature relationship commentary, but she voices it as a great discovery, because women are not taught this by their experiences. At a young age, they are conditioned to put the emphasis on sex to acquire and hold on to the boy/man they want. As they mature and realize sex doesn't keep the man, they develop this rationale and start the difficult task of finding a man mature enough to agree with them on these principles.

Women also face the challenge of balancing their lives in conjunction with relationships: "I want to get my career thing together so a relationship is out of the question. When I'm in one I get lost in a kind of dream" (92). The balancing of life channels: Marianne feels she cannot have a relationship and a developing career at the same time. Why not? They are not exclusionary, but perhaps men do not like women with careers? Men are intimidated by that; men like to be the center of attention to their partner and do not want to share the spotlight with a career. The career prohibits the woman from giving the type of effort she wants to in a relationship; the relationship prohibits the woman from giving the type of effort she wants to in a career. Either way, she has not the time nor the energy for two consuming life forces. Her second sentence indicates which it is; she will get too absorbed in the relationship, and she will not be able to focus on the career. While this predicament may not be accurate for every woman, it is common enough. On the common theme, women also face the domestic

expectations of a sexual relationship: "When I lived with Dick I hated all the shit of washing up and buying food and things. I had a big romantic idea about sitting up in a double bed with silk sheets, smoking big joints and watching telly" (92). This is domestication versus fantasization, expectation versus reality. This type of burden weighs heavily on a woman and her self-perception: "You've got to work much harder at a relationship. You've got make compromises and sacrifices. That's exactly why I don't want it. I never want to compromise: I did it once, I craved a relationship but it was more the idea than the person that really mattered. Now it would have to be someone who fitted into my thing" (92). This is a preservation of self identity through sexual terms — a woman can maintain her standards and expectations when a partner's demands or expectations become too oppressive.

On the other side of this view is the woman who cannot preserve her self identity when faces with difficult situations. Oppression extends to a point where the woman loses the struggle for possession of her own body and identity: "At first we didn't realize how big the problem of rape was. There are two factors: society's attitude to rape and helping rape victims. Rape isn't just a guy who gets a sexual urge and jumps on a woman passing by...Also that it's not the woman's fault: any woman can be raped. That often only comes home to people when someone they know is raped" (236). Rape is still an issue for women, situations where they lose control of their surroundings and are taken advantage of by power-seeking individuals. A woman is reduced in this instance to a sexual non-entity. She has no self identity except one of pain: "The date rape is really common: a guy meets a girl at a dance, gives her a lift home, then rapes her. It just starts as an attempt at seduction, which fails, so the guy just goes ahead and rapes her" (236). A man tries to force an identity upon the woman, she resists, and he in turn resorts to physical power to impose his perception of her identity upon her. Men and women have different perceptions of what the woman is supposed to be in this situation;

those differences can lead to hideous crimes. Sometimes, these crimes that rob women of their identities also do permanent damage to the women's sense of self, and not enough attention is paid to that aftermath: "We're not looking for fifteen year sentences for rapists, none of us are great believers in the prison system, but we do feel while rapists are often given psychiatric treatment or help, the victims are left with nothing, and obviously they need it very badly. So we feel there should be psychiatric help for them, particularly for younger women who've been brutally attacked, or attacked within the family" (264). With the Kilkenny rape case presented earlier, this situation is still not addressed by Irish society on the level it needs to be.

While rape is not the sole problem with women's sexual identities in Ireland, it is indicative of the attitude towards women and sex that has prevailed for generations. Women should not be aggressive, women should be passive. Women should hide their bodies, they should not be overtly sexual in public. These myths contribute to suppression of sexuality in women. In these literature examples, there is a variety of identity expressed, from young girls to mature women. All reflect the volatility surrounding sexual identity in Irish women. They long to be strong individuals in sexual relationships, and sometimes they are able to achieve that. Other times, they are not able to do to societal attitudes and male actions. But they strive forward nonetheless, expressing themselves as they want to, living as they want to, even in the face of social criticism and scorn.

Individual Liberation Through Complete Self Identity

All the facets of identity discussed until now merely contribute to the whole of self identity. Women complete or not so complete in the previous areas of identity still face the final challenge of putting it all together to develop a sense of self allowing them to succeed in whatever way they choose to. That may be the key, for there is no single, successful way to measure every woman's self identity. One woman's conservatism is another woman's feminism, so identity must be looked at on an individual basis. If one woman is content to be a housewife, she cannot be criticized for a lack of identity. She knows who she is, and she is happy with her station. If she is not content, she owes it to herself and to her fellow women to find her happiness and fulfill her own respective vision of identity. That is the only true demarcation line in determining a successful woman — has she recognized and fulfilled her own individual dreams and desires? Every woman is different, and she must find the different answers to be happy and establish her own true identity.

Young women sometimes question their futures. And each young girl has her different idea of a future identity as well. In Moya Roddy's *The Long Way Home*, two girls discuss the future: " 'What are you goin'ta be when you grow up Loretta? ' Jo asked as they walked home. 'Dunno. What are you goin'ta be?' ... 'I'm not gettin' married, that's for sure.' After a moment Jo added, 'I'd like to be a teacher.' Seeing a glitter in Loretta's eyes she hurried on, 'or a secretary or somethin'.' She hoped that put her off the scent" (Roddy 44). One girl is determined not be married, with assertive plans, although she softens them to keep her friend off the "scent." Why? She is a strong-willed girl, yet she is afraid to show it for fear of being different and outside the normal expectations of a young girl's future. Loretta wants the normal expectations, though: "I'm goin'ta get married and have loads of babies. Have you seen our new wan? She's gorgeous.' 'But

wouldn't you like to travel round the world?' 'Whaa, and get eaten up by wild animals in the jungle,' she exclaimed..." (44). The other girl wants to have babies in marriage — different aspirations, and almost a fear of the "wild animals in the jungle," if she dare venture beyond her perceived boundaries. The wild animals are the men outside in the real world, ready to devour young women, Jo thinks. She will not fall prey to that — she will be her own woman. She is confident and aware of this even at such a young age. She will find her way.

Many pieces of feminine Irish literature focus on that idea — a woman finding her own identity and self in whatever way she can, in whatever way she knows how. Success and failure is tied directly to this struggle to find identity. In Maeve Kelly's *Amnesty*, a woman struggles to maintain her dignity and preserve her life in the face of economic and social hardship. Living alone with her deaf-mute brother, she must constantly find ways to stay on top of finances and social stigmas that burden her existence: "Not one word did she utter on the journey to town and the Fish Merchant. Nobody knew that the grimness of her silence was simply a necessary part of her life. It was her preparation for the tussle over pennies per pound with the Fish Merchant. This way she stored her mental energies, drew on her strength of will so that he might not 'best' her" (Kelly 114). As a silent-by-choice woman, she is prejudged by everyone around her. Her silence is misinterpreted; if they only knew. She has a fortitude no one around her possesses, and it is her strength and success: "People who knew her were wise enough to leave her alone. They said, tolerantly, that after all what could you expect from a poor creature whose every day was spent in the company of a deaf mute. The brother had been born that way" (114). She is strong out of need, and no one gives her credit for it. They pity her and avoid her. Why? Because of their own weaknesses they project on to those they fear and are intimidated by. The weak are always fearful of

the strong, and of they can, they turn the tables of social perception on the strong, in order to weaken them and bring them back down to the common level of weakness.

But this might not be the case, as there is no direct hostility. The silent treatment she receives is hostile in outcome, but perhaps it is not intended as such: "The mainlanders were not hostile to the sister. They pitied her and had regard for the way she cared for the dependent brother. They admired her energy and diligence in work. But who could warmly friendly with such odd people?" (115). Why do they pity her? Is it out of realization they could never do what the girl is doing? There is admiration, but not enough to help out themselves or treat the two as real people. Instead, they are odd because they are different. The others are not perceptive enough to realize they cannot judge the woman and her life by their set of standards. They all have different lives and different needs. One woman's trash is another woman's treasure chest: "She had once been offered big money for the island. If the bidder had tried to seduce her she could not have been more offended. 'The cheek of it,' she declared. 'A stranger! The nerve of it. Looking to take the island off me. They can buy the whole country, but they won't buy my island.' And she became even more possessive of it..." (116). She is intent on keeping her own, protecting it. This last bastion of familial land is her pride, her fortitude, her feistiness. Perhaps it is also the source of her strength, for keeping the island is her top priority, and it keeps her alert, strong and agile in the face of a world she perceives wants to bury her. If her attitude is paranoid, it is also her guiding light. She later haggles with the Fish Merchant and wins based solely on her strengths. As a reward, she buys herself a dress: "The sister knew only the one kind of defeat and that had nothing to do with ideas. If she was a country woman conquered by town, she did not know it. If she was a provincial conquered by Dublin she did not know that either. If she was an Old Gael defeated by foreign money and foreign customs she knew nothing at all of that. Defeat was ill health, hunger, the loss of the island, death. Yet she had smelled defeat at

the turn of Fish Merchant's back. The pink dress was not now a rent flag thrown on a burial mound. It was a song of triumph, a declaration of peace" (122). She clings to the one fortune life dealt her, the island of her family, not so rich in fertile land, but something to start and build from when nothing else is there. She defends it and its resources to the end, and that resolve gives her the strength no one else understands, the strength to survive at all costs in the face of adversity. She has her identity, even if no one else around her understands. They do not need to, for they do not live her battles. They cannot even recognize this woman as being the only one among them who has what she wants.

Quite often a woman may know what she wants, but she might not be able to get there because of society's constraints upon her dreams. An example of this is in Christina Reid's *Joyriders*, a brief piece on a delinquent girls' dreams. Told in the first person, it depicts the rebellious yet dignified attitude of an uneducated Irish girl on the verge of adulthood: "I stole a car once...all by myself...I never told nobody, doin' it was enough...Didn't need to boast about it the way the fellas do...just doin' it was enough..." (Reid 321). She is a female taking on very male characteristics, except one, the need to tell everyone how cool you are. She does this, as she says, just for doing it — she is satisfied with that, with fulfilling her own desires and needs. However, she is committing criminal acts: "When the careers' officer come til our school, he asked me what I wanted to do, an' I says, 'I wanna drive roun' in a big car like yer woman outa Bonnie an' Clyde...he thought I was takin' a hand out him, so I says, 'All right then, I'll settle for bein' a racin' driver.' An' he says, 'I'd advise you to settle for something less fantastic Sandra.'...They're all the same. They ask ye what ye wanta be, an' then they tell ye what yer allowed to be..." (321). The last sentence says it all; dreams are squashed, ideas discredited and paths dictated. In this case, her dreams may not fit into societal expectations for any one, let alone a woman. But she is bold enough to dream those

dreams and share them. She has her identity, and her identity just does not happen to fit into Irish society. But she maintains it nonetheless, and she never lets it go, proving her feminine strength through every trial. She is happy to be pursuing what she wants; she is not happy because she cannot quite get there. Is she any happier than the aging housewife in Mary Beckett's Heaven? She is, because she still feels the dream, and she can still pursue it. Society has not beaten her yet, although it might sometime soon.

An example of actually overcoming these societal roadblocks is presented in the sometimes confusing *Counterpoints*, by Gerardine Meaney. An interesting story telling the tale of a young woman working with older patients, she develops a relationship with an old man everyone considers an invalid — he speaks in mumbled tongues, which every doctor suspects is gibberish caused by a stroke the man suffered 30 years ago. The young woman recognizes the speech patterns as a dialect her grandmother used to use with her when she was just a child. She hasn't heard the language in years, but her experiences with the man rekindle her memory: "Grandmother had coaxed and bribed and bullied what her daughter called 'that nonsense' into the child's head. The old woman regretted volubly that she had not known what she had to give her own children when she had remembered more" (Meaney 491). We see the line of descent coming from the grandmother to the granddaughter, passing over the daughter, who has no interest in this specific knowledge her mother wishes to preserve through her descendants. The recognizing of the speech and the young woman's interest in the old man speaking the same language is symbolic of her need to preserve the woman in here passed down through time. She is maintaining her feminine identity by pursuing this language study. The male doctors overseeing the patient are upset with the young woman. " 'Why didn't you tell me this the first day we came in here?' Had this stammering little know-all been making a fool of him? Making a fool of the poor old man too, pretending not to understand. Cruel" (492). The doctor takes his frustration and

annoyance at not being able to correctly diagnose the old man's alleged affliction out on the young woman who does know the old man's predicament. Instead of actually listening to what the young woman has to say, the doctor assumes he's been duped by everyone involved, his insecurities exposed because of the young woman. The young woman then does manipulate the doctor into thinking he had suggested her topic for study. She's placating his ego in order to get what she wants while making him think it was his idea, thereby easing his prior anger towards her. "When she said she wanted to research a paper on language loss, as he had suggested, the doctor took it, as she had intended, as a compliment. He had talked her out of that lost language nonsense, shown her the scientific basis. Couldn't remember suggesting a paper though" (492). In order to pursue her own feminine lineage, she has to placate an insecure man in her way, who has no concept of her motivation, just his own fear of being outdone by a female student. What ensues is the woman's study of the old man and his language, to the point they finally reach a communication nadir, and in a cathartic sense, it releases them both. The old man dies peacefully and happily, and the young woman is left with a connection to her grandmother she thought was lost forever. In contrast to the student-doctor relationship, this student-subject relationship was a more constructive and fruitful relationship for the man and woman involved. But the young female student triumphs in the end, as she choreographed her own path and identity through the pratfalls provided by the traditional structure in front of her. She fulfilled her own desires on her own terms. She found her identity and protected it from others.

Clairr O'Connor's *For the Time Being* also highlights a situation where a woman must overcome prejudices and attitudes to assert herself. It is a rambling piece about a woman, religion, visions of the future and marriage. The narration starts out with the bindings of familial religious practice: "To break the bind of catholic orthodoxy my parents embraced, I resolved on several things. The first being, to eat meat only on

Fridays. Big steaks preferably...Next, I resolved to go to mass when I felt like it, but never on a Sunday" (367). Catholicism is infamous for its lack of feminine influence. A male-controlled patriarchal organization still clinging to the Biblical notions of Sarah as the ideal wife. Her rebellion against her parents and their religion encompasses most of how a young Irish Catholic girl is restrained. However, she fights her parents using their methods, which is not what she wants: "But the day came when I realised that the deritualisation of my parents' rituals had, in themselves become rituals. Their observations pushed me in the opposite direction merely" (367). Instead of forging her own path, she forged an distinct path away from her parents. This was negative energy, and she had to correct it and find her path in a positive flow. In response to her friend's vision of freezing barely living bodies for future revival, she questions her own path: "While he'd been beating the future, I remained mired in doubt. I'd run the gamut from gorge to abstinence on the see-saw between past and future, the present somehow escaping. Then I saw my mistake. I had assumed the present was happening to other people elsewhere..." (368). She's been so concerned with everyone else in her life, she has forgotten her own life. She had to stop and smell the roses. She makes the discovery of the here and now, grasps the importance of seizing the day and finally regains her strength and identity after it had been muted for so long. At that moment, there is one last revealing roadblock for her to overcome: "Just then, the telephone rang. It was Richard. He was ringing to say it was our tenth anniversary. I said, how could that be if I'd fled the marital tomb seven years ago? I hung up and decided to get an answering machine as an early birthday present" (368). A marital tomb escape, left her pondering life without enjoying it. The escape from traditional ideas of marriage, as perceived by Irish men and clergy, was such a focus that when she finally escaped she forgot why. It took her seven years of wandering thought to figure it out, and now, she is

liberated at last. With persistence and introspection, she found her way through the mire to daylight.

The mire can often prevent a woman from attaining her true identity. The mire may be provided by an individual, society or the family, as seen in previous chapters. In Mary Morrissy's *Divided Attention*, the story is told by a woman to a man, her married lover. It starts with a phone call in the middle of the night, triggering her exploration of her need to be listened to and to listen. She is having an affair with a man she needs more from, and taking a cue from her phone assailant, she starts to call her lover's house in efforts to learn more about his life. Psychologically, she embraces her caller and tells her story to him, who listens silently. By the end of the phone therapy, she has released her anxiety and need for her married lover: "It started innocently, I swear. I had not intended ever to use your number. Having it alone was enough. I carried it around in my wallet, taking it out from time to time and contemplating it, wondering what it would be like for this particular conjunction of figures to be familiar — oh, let's not beat around the bush — to be mine. I wanted them to spell out home" (Morrissy 526). She clings to his phone number as a symbol of what she cannot have. She has no malicious intent, just the pain of intimate isolation. She doesn't report the harassing phone calls: "But my biggest fear was that the policeman logging the call down in the large ledger of misdemeanours would look up at me and know that I too have been a caller in my time" (527). She feels guilty of what she's done to her lover's family. She cannot complain about her own crank calls because she knows what can motivate someone to do the act: "Curiosity knows no boundaries. The first call had rewarded me with your daughters' names — you had always referred to them as The Children, an anonymous troop of foot-soldiers. But then, I suppose, my name was never uttered in your household" (527). The reader can sense the resentment as she talks to her lover in this tone, yet you can always sense the need to be more a part of him than she is. She is the other woman;

how does this role relate to the role of the man calling her? His identity is never revealed, but that is because he is not important. His role is what is important — he is an outlet for her new budding identity.

She makes references to getting out, going to parties, if only to relieve the anxiety of loneliness she feels in her lover's absences. Her affair with this man is dominating her life adversely. She debates whether or not to reveal the affair: "I didn't, of course, betray you. But knowing that I could changed things. I had to stop ringing for fear I would blurt it out — our secret. The snatched moments, the meetings in pubs, the subterfuge" (530). She has found some power in the situation previously bereft of such. She has power now, and she proves herself worthy of the power by not using it. She draws strength from the knowledge of her power, and that is enough for her to turn the tide in her own life. She actually visits the house where her lover lives, finds him with one of his daughters in the yard. "I was alone, shut out where I belonged, in the pit of the garden" (532). But the experience is the final one of desperation for her, as she realizes where she stands with finality. She lets it go: "Last week I threw your number away. The paper on which it was written was yellowed and grubby and ragged along the folds. The ink had almost faded away. I found it had lost its power. Does this mean I'm cured? Of you, perhaps" (533). She has conquered her demons, or has she? She has in turn developed a new passion, that of sharing her life with the silent caller. Her attention divided, and finally, away from the man holding her captive. From one captor to another, perhaps? "I've told all this to my caller. I've named him Larry in your honour. I've had to battle against his groaning and heaving but I've persisted. He keeps ringing so it must do something for him. It's therapy for me, you could say" (533). She has found strength in an alternate expression, away from the mire provided by her lover. She may not be any healthier for moving from one obsessive behavior to another, but she has pulled herself away from the one restraining her. She has found a passion she can express her feeling

through. She has found an alternate identity to escape the one foisted upon her by her married lover. She is no longer isolated from the world because of him — she has found a new world to explore.

Before a woman can even find herself in the above predicament, she has to understand what love and marriage are all about, in the sense of what it is she wants from either part of life and herself. Quite often misconceptions of reality set up the disappointment and fall. For women, these misconceptions are often purported from the start, as seen in previous chapters. In Clare Boylan's *Villa Marta*, it is very apparent how these misconceptions begin. This is a story of two young women and their pursuit of men, specifically some American sailors in town on some kind of military shore leave. The girls, seeking a better life in America, attempt to latch on to the men as some sort of promise of something they cannot attain on their own. Sally and Rose are trying to chase boys. They are not interested in being themselves — they are more interested in being what they think the boys want them to be: "They stretched out beside the pool and talked about food and records and sex appeal and sex. Already they had learned a thing or two. Sally had discovered, from a survey in Time magazine, that smoking added fifty per cent more sex appeal to a girl" (Boylan 152). Young and naive, they have no idea what they want or what men want. Their actions are being dictated by society and expectations, not by themselves. They are trying to live up to everyone else's ideals. As result, they question everything and theorize based on everyone else's experiences, not their own: "They wondered if you were hopelessly, truly in love, would you know because you would even think a man's thing was nice looking. This was a mystery and also a risk because if such a love did not exist and you spent your life waiting for it, you would be on the shelf, an old maid and hairy" (152). This passage reveals a tremendous amount about the girls and their lives. The perception of the penis as vile is a sign of ignorance to their own sexuality, for their positions have been formed by what other

women have told them. Logically presuming these other women were elders, the attempt of the older women to stunt and limit the sexuality of the younger female generation restrains the individuality and identity of Sally and Rose. The consequences of not being attractive to men is the old and hairy fate awaiting them. Perhaps this is a self-perceived notion based on relationships within Sally's and Rose's own lives, but either way, it purports the myth a woman needs a man to be happy, sexy and complete. Without a man, you are old and hairy, although even elderly married women could fit this "profile." Regardless, no young female wants to be on the shelf, and this perception of femininity is what fuels the actions of the two young girls: "Built into their contempt for old maids was the knowledge that marriage meant an end to office life and it was so pleasant to lie by the pool, barely disturbed..." (152). The girls see marriage as some sort of meal ticket to paradise, without realizing the dramatic and complex effects of interpersonal relationships and affections. These views may be formed by either observation or direct lesson; either way, neither paints a very good picture of reality in relation to the mature female entity and/or identity: "When they spoke of their married lives, Sally detailed a red sofa and Japanese paper lanterns. Rose was going to have a television in the bedroom" (153). Again, we see the idealization of marriage as a pathway to the acquisition of goods desired. The young women have no illusion of actually being able to achieve these goods on their own; they only see the man and the marriage.

As the story progresses, the two women find themselves with two young American sailors. "Both of them felt like sacrificial virgins although they were not, actually, virgins. In the terms of the understanding, they were going to lie down beside Will and Bob and let them do, within reason, what they wanted" (156). In this passage, a disturbing state of mind is revealed. The reference to sacrifice, a lack of maidenhood and the compliant acceptance of what to come dictates a bleak situation for these

women. What are they doing here? The reader may not know. The reader sees them trying to attain their perfect ideal marriage through the sexual temptation and luring. But what is the sacrifice? Is the sex the sacrifice for the goods they dream of? The sacrifice they make today could result in the dreams they harbor. Again, we see the distinct view of the world these women have: they need men to get what they want, and to get what they want, they may have to use sex as a tool. What is sex to these women? It is a tool, and as we see, they are not "virgins" so the tool has been used prior, unsuccessfully evidently. They have attempted to have sex prior to this occasion in order to gain their dreams. It has not worked. In fact, "...Sally's period was late following some home-based encounter" (156). Sally's attempt to use sex to gain what she wants could actually put her in a far more precarious situation. This is the risk the women feel they must take to attain the happiness they desire. Finally, by acquiescing (lying down beside the men) and letting the sailors do what they "want," the ultimate sacrifice is completed: the women are giving up their freedom of choice in order to gain what they perceive as safe harbor and a ticket to paradise. Benjamin Franklin once said those who are willing to sacrifice a little liberty for temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety. What do these women deserve? They are attempting to acquire what they want in the only way they know how — they are not hurting anyone in this case except themselves.

This predicament is captured in a brief passage: "She had no notion how to treat or be treated by a man as an equal. Sexual excitement grew out of fear or power" (157). As one of the sailors shows Rose pictures from home, she has an epiphany of sorts: "It was herself that she saw in the balding Polaroids — at the barbecue, at the bake sale — squinting into the faded glare of the sky. She was looking at her future" (157). She proceeds to physically pull sailor Bob closer to her to achieve her perception of the future. Her actions are consistent with previous behaviors. What she eventually finds out is her perceptions and dreams are a myth, by the way of Bob saying he had no pool in

his backyard as she'd imagined. Her dream shattered, Rose crumbles at the end of the story. This presents the myths of what girls think they want, and what they are told they want — if they do not discover the realities of life soon enough, everything they thought they were will eventually be destroyed.

These disintegrations of identity are very hard to recover from. The results of deception later can be harder, for both men and women. If Rose had not discovered what she did when she did, she could have ended up in the following piece instead. Mary Dorcey's *The Husband* explores the disintegration of a marriage, told from a man's perspective. The opening line sets the tone for the story: "They made love then once more because she was leaving him" (Dorcey 265). Right away, it is clear this is not another underempowered female at the center of the plot. The remainder of the opening paragraph describes the affection of beauty this man has for his departing wife, again reiterating the tone set from the start. The social constructs are being placed on the man in this relationship. As the story continues, the man's affection for the woman continues to show: "He knew that she was looking past him, over his shoulder towards the window, to the sunlight and noise of the street. He touched a strand of her hair where it lay along the pillow. She did not turn. A tremor passed through his limbs" (265-66). The tremor of terror, the realization of loss, all wrapped up in a moment of brief affection. Painful and very direct, the author sets the tone for the rest of the story: "Now that it was over at last he was glad, now that there was nothing more to be done. He had tried everything and failed. He had lived ten years in the space of one — altered himself by the hour to suit her and she had told him it made no difference — that it was useless whatever he did because it had nothing to do with him personally, with individual failing" (266). She had discovered a new self, a new world where the man no longer fit. She is sincere when she says it is nothing personal; whether he believes it or not is his own issue — she believes it, and she has the strength to act upon it. Many women would not be able to do

so: "The night when, finally, she had told him it was over, he had wept in her arms, pleaded with her, vulnerable as any woman, and she had remained indifferent, patronizing even; seeing only the male he could not cease to be" (266). The woman is leaving her husband for another woman. The powerless male is hereby put into a position the male gender may not be used to, as evidenced by the two quotes above. Two interesting thoughts on this story lie within the fact the author is a woman. There is a man in the traditional female role of pliant and spurned lover, willing to do anything.

The surprise of the story is the point-of-view perspective provided through the man, by the woman author. Is she speaking from experience? Is she changing the traditional gender roles to illustrate a point? Either way, the theme hits home. Second, by having the woman leave the man for another woman, the author hereby empowers the female gender doubly, saying without any subtlety a man is not capable of giving this woman the love she desires. Contrasted with Boylan's piece of the two young women, this is profound. Where as those young women idealize men as the transport to happiness, this more mature woman (a mother, too) defines woman as the transport to happiness. The man is helpless because he cannot be what he needs to be for what he wants. The whole story is told third-person, but from the man's perspective nonetheless. He ridicules her lesbian attitude: "...that straight women use men as instruments, that they make love to themselves through a man's eyes, stimulate themselves with his desire and flattery but that it is their own sensuality they get off on. He knew every version of their theories by now" (270). He doesn't understand their relationship, he doesn't want to understand it, and he refuses to acknowledge it when he surmises she'll be back very soon. The author capitalizes on typical anti-male stereotypes when it comes to perception of lesbianism — the examples are too numerous to discuss here, but it's clear the author is mocking the man as the story progresses. Capitalizing on these stereotypes, Dorcey is either mocking men or mocking women's perceptions of

men through her own words. Considering the stereotypes already reversed and expounded in this story, there really is not concrete way to assuage what the author is attempting to do with the story. What the story does do is force the reader into reassessing his or her own perceptions regarding separation, isolation and homosexuality. Depending on the reader's own gender and experiences, many different analyses can be pulled from this story.

One of the more interesting passages in the story stems from the man's analysis of the feminine lesbian mindset. "They told one another these fairy stories sitting round at their meetings. Everything that had ever gone wrong for any one of them, once discussed in their consciousness-raising groups, could be chalked up as a consequence of male domination" (277). This story and its themes preys upon the fears of men, and to add insult to injury so to speak, Dorcey throws in the stereotypical male construct of deconstructing everything femininely positive. Is it accurate? While that may be impossible to discern, what the reader is left with is a nasty attack upon male stereotypes, and it may be accurate. But what those attacks obscure is the woman and her actions; she was disillusioned by her marriage, not with the man. The changes she brings about are of her own choice, as she asserts an identity she has always sought after. She leaves the old identity behind, and the man cannot handle it. He rationalizes as he can, but she is the catalyst dictating the marital terms in this piece. She is the strong identity, forcing her choices upon others in her life, for better or for worse. While on one hand, she is strong for asserting her identity, but on the other, she is no better than the same social constructs that bound her to the marriage ideal in the first place. She doesn't have malice at heart, but she hurts others with her actions. Sometimes that is unavoidable, and in the grand scheme of the universe, she must choose between herself and others. She chooses herself and her own identity, as men have done for centuries. The transgendered story line is actually quite information, incisive and

extremely credible. The woman can achieve her identity without hurting others as seen previously, but it is difficult. Quite often, the constricting source feels they are actually acting in the woman's best interests, so the pain of separation can be more hurtful when the woman asserts herself. Quite often, the oppressors just didn't know what they were doing.

In Victoria White's *Mr Brennan's Heaven*, a woman comes to her own terms, her own identity without hurting anyone else and within the confines of a marriage hitherto restricting. She experiences her epiphany in a crowded social environment: "...a face came into my mind, the face of a woman so beautiful that only the richest man in the world could have her for his own. Suddenly I realised that no-one would ever ask me to be more than an approximation to that face, that I would never any thanks or appreciation for being anything else" (White 230-31). Wealth buys beauty and possesses it. Women are bought by men, allow themselves to be bought by men, using their beauty to get where they can, leaving the unfortunate women to fend for themselves. The speaker realizes that is all people think of her, and they take her beauty for granted, and they never see anything else she is except that pretty face. Overcome with anxiety at this realization, the woman goes into the restroom: "The silences and the white surfaces calmed me. I bent down and washed my face and then looked up at myself. I had never been more struck by my beauty...I started to smile and the face in the mirror smiled and nobody else could see it, only me. Nobody else could have it. This was what I wanted then, I thought, and I felt happy for the first time since my marriage" (231). Silence and white surfaces bring to mind a hospital or a sanitarium, but this woman is too in control of her faculties for that imagery. Possession of one's own identity and soul is what she attains in her moment of truth. Her face is hers, no one else's — she is unwon. The reference to marriage indicates a possession she does not care for, confirmed when her husband tries to force his way into the bathroom where she rests

and relaxes. He does not mean harm, he only is concerned by her silence. She will be happy in her marriage from this point on, since she finally understands herself, her role and her identity within her own marriage. That's all she needs to know to be happy, whether anyone else understands it or not. She knows her truth — her identity is her own, and she will wear it proudly now.

Along this line of self, an uplifting theme to close with is presented in Moy McCrory's *Katie-Ellen Takes on the World*. This is a piece about a woman giving birth to a baby daughter, sharp and poignant: "Hot with sudden anger, I said 'Leave me alone.' But I meant completely alone, not with this volcano waiting to explode inside me. Why couldn't they do something? They, and I, were useless. And as I realized this, saw how helpless were our gestures against this terrifying life that took me up to throw me downgasping, I heard the gas hissing and felt the strength of another movement which flooded into me and took me after it. I knew then that I would go on; despair was no match for it" (McCrory 3). This may be a metaphor for something else, the struggle for identity and life. What is the gas in the metaphor? It is the spirit to fight and live: "I reached out and touched her carefully, stroking and exploring this new person who bellowed with healthy lungs, breathing on her own in the strange atmosphere, ruddy and drunk on oxygen. I stroked her downy back, with its soft whorls of hair, and rubbed her ears with their little tufts" (4). Mother instincts taking hold, in the face of pain and suffering, albeit with a purpose in mind. These are the affectionate instincts of femininity. Her mother addresses her little girl for the first time, face to face: "My daughter wore proudly on her crown, the blood streaks she had been baptized in...Her mouth opened and her tiny fingers made gentle pawing movements. I whispered to her that she had taken on the world and as I held her fiercely to me, I felt her small strong life vibrate" (4). The future for this little girl is an open book. She can make of live what she wants to, and her destiny is unwritten. In a new Ireland, where women freely express their voices and

dreams through literature, this little girl has a world of opportunity in front of her, something her mother may not have had in her time. The little girl will grow, experience happiness and sorrow, but she will have the opportunity to choose her own identity in Ireland, thanks to the pains and efforts of those who came before her.

Conclusion

In Mary Kenny's *There's Something About a Convent Girl*, the narrator discusses her life in broad strokes, from childhood to the present: "...I think I started out as an unwanted child, though as I grew older I became rather the apple of Mama's eye; one of the reasons, I think, why I am against abortion is that in my own life, I know, emotionally, that you can be both an unwanted pregnancy, and subsequently, an adored child" (53). This perfectly captures the struggle of modern Irish women to assert themselves and their identities in a social environment which rarely encourages them to do so. They start out as secondary considerations, subservient to a social order that emphasizes a male hierarchy of power and authority, through religion, family and society. As they mature, they become the focus of that same society, as they are looked to fill the roles they are expected to — wife, mother, matron. They are adored for the wrong reasons, but they also take a certain pride in being women, whether they are acknowledged for the things they should be or not. They live life, make discoveries, experience failure, love fully, suffer tremendous pain both physical and emotional, impact others positively and negatively — all the while struggling to find themselves in a society which usually does not encourage them to be individuals with dreams, aspirations and purpose. In a sense, they are an abortion upon society; they are at once unimportant and important, rarely a priority. They have learned to make themselves a priority, not only in their own lives but in society's eyes as well. Women have overcome obstacles to become leaders in some facets of public life — a woman has been elected President, women authors have provided written record of their collective feminine experience in Ireland.

In examining the anthological contribution in presentation of women's writing in Ireland, the editorial voice adds to the new female voice. In *The Vintage Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction*, editor Dermot Bolger compiled a collection of men's and

women's writings, to produce an overall look at the modern Irish identity. The women's pieces included in Bolger's compilation are there because they represent the sense of modern Irish fiction he wanted to offer. This paper examined nine pieces from this collection, written by women writers. All of the included pieces examine relationships in women's lives, with family, friends and lovers. In providing these relationships, Bolger's editorial vision examines the complexity of women's lives and their place in society through the exploration of these relationships. Whether with a crank caller as in Mary Morrissy's *Divided Attention* or with a retarded aunt in Eilis Ni Dhuibhne's *Blood and Water*, the selections show how women can often define themselves in terms of their relationships. Perhaps this is a masculinist view of what qualifies as "modern women," but the pieces do provide a deeper look into the modern woman's life and the questions they face every day. They have been forced at times by the male hierarchical society to define themselves as such, but the pieces in this paper also challenge that notion, quite often with the women realizing they have been taught to define themselves in that way. When they break that binding circumstance, they can then be free to define themselves as they choose to, not as society has defined them by historical habit. Whether this was Bolger intent a reader cannot know, but it is the end result of the selections in his anthology.

Quite different from the other two anthologies included in this paper, *Ireland's Women: Writings Past and Present* is a combination of all formats of Irish literature. Like Bolger's work, there are writings from men authors included, but all the pieces in the anthology — edited by Katie Donovan, A. Norman Jeffares and Brendan Kennelly — focus on women. These pieces include non-fiction and journalism pieces as well as the fiction works featured in the other two anthologies. The non-fiction pieces as a sense of reality to the fictional pieces. In Rosita Sweetman's *On Our Backs*, real accounts of Irish feminine sexuality can be balanced against the fictional pieces dealing with the same

subjects, such as Evelyn Conlon's *I Deserve a Brandy and Port*. These non-fictional accounts not only weigh in with the selections in this specific anthology, but with the fictional pieces included in this paper from the other two anthologies as well. The social commentary, such as Mary Robinson's inaugural speech, provide the insight into the situations and societal standards being explored in the fiction pieces. The editors chose to give a full perspective on women in Irish history and the present. They include men's perspectives and non-fiction writings to offer a lesson, of sorts, to the reader; to view the past of Irish women and to contrast it with the present of Irish women.

The most profound editorial voice of the studied anthologies comes from Louise DeSalvo, Kathleen Walsh D'Arcy and Katherine Hogan. In their collection, *Short Fiction by Irish Women Writers*, there is a different tone and effect of the included works. Eight of the selections in this paper came from this anthology, and each piece carries a strong message, delivered in various ways but never suffering in impact. For example, Helen Lucy Burke's *All Fall Down* focuses on the family relations helping to form female identity. Burke's piece is especially powerful, examining the role of a drunk father in the life of a young girl who does not want him in her family. When she kills him at the end of the short story, the shock of the action is numbing; was anything he did in the story deserving of such a fate? Probably not, but the girl's perception of her father contributes to her frame of mind, showing a reader the difference between observation and participation in a undesired environment. Her voice offers the vision of experience, telling a reader what it could feel like to be a young Irish girl with a drunk father. The father doesn't directly abuse her, but his neglect of his daughter is just as painful. Maeve Kelly's *Amnesty* again provides the viewpoint of a young woman, forced by tragedy and misfortune to carry on her family's legacy in work and sustenance. She fights to keep the family land, works hard to provide for her diminished brother and overcomes bias and misperception from the local villagers. She finds peace with herself, at the potential cost

of social understanding and acceptance. Her priorities are noble, her victories are satisfying, both to herself and to a reader. Finally, Fiona Barr's *The Wall-Reader* looks at a married mother who is bored with her life. Her simple dalliances with a soldier in the park lead to potential danger for her family. From her perspective, it was an innocent attempt to spark her life with a new injection of excitement. From the social perspective, her solicitation of interaction outside her marriage and with a soldier was unacceptable. She fears for her family and the safety of her child, all because she felt trapped in her life. The impact of innocent longings is presented to be dangerous societal action, verifying the lack of control for women over their own destinies in Irish society. These three stories are symbolic of the power in the anthology, which represents an editorial directive. The editors wanted short pieces defining the true varied experiences of women as told by women. The voices hitherto barely heard come calling with strong conviction and authority.

Through these voices, so long muted and ignored, a new identity is forged in Irish life. Women are learning about each other, about themselves, and they are doing it out in the public eye, through these voices. Some of the voices maintain traditional viewpoints, some do not. The point is not so much what is being expressed at times, but that the ideas themselves are being expressed. A young girl can read Clare Boylan's *Villa Marta* and understand what their marital aspirations should and should not be. A young woman can read Sweetman's *On Our Backs* and discover real truths about sex and relationships. A middle-aged woman can read Mary Beckett's *Heaven* and learn about the possibilities of her life after the house is empty. Literature provides an opportunity for the exposure of ideas. This didactic literature, it is therapeutic literature, it is the record of human experience, there for all to read and learn from. That is the value of the literature, as it is there for the next generation of young girls to absorb and assimilate so they can apply the ideas to their lives, eventually record their own stories

and pass them on. In this sense, each generation should capitalize on the sacrifice and experience of the previous generation, in order to promote the general welfare and self-esteem of the Irish woman and her existence.

Irish identity is forged in such ways, cast in the words of the wise and of those who yearn to know themselves.

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