

## OF RUIN AND ARCHAISM: KATE O'BRIEN AND THE POLEMICS OF PLACE IN 1930S IRELAND

Charles Travis  
Department of Geography & Anthropology  
Rowan University  
201 Mullica Hill Road  
Glassboro, New Jersey 08028  
[travis@rowan.edu](mailto:travis@rowan.edu)

**ABSTRACT:** *Kate O'Brien's 1938 novel Pray for the Wanderer illustrates the polemics of place operating in bourgeois Ireland in 1937, the year of the Irish Constitutional referendum. O'Brien's subtle and audacious literary technique charts the social and political landscapes of a strongly Catholic Saorstát Eireann (Irish Free State) which emerged during the 1930s. Accordingly Pray for the Wanderer employs a metonymic equivalent of O'Brien's native Limerick, located in the West of Ireland, to represent a dimension of the Irish postcolonial experience. The theoretical lenses trained upon Pray for the Wanderer which bring the literary geographies of O'Brien's writing into focus consist primarily of methods which excavate the prose landscape of her text by employing an application of Mikhail Bakhtin's Historical Poetics.*

**Keywords:** *1930s Ireland, Literary geography, Kate O'Brien, M. M. Bakhtin, History*

### INTRODUCTION

The 1938 Anglo-Irish novel *Pray for the Wanderer* by Kate O'Brien (1897-1974) aptly illustrates the complex polemics of place operating in provincial Catholic Ireland during the 1930s. Her audacious literary perspective dissected the increasingly binding relations between class, religion, gender and sexuality in the two decades following the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921), the partition of Northern Ireland (1920) and the foundation of Saorstát Eireann (Irish Free State) in 1922. O'Brien's creation of Mellick, the metonymic equivalent of her native Limerick in the West of Ireland, provided a literary site from which she could critique the social and political milieu of the Catholic petite bourgeoisie which supported the country's adoption of the 1937 Bunreacht Na hÉireann, a constitution that imposed a quasi-religious and patriarchal structure of political architecture upon the fledgling post-colonial nation.

Drafted by Eamon DeValera's (1882-1975) Fianna Fáil government, the 1937 Constitution altered the dominion status of the Free State as a member of the British Commonwealth and laid a foundation for the declaration of an Irish Republic in 1949. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 which instituted the Free State included an oath of fealty to

the British monarch, provoked a bitter, and internecine civil war from 1922 to 1923 despite the treaty's popular ratification. Free State forces triumphed over Republican dissenters and DeValera, who had cast his political lot with the latter, was imprisoned. After his release he left the Sinn Féin party to form Fianna Fáil from the rural and urban structures of the old Irish Republican Army (IRA). By 1932 De Valera and Fianna Fáil had assumed power, with Fine Gael (formed from the remains of Cummann na nGaedheal, the party which had supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty and subsequently governed the Free State after 1922) in opposition. Soon after taking office DeValera's government engaged in the Economic War with Britain (1933-1938) over land annuities unpaid during the war of independence. Despite this turn of events, projects such as the Shannon Hydro-Electric Scheme of 1929 fostered rural electrification and the inauguration of Aer Lingus as the national airline in 1936 provided evidence that tendrils of modernity were pushing through the insular and war torn milieu of the Irish Free State. However, Fianna Fáil's social legislation of the 1930s was increasingly vetted by a Catholic hierarchy and clergy, and the 1937 Constitution bore their imprimatur. In tandem with cultural nationalism the State and Church had "anathematized everything from jazz to modern fiction," (Foster, 1989, p.535) in an attempt to assert the Catholic identity of the Ireland, in contrast to the Protestant

heritage of its former coloniser. Subsequently, writers such as O'Brien faced the "symbolic institution of the much reviled Censorship Board in 1929," (Foster, 1989) and consequently played the role of dissidents in the public sphere of post-colonial Ireland.

O'Brien was born on December 3, 1897 and during her adolescence and early adulthood she experienced the Irish War of Revolution, was a supporter of the embryonic Free State, but soon became one of its most incisive critics, as De Valera's myopic vision of Irish social life unfurled itself during the 1930s. She was the seventh child of Thomas and Catherine "Katty" nee Thornhill who owned an equestrian business, and members of the affluent mercantile class which comprised the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie in Limerick at the turn of the century. After the death of her mother in 1903, O'Brien was sent to board at Laurel Hill Convent. Her upbringing in a school overseen by French nuns from the Faithful Companions of Jesus insulated her against "the usual conditioning of a patriarchal society" (Logan, 1994, p.115). In 1916 her father died, and in the shadow of the Easter Rising, O'Brien won a scholarship, which allowed her to travel to the war torn colonial capital of Ireland to attend University College Dublin. She received a B.A. degree with second honours in French and English, and in 1919 she moved to England where she found employment as a journalist with *The Manchester Guardian*.

By 1921, O'Brien was in Washington D.C. working for Eamon de Valera's Bond Drive, to raise funds to support an independent Irish state. She then returned to London in 1923 and married Gustaaf Renier, a Dutch journalist, who remarked after the break-up of the marriage that O'Brien was "not made for matrimony and cannot live with me under false pretences" (Reynolds, 1987, p.38). This observation of Renier's leads us to an aspect of O'Brien's life, which has been at times curiously avoided by academics. That of her lesbianism: "Kate O'Brien, her family, her biographers, critics, and friends all colluded to keep her in the closet. Not so much covering up her bonds with women, as by denying that those partnerships were of any relevance to her work" (Donoghue, 1993, p.37).

O'Brien emerged with a serious reputation as writer after the debut of her first play *Distinguished Villa*, in 1926. During the 1930s, O'Brien turned her pen from drama to prose, and published a series of novels rooted in a fictional provincial Irish city named Mellick. Framed by a cityscape of church steeples and castles, O'Brien's novels *Without My Cloak* (1931) and *The Ante-Room* (1934) and *Mary Lavelle* (1936) were informed by

her intimate knowledge of Limerick's culture, history and geography. Though dismissed by critics as a polemical tract, O'Brien was motivated to write *Pray for the Wanderer* in response to the banning of her 1936 *Mary Lavelle* novel under the Censorship Act of 1929 for its vivid portrait of lesbianism and adultery, themes prohibited by the tight moral web spun by Church and State in the decades following Irish independence. The theoretical lenses which bring the critical literary geographies of O'Brien's novel into focus, consist primarily of methods which excavate the prose landscape of her text by engaging Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895-1975) 'Historical Poetics' of time and place.

## O'BRIEN'S LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Geographers interested in literature have noted "as a literary form the novel is inherently geographical," (Daniels and Rycroft, 1993, p.460) and arguably, the best scale suited to study imaginative representations of period and place. Daniels and Rycroft (1993) observe:

The world of the novel is made up of locations and settings, arenas and boundaries, perspectives and horizons. Various places and spaces are occupied by the novel's characters, by the narrator and by audiences as they read. Any one novel may present a field of different, sometimes competing, forms of geographical knowledge, from a sensuous awareness of place to an educated idea of region and nation.

In addition geographers such as Brousseau (1995, p.90) have argued that 'a novel generates its own geography,' and acknowledge the 'agency' of the text in regards to the cultural production and social critique of place. As such, *Pray for the Wanderer* will be informed by a perspective that considers O'Brien's text as a prose landscape framed by a distinct perception of provincialism and politics in the early Irish post-colonial experience. When examined under the chronotopic lens provided by Bakhtin's 'Historical Poetics' this landscape can be hermeneutically excavated to identify the literary geographies generated by O'Brien's writing. Before discussing this specific application of Bakhtian theory, it is necessary to situate the basis upon which the prose landscapes of *Pray for the Wanderer* is conceived, in order to more firmly anchor the broader

exegesis of O'Brien's critical literary geographies to follow.

### **Prose Landscape**

In geography's most recent cultural turn, landscapes became conceptualised as "texts" (Barnes and Duncan, 1992, p.6). Conversely, texts and by extension -novels, can be perceived as discursive forms of landscape themselves, which generate geographies related to identity and sense of place. This reading of "landscape as text" draws upon phenomenological and hermeneutic modes of interpretation, which have their applications in both the humanities and the social sciences. These applications contribute to locating "landscape interpretation at the center of an interdisciplinary arena where issues like objectification, representation, consciousness, and ideology," have opened "a dialogue between cultural geographers and literary theorists, cultural anthropologists, and others who, in expanding the concept of text become interested in landscapes" (Peet, 1998). Consequently, from a Foucauldian perspective, novels constitute "landscapes in the aesthetic sense" (Stevens, 2000, p.5) and can be recognized as:

Compositions arrived at through human design, and in the historical sense, sites made up of several strata of events. The text becomes a kind of archaeological site that reveals in its excavation the accretion of histories, not a single narrative tradition but the overlapping and infiltration of different lives (Stevens, 2000).

Illustrating an evolving perspective on landscapes and texts, this conceptualisation provides a fixed point of entry, and a frame of reference for ideological, humanistic, historical and cultural engagements concerning the relationship between literature and place on a variety of scales: "The excavation of the text reveals the level(s) of inheritance within a fiction, a descension which frequently spans imaginative and actual past realities, or which unearths conflicts between different concepts of time and space" (Stevens, 2000). Through the aegis of her novel and the geographies and landscapes generated within it, O'Brien scripted a critical performance space to discuss and dissect the relations between class, religion, sexuality and gender, subjects increasingly marginalised in 1930s Ireland by the dominant political discourses which constituted the Censorship Act of 1929 and the 1937 Constitution.

### **Historical Poetics**

Bakhtin's literary theory is salient to analysing O'Brien's work on several levels. Firstly there is a historical contextuality and parallelism to their lives. As figures born during the European fin de siècle both O'Brien and Bakhtin experienced periods of revolution, civil war, social upheaval and the consolidation of hierarchical and oppressive power structures during the early twentieth century. In Bakhtin's case this took the form of the October 1917 Revolution, a subsequent civil war (1918-1921) and the emergence of Stalinism in the 1930s. Secondly, the performance space scripted by O'Brien and anchored by the 'literary archaeological site' of her novel generates a multiplicity of geographical perspectives, which can be examined under the broad theoretical platform of Bakhtin's thought: "His writing touches on linguistics, psychology, theology, sociology, and poetics; he has been variously treated as a formalist, a structuralist, a poststructuralist, a Buberian theologian, a democratic humanist, and a Marxist of any stripe from relative orthodoxy to essential heresy" (Kershner, 1989, p.15). However in analysing the prose landscape of *Pray for the Wanderer* the theoretical foci of this exegesis will specifically employ Bakhtin's 'chronotopic lens' to sharply focus O'Brien's representations of time and space in her novel. Bakhtin (1981, p.84) describes the theoretical function of his concept accordingly:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, 'time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature . . . In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history.

Bakhtin developed his concept of chronotope after studying the evolution of western literature from its classical origin in Greek epics dated from the second to sixth centuries AD, through the folkloric tales of Medieval Europe, to the appearance of the modern novel encapsulated by the works of Rabelais, Flaubert, Stendhal, Balzac and Dostoevsky between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this evolution, he identified several classical chronotopes including the idyll, the road, the public square, and noted with the emergence of the modern novel that chronotopes began to function "as the primary point

from which 'scenes' unfold[ed] within narrative space," (Bakhtin, 1981, p.250) and observed:

All the novel's abstract elements - philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect - gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. Such is the representational significance of the chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981).

### **Petty-Bourgeois Provincial Town**

In the novel *Pray for the Wanderer* one can excavate a polemical Irish version of the "petty-bourgeois [sic] provincial town with its stagnant life" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.84). This intersection of time and place, which Bakhtin (1981, p.248) identified in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) is "simple, crude, material, fused with houses and rooms of the town, with sleepy streets, the dust and flies, the club, the billiards and so on." O'Brien's main character is Matt Costello, an ex IRA volunteer, successful writer and dramatist, who at the age of thirty-seven, returns from England to the provincial town of Mellick in the West of Ireland. Costello who participated in the Irish War of Independence and during the 1920s achieved international reputation as a playwright, is seeking refuge and emotional exile in his home town, even though his works have been banned under the Free State's Censorship Act of 1929. Costello is fleeing a failed love affair with a stage actress in London, an imperial city shadowed by the gathering storm clouds of the Second World War.

In the provincial milieu of Mellick "under the drug of memory and tradition," (O'Brien, 1938, p.159) Costello hopes to re-assemble his life, and possibly make a new beginning. As he facetiously tells his old friend, a solicitor named Tom Mahoney, he wants to "find out what Dev is really doing for Cathleen Ni Houlihan's four green fields" (O'Brien, 1938, p.69). As Costello and Tom saunter down one of Mellick's thoroughfares on a May evening, O'Brien's depiction of the veneer of modernity slowly creeping into the Irish provincial town of 1937 evokes the fundamental chronotopic space of the road:

The wide Georgian street looked noble, beautifully lighted by cold arc lamps.  
"Shannon Scheme?"  
"Yes. Good, isn't it?"  
"Fine. A creditable-looking town. Up, Dev!"  
(O'Brien, 1938, p.93)

In Bakhtin's (1981, p.244) theory "the chronotope of the road is both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement, time as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it." For Costello, the provincial space of Mellick induces a welcoming temporal vertigo: "London was no longer three hundred but three thousand miles away, and the lighting change in perspective was an irrational, intolerable relief" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.188). The chronotopic gateway of the road in O'Brien's novel frames the personal and political dilemmas which Costello will confront during his homecoming. Accordingly, the larger chronotope of the petty-bourgeois town, in *Pray for the Wanderer* gives birth to smaller types such as the aforementioned road and also that of the salon & parlour, a spatial-temporal *leitmotif* which represents when and where "webs of intrigue are spun, denouements occur and finally [. . .] where dialogues happen" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.246). These chronotopic spaces in O'Brien's novel are anchored by her native experience of Limerick. Consequently her depiction of the Mellick illustrates that "chronotopes in literary texts are not cut off from the cultural environments in which they rise," (Holquist, 1990, p.111) and proliferate additional spaces reflective of a writer's historical and geographical milieu. The street where Boru House, the home into which O'Brien was born had expanded considerably during the nineteenth century due to the influx of rural migrants, and in the historic sense, proliferated chronotopic spaces reflecting an emerging provincial urban modernity:

The creation of Mulgrave Street provided the space for important new institutions such as the Artillery Barracks (1807), the County Infirmary (1811), the County Gaol (1821), the District Lunatic Asylum and the Mount Saint Lawrence Cemetery (1849) (Logan, 1994, p.115).

The modern institutionalisation of space in O'Brien's early life milieu seems to have imbued her with and awareness of the centrality of place as a means to anchor essential themes in her writing. As such the theoretical scope of this paper regards *Pray for the Wanderer* as a site of dissidence in which the distinct chronotopic spaces of 1930s provincial Ireland allow an excavation of the polemics of place operating during this period. By applying the theoretical lens provided by Bakhtin's concept of chronotope it is possible to illustrate that O'Brien's writing through the use of "metaphors and comparisons" generated a discursive landscape rendered in prose "whose outcome [was] the building of roads, towns and cultures," (Folch-Serra, 1990, p.255-256) which

served as spatial symbols to illuminate and critique social and political discourses crystallizing during the 1937 Irish constitutional referendum. By translating the chronotopic spaces of the petty-bourgeois provincial town and corresponding spaces of the manor house and the salon & parlor into an Irish context, O'Brien chronicled the social constructions of class, place and Catholicism, which shaped the polity of the Irish Free State during the two decades following independence in 1922.

### ***PRAY FOR THE WANDERER (1938)***

O'Brien's (1938, p.113) rendering of Mellick charts the confessional web of prohibitions and "atmosphere of active Catholicism, decorum, taboo and self-discipline" which shaped social spaces in provincial Ireland during the 1930s. In her novel, O'Brien (1938, p.42) coins an Irish translation for Bakhtin's chronotope of the petty bourgeois provincial town – "a pretty scene -tranquil and traditional, modestly civilized [. . .] for all the thoughtful world, a thing of ruins and archaisms." O'Brien's *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938, p.183) also generates the geography of her native West Clare in which this chronotopic space is rooted: "Mellick lay at the heart of it, in the green, watered valley," by drawing upon a landscape she established as the 'Vale of Honey' in her previous novels on the region.

#### **The Chronotopic Space of Weir House**

O'Brien's portrait of provincial Ireland opens in Weir House, a manor house built by Costello's father on the banks of a stream on the outskirts of Mellick. Costello's Brother Will, "a citizen of the Irish Free State," (O'Brien, 1938, p.4) resides in this bucolic milieu with his wife Una, and their five young children. Costello finds himself one May evening, sitting in one of its rooms gazing at the bourgeois décor of the house which includes a "wood fire, the Victorian sofa, pink flowers on the wall, the old brass cake stand [and] silver trophies too, behind the glass doors of the Chippendale cupboard" (O'Brien, 1938, p.2-11). Costello's father had been a "breeder of blood stock," (O'Brien, 1938, p.11) champion thoroughbreds, but his brother Will has replaced the equestrian business with "Dairy Shorthorns" (O'Brien, 1938). Despite being a supporter of William T. Cosgrave, leader of the opposition party Fine Gael in 1937, Will is bullish about his economic and political prospects: "We dairy farmers are a power in the land now," (O'Brien,

1938, p.46) he tells Costello. O'Brien (1938, p.5) writes that Will's wife Una "A wild and blowy rose . . . was still an innocently seductive woman, plump and rather charmingly untidy, with mousy hair and a fragrance of contentment." She "was completely subservient to Will without remembering that so she had vowed to be at the altar," (O'Brien, 1938, p.95). But as a wife and mother, she is no sacrificial victim, as her needs are met within the demands of her role: "Will and the children used her up, and in doing so vitalized her" (O'Brien, 1938).

The chronotopic space of Weir House allows O'Brien to position herself as a doubly marginalised figure in the social and political landscape of the Free State. That of a woman and a lesbian. During her adolescence and young adulthood, O'Brien was a staunch supporter of the project of Irish liberation. In 1921 she travelled to Washington D.C. to work on De Valera's Bond Drive, to raise funds to support an independent Irish state, but by the mid 1930s she became alarmed by the type of confessional shape that the infant Irish state was taking under De Valera's leadership. Article 41.1 of the 1937 Constitution drafted under a Fianna Fáil government would soon come to dictate: "the family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society, as a moral institution [is] superior to all positive law" (Bunreacht Na hÉireann, 1937, p.158). In *Pray for the Wanderer*, Weir House and its occupants symbolise for O'Brien, the social construction embedded within this legislation. A second clause, Article 41.2, designates the role Irish women should play to sustain this moral institution, a social function that Una as wife and mother, happily fulfils: "by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved" (Bunreacht Na hÉireann, 1937, p.160).

Gazing through the three long windows of Weir House's drawing room Costello reflects on the pastoral setting outside, and O'Brien fleshes out the polemical significance of Weir House, as a spatial metaphor for the provincial Catholic Ireland of the period. Costello's chosen place of exile is within the naïve bosom of the provincial Irish bourgeois, and its elegant milieu, where "Roses swooned in beauty on the table; the brood mares and the silver trophies kept their ancient places; beyond the window lay childhood's unchanged garden," filled with "columbine, lilies and Canterbury bells . . . sunflowers and late lingering, azaleas. A brilliant parade" (O'Brien, 1938, p.217, p.308). And Costello realizes "even in his first days of pain that it was good for him to be at Weir House [. . .] to play noughts and crosses with Sean, to argue the "economic war" with Will, to flirt with Una"

(O'Brien, 1938, p.238). But Costello's thoughts cannot help but stray beyond the horizons of Weir House, and he broods upon the darker events of the decade, as the long shadows of Hitler and Mussolini's fascist regimes stalk the political landscapes of Europe:

Chains clanking; bombers roaring through the once free sky [. . .] nationalisms foaming at the mouth; grown men taking instructions from this little creature or that as how they shall think [. . .] The same doom awaiting every country in every country's re-armament intentions (O'Brien, 1938, p.42-43).

Anticipating the 1937 general election, in which De Valera's Fianna Fáil party will attempt to secure a consecutive third term in government, as well as ratify a new constitution for the country, Costello ruminates about the shape that the Ireland he fought to liberate is taking, under the tightening web of social and civic legislation:

A dictator's country, too. But a more subtle dictator than most –thought he also, given time, he might have the minds of his people in chains [. . .] Well, the Free State would vote on its Constitution, and [. . .] Ireland, newly patrolled by the Church, would be unlikely to vote solid against the Holy Trinity. Certainly this household wouldn't, whatever it might think of Dev (O'Brien, 1938, p.44).

Indeed, the revolutionary Ireland of 1916-1921 fomented by socialists and poets like Costello, has by the late 1930s evolved into a fortress Ireland ruled by clerics and capitalists.

### **The Chronotopic Spaces of Mellick**

O'Brien's spatial representation of Mellick and the sensibilities of its Catholic bourgeois are constructed largely through dialogues taking place within the chronotopic space of the salon & parlor. Commenting on Bakhtin's ideas on language, the novel and their use to study region, place and landscape, Holloway and Kneale (2000, p.82) note:

Space is constructed by the constant dialogical interaction of a multiplicity of voices; at any point in space and time it is possible to see a chronotope which is more or less fixed depending upon the strength of competing centripetal (monological) and centrifugal (dialogical) forces.

The monological force which O'Brien's novel contests through its dialogical encounters and chronotopic spaces is the ideology of Irish Catholic nationalism as it was cultivated by De Valera through his government's increasingly close relationship with the hierarchy of the Church in the 1930s. This translated Catholic teaching into constitutional legislation, and arguably plotted the direction in regards to social and economic policy that the Irish nation would take over the course of the twentieth century. However, paradoxically, O'Brien's novel also provides evidence, that instead of existing as monolithic entity, the Church itself possessed internal contradictions and contestations. Her writing challenges as well 'official' Free State representations of the 'authentic' Irish identity as being rooted in a pre-lapsarian 'Gaelic Eden' located in places in the West of Ireland such as O'Brien's native West Clare. The dialogical encounters in O'Brien's novel illustrate another nuance in the "Bakhtian conceptual landscape," (Folch-Serra, 1990, p.258) which interprets "ongoing historical developments that alternatively 'anchor' and destabilize the 'natural harmony' of a given region through constant interaction between meanings" (Folch-Serra, 1990). The dialogical encounters in chronotopic space of the salon & parlor include Costello's conversations with a Franciscan Priest, and his friend the solicitor Tom Mahoney, who resides in a "big, Georgian house in King Street" (O'Brien, 1938, p.58). O'Brien's (1938, p.59) description of the interior of the Georgian edifice illustrates the demarcations of space which provided structure for the bourgeois class and gender roles of provincial Ireland during the period:

The dining room in which they sat was on the first floor, behind the drawing room. Tom's offices occupied the ground floor, and obviously the kitchen and the servants' quarters must be in the basement. There was no service lift, yet dinner proceeded with out a hitch in a prosperous Victorian setting [. . .] Was it still possible to ask your fellow creatures to race up and down four flights of stairs with your roast lamb and green peas?

Keeping with this "archaic" Victorian custom, the genders separate after dinner. The women to the big drawing room; the men the study: "It was a tall, pleasant room with one long window. Although overfilled with books, both legal and general, it was orderly and comfortable. There were green leather armchairs on either side of a Georgian mantelpiece" (O'Brien, 1938, p.61). Costello and Tom, who had been acquainted in childhood and at university in

Dublin, settle in for a conversation that is filled with witty repartee, sardonic observation and contemplative frankness, which constitutes the character of discourse in the bourgeois salon. Within the chronotopic space of salons & parlors “political, business, social, literary reputations [are] made and destroyed, careers [. . .] begun and wrecked” (Bakhtin, 1981, p.247). As the *tête-à-tête* between Costello and Tom continues, a more earthy dimension of Irish provincial life and additional chronotopic space generated by O’Brien’s (1938, p.71-72) novel, hidden under the veneer of De Valera’s Catholic ideal emerges into view:

“There is a brothel in the town, in the town,” sang Tom.

“In Mellick?”

“Two, I believe. But the outsides are a fine, symbolic warning. Anyway, a poor chap I know was seen going into one of them of a certain Wednesday night, and on Friday when he got his wages he got the sack.”

These hidden aspects of the double-lives depicted in Mellick are alluded to largely through dialogue. Tom, a lapsed Catholic, describes to Costello the powerful influence that the local clergy and hierarchy have come to possess over the social and political milieus in provincial Ireland:

“Religiosity is becoming a job in this country, you might say. A plank. A threat and a menace. A power in the land, in fact, my boy! In the Island of Saints and Scholars! Yah –it’s disgusting! [. . .] with Father O’Hegarty warning you kindly about this, and [. . .] Father O’Hanigan running off to talk to the bishop about you! Town Council Stuff! Pure jobbery” (O’Brien, 1938, p.72-73)

After his rant about the insidious confessional influence in Mellick, Tom places the responsibility of on the puritanical strain of Catholic theology promoted within Irish seminaries, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and diffused from pulpits within the Free State: “that Jansenism that Maynooth has threatened at us for so long. Now it’s ripe at last –we’re sick, like the rest of the world” (O’Brien, 1938, p.80). Despite his feelings about the dangerous influence of this heretical and puritanical theology on the nature of Irish Catholicism, one of Tom’s confidants is Father Malachi, a Franciscan priest.

In contrast to the “jobbery” and “Jansenism” which characterizes much of the growing Catholic hegemony of the Free State, Tom tells Matt: “The

Franciscan is the poor mans friend [. . .] This fellow has been at the head and tail of every strike that has afflicted Mellick in ten years. His sermons are a perpetual embarrassment to his superiors and he’s come mighty near being unfrocked” (O’Brien, 1938, p.200). Though Costello admires the priest for his social activism, he takes umbrage when Father Malachi praises his books as “eloquent and powerful,” but states that they are “‘news’ to us here in Ireland, even if news of an unfortunate or unwelcome character” (O’Brien, 1938, p.195). The writer, the solicitor and the priest engage in a long discussion where Costello’s books are described as “myth-creating, anti-social and unnecessary” and artists are described as “dangerous fellows,” who are “the instigators and inspirers of egotism, the handers-on of all the romantic and individualist non-sense that has made a shambles of the world” (O’Brien, 1938, p.196, p.201-202). Father Malachi then asks “You resent our censorship of you, I suppose?” (O’Brien, 1938, p.205). O’Brien’s (1938, p.205-206) response to the banning of her 1936 novel *Mary Lavelle*, under the Censorship Act of 1929 forms the subtext of Costello’s reply:

“I reject censorship, lock, stock and barrel.”

“Why?”

“Because it is a confession of failure. It is a denial of human judgement and understanding, and a gross intrusion on liberty.

[. . .] Sheer impertinence- and an example of that fatal tendency in all modern government to level down, not up. In any case, too many negative regulations are a symptom of weakness in any authority.

These dialogical encounters within O’Brien’s (1981, p.247) novel, illustrate the function of the chronotopic space of the salon & parlor as a literary prism through which:

The graphically visible markers of historical time as well as of biographical and everyday time are concentrated and condensed; at the same time they are intertwined with each other in the tightest possible fashion, fused into unitary markers of the epoch.

Legislation enacted under the Censorship Act of 1929 affected all types of literature during the period in which O’Brien was setting her novels the fictional Mellick: “between the years 1930 and 1939 some 1,200 books and some 140 periodicals fell foul of the Censor’s displeasure” (Brown, 1985, p.149). ‘Negative regulations’ had also been extended to

other spaces in Ireland's public sphere after the enactment of censorship legislation: "By 1930, all of the nudes had been removed from the Municipal Gallery, Dublin's principal gallery of modern art" (Carlson, 1990, p.10). Accordingly, the symbolism of place contained in O'Brien's (1938, p.113) chronotopic representations of Mellick and Weir House, stand in contrast to the spatial metaphors representing Costello's "abandoned, senseless, exhibitionist life of London, Berlin and Paris" which embody the antithesis of De Valera's theories on Catholic social engineering. Costello's novels and dramas, written in spaces such "cellars and lodging houses and borrowed studios," (O'Brien, 1938, p.114) and their libertine narratives have been banned by the Irish 'Free' State. O'Brien (1938) writes: "the details, memories and remorse of these lives would not stand examination by the philosophic light of Mellick or Weir House." At the end of *Pray for the Wanderer* Costello decides upon exile and leaves the insularity of his native country for the cosmopolitanism of New York City. Before doing so, he turns his thoughts to the immediate surroundings of Weir House:

The harmony within this house, for instance - is that representative and does it promise anything? This uncrowded landscape, flowing peace. This easy sense of God and of right and wrong, with fastidiousness and curious courage that such possessions give. God save Ireland. There might conceivably be some general hope in such salvage (O'Brien, 1938, p.307).

Within this chronotopic space, it can be surmised that O'Brien has created an ironic spatial metaphor to symbolize the social and political discourses which operated in the Irish Free State in collusion with the Catholic Church and under the government of Eamon DeValera.

## CONCLUSION

Chronotopes in *Pray for the Wanderer* can be identified as spaces where "the knots" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.250) of O'Brien's dissident narrative, in its aim to dissect and critique the polity of Saorstát Eireann in the run up to the 1937 constitutional referendum become "tied and untied" (Bakhtin, 1981). Bakhtin (1981, p.425-426) noted that the chronotope acted as "an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from

which they spring." The prose landscape constituted by O'Brien's text when viewed through such an analytical lens can be perceived as generating a critical geography dissection the broader polity of the Free State and the role of Eamon DeValera's Fianna Fáil government in binding politics, religion and gender roles together within a legislative framework to essentialize Irish identity, social policy and structures of governance. The design of DeValera's 1937 constitutional draft was aimed at establishing boundaries which would delineate essentialized political and personal geographies to fulfil his own idiosyncratic vision for the Irish nation:

His new Constitution was designed to [. . .] secure the allegiance to the new state of many whose support, up until that moment had been conditional. The problem of legitimating the uncertain state structures overrode the concerns of women, and also those of Protestants, intellectuals, artists, northern nationalists and republicans, all of whose rights were either curtailed or excluded. If the partition of 1921 had ensured a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people in Belfast, its logical corollary was a Catholic Dáil for a Catholic people [. . .] The very existence of a twenty-six county state suited the conservative elements of the Catholic Church very well, since it permitted the passing of clericalist legislation without a significant debate such as might have been expected in a pluralist republic (Kiberd, 1996, p.404)

Regarding the politics of gender and sexuality, the Irish historian Margaret MacCurtain has noted: "Irish women retreated into a secondary role with the setting up of the northern State in 1920 and the Free State in the south in 1922. Around Irish women, as in a cage, were set the structures of family and women were assigned home-based, full role as housewives, whose talents and energies were devoted to looking after husband and children" (MacCurtain, 1985, p.49). MacCurtain's observation underscores an argument put forth by Michel Foucault (1972, p.216):

In a society [...] prohibitions interrelate, reinforce and complement each other, forming a complex web [and] the areas where this web is most tightly woven [...] where the danger spots are most numerous, are those dealing with politics and sexuality.

While it is true that O'Brien's Mellick is the home of two brothels it is also an arena where a religious



schism between the sexual Puritanism enforced by the Jansenistic theology of Maynooth, and the social activism of the Franciscan order is played out within the 'pure jobbery' of local politics. Brothel patrons are sacked from jobs; labour activists are painted as heretics. Dissecting the tangled web that binds the Catholic bourgeois family, the provincial town and the Irish State is a core theme that emerges in *Pray for the Wanderer*. O'Brien's critical fictional perspective, drawn from her experiences working as a governess in Spain and as a journalist in England shaped the European dimension of her writing which coloured the sensibilities of her protagonist Matt Costello. This dimension, also echoed in the works of her Irish contemporaries James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, constitutes a trend in the broader cultural history of the period which was characterized by

A formative relationship between literary innovation and the cross-cultural status of many modernist and avant-garde artists, those who during the first half of the century came to London, Paris or Berlin from "colonized or capitalized regions [within Europe] . . . linguistic borderlands . . . [or] as exiles . . . from rejecting or rejected political regimes" (Weisberg, 2000, p.43)

Despite the influence of European cultural trends, it must be recognized that it was O'Brien's native Limerick that ground, shaped and polished the essential chronotopic lens of place which generated the critical literary geographies contained in *Pray for the Wanderer*. The fictional Mellick, a prose landscape framed by church steeples and castles, provided an anchor for O'Brien's polemical representation of provincial Ireland during the 1937 constitutional referendum. Invoking the philosopher and poet George Santayana, she once reflected upon the significance of her native place in her writing: "The freest spirit must have some birthplace, some *locus standi* from which to view the world and some innate passion by which to judge it.' Modestly I say the same for my relationship with Limerick. It was there that I began to view the world and to develop the necessary passion to judge it. It was there indeed that I learnt the world and I know that wherever I am, it is still from Limerick that I look out and make my surmises," (O'Brien, 1962, p.148) and in regards to the generation of a truly emblematic literary geography which distinctly describes the history, culture and landscape of a region it can be concluded: "If we may talk at all of the 'world' of the writer, Kate O'Brien's Mellick and the adjoining Vale of Honey is as distinctive as the most famous, as

Hardy's Wessex, or George Eliot's Warwickshire" (Reynolds, 1987, p.51)

## REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, M.M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. M. Holquist, eds. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, University of Texas Press, London & Austin.
- Barnes T. and Duncan, J. 1992. *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Texts and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape*, London: Routledge: 6p.
- Brosseau, M. 1995. 'The City in Textual Form: *Manhattan Transfer's New York*' *Ecumene*, 2(1):89-114.
- Brown, T. 1985. *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985*, London: Fontana.
- Bunreacht Na hÉireann, Constitution of Ireland*. 1937, [2000] Dublin: Government Publications.
- Carlson, J. 1990. *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer*, London: Routledge.
- Cook, I. 1979. 'Consciousness and the Novel: Fact or Fiction in the Works of D.H. Lawrence.' In: *Humanistic Geography and Literature Essays on the Experience of Place*, ed. D. Pocock. New Jersey: Barnes & Nobel Books, 1981, 66-84pp.
- Daniels, S. and Nash, C. 2004. 'Lifepaths: Geography and Biography,' *Journal of Historical Geography* 30:449-458.
- Daniels, S. and Rycroft, S. 1993. 'Mapping the Modern City: Alan Sillitoe's Nottingham Novels', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18(4):460-480.
- Donoghue, E. 1993. "'Out of Order" Kate O'Brien's Lesbian Fictions', *Ordinary People Dancing : Essays on Kate O'Brien*. Cork: Cork University Press, 36-58pp.
- Folch-Serra, M. 1990. 'Place, Voice, Space: Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogical Landscape.' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 8:255-274.
- Foster, R. 1989. *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, London: Penguin.

- Foucault, M. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M.S. Smith. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.
- Holloway, J and Kneale, J. 2000. 'Mikhail Bakhtin: Dialogics of Space' In: *Thinking Space*, eds. M. Crang and N. Thrift, London: Routledge, 71-88pp.
- Holquist, M. 1990. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, London: Routledge.
- Kershner, R.B. 1989. *Joyce, Bakhtin, and Popular Literature: Chronicles of Disorder*, Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Kiberd, D. 1996. *Inventing Ireland*, London: Vintage.
- Logan, J. 1994. 'Family and Fortune in Kate O'Brien's Limerick.' In: *With Warmest Love: Lectures for Kate O'Brien, 1984-1993*, Limerick: Mellick Press, 105-130pp.
- MacCurtain, M. 1985. 'The Historical Image.' *Irish Women: Image and Achievement*. ed. E. N. Chuilleanain. Dublin, Ireland: Arlen House, 37-50pp.
- O'Brien, K. 1938. *Pray for the Wanderer*, London: Heinemann.
- O'Brien, K. 1962. *My Ireland*, London: Batsford.
- Peet, R. 1998. *Modern Geographical Thought*, Oxford: Blackwell, 233-234pp.
- Reynolds, L. 1987. *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe.
- Sandberg, L. and Marsh, J. 1988. 'Focus: Literary Landscapes –Geography and the Future.' In: *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien* 32(3):266-276.
- Stevens, J.A. 2000. *The Irish Landscape in Somerville and Ross's Fiction and Illustrations 1890-1915*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Dublin Trinity College, October 2000.
- Weisberg, D. 2000. *Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel*, Albany: State University of New York Press.