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Exploring the Irish Catholic Mother in Kate O'Brien's *Pray for the Wanderer*

In order to orientate the reader to the discussion that follows, a brief introduction to Kate O'Brien's novel, *Pray for the Wanderer*, published in 1938, will serve to sketch the key characters and relationships in the plot. In addition, the historical context to the composition of the novel is also pertinent, as it was written during the unveiling of the 1937 Irish Constitution. Significantly, too, the novel was written after the banning of O'Brien's previous novel, *Mary Lavelle*, and the fact that the main character in *Pray for the Wanderer*, Matt Costello, acts as a mouthpiece for O'Brien is attested to by her friends, the critics Vivian Mercier and Lorna Reynolds. Mercier wrote: 'Miss O'Brien has clearly made her hero an author – and a banned one at that – so that through his mouth she may register her protest against modern Ireland's love of censorship'.¹ In a similar vein, Lorna Reynolds in *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, remarked: 'The author herself is present ... as a man, a famous author back in Ireland on a visit to his brother and sister-in-law'.²

Matt Costello, a successful writer, retreats to his ancestral home in Mellick, O'Brien's fictional Limerick, after the ending of a passionate affair with a married actress in London. Weir House is now occupied by his brother, Will, who is married to Una, and their five children. Much to Matt's surprise, he becomes involved in the lives of this family, is temporarily soothed by their tranquil lifestyle, and finds himself attracted to Una's sister, Nell, who teaches world history through the Irish language. Matt's thoughts

¹ Vivian Mercier, 'Kate O'Brien', in *Irish Writing*, 1 (1946), pp. 94–95.

² Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), p. 76.

and feelings on the Ireland he has returned to are expressed throughout the novel in sustained discussions about the social and religious atmosphere of Éamon de Valera's idyllic Ireland. These debates are conducted mainly with Tom Mahoney, the urbane solicitor who represents the authority figure of the community, and Father Malachi, the educated, intelligent spokesman for the Catholic Church. Although temporarily seduced by the peace and tranquility of what Matt calls 'Lotus Land', he realises ultimately that Ireland is no place for artists. The term 'Lotus Land' is significant in the text, as the lotus is a mythical fruit which when eaten induces a state of lazy and luxurious dreaminess.³ The use of this mythological reference, therefore, indicates a lack of realism in relation to the Costello family in Weir House as well as to the country in general. Matt's inability to 'fit' into the cultural ethos is made clear by Nell, who rejects his proposal of marriage and tells him: 'Go back to your own world, Matt.'⁴ Matt finally quits Mellick, having been defeated in his efforts to settle there. The ultimate irony is that he has, as Eibhear Walshe notes, left behind 'a community largely untroubled by its rejection of artistic freedom.'⁵

For the purposes of this chapter, the focus will be on the portrayal of the matriarch of the family at Weir House, Una Costello, with some reference later to a second matriarchal figure, Hannah Kernahan, in *The Last of Summer*. The sense of 'luxurious dreaminess' induced by the lotus fruit is personified in the representation of Una, and I argue that she can be read as a symbol for the 'ideal' Irish woman as described in the 1937 Irish Constitution, as well as an example of the cultural ethos needed to sustain that idealisation. In order to contextualise the discussion, I will briefly con-

3 See 'The Cyclops' (9.84–96) in Homer, *The Odyssey*. Translated by E.V. Rieu (London: Penguin Books [1946], 1991). When Odysseus's companions eat the lotus fruit in the country of the Lotus-eaters, they lose any wish to leave or to return home.

4 Kate O'Brien, *Pray for the Wanderer*, 2nd edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin [1938], 1951), p. 160. All subsequent references will be denoted by the abbreviation *PW* followed by the page number.

5 Eibhear Walshe, 'Lock up your Daughters: From *Ante-Room* to Interior Castle', in Eibhear Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), pp. 150–166, p. 155.

sider the Articles of the Constitution that drew on Papal Encyclicals⁶ in order to position O'Brien's representation of Una Costello as an example of the dramatisation of the lives of women that were determined by the particular modes of femininity advocated both in the Constitution and in Catholic Church teaching.

The development of Catholicism as a central element of Irish nationalism by the 1930s underpins the incorporation of Catholic social teaching tenets into the 1937 Constitution. Two clerics, among the many contributors, are credited with helping Éamon de Valera compose the sections of the Constitution relevant to women and the family; the Jesuit, Edward Cahill, and the Holy Ghost priest, John Charles McQuaid, who later became Archbishop of Dublin. De Valera also read the writings of Irish exponents of Catholic social teaching. Dermot Keogh, in an account of the drafting process, explains that de Valera invited Cahill to come up with draft articles, relevant to the Church's interests.⁷ Keogh writes: 'When Cahill brought the matter to the attention of his superiors, they decided to set up a committee of some of the best minds in the Jesuit province to comply with de Valera's request.'⁸ Although quite altered from the original draft material provided by the Jesuits, the finished articles were heavily based on the topics debated by the committee. McQuaid, as de Valera's friend and

6 Papal encyclicals are letters addressed by the Pope to the Catholic bishops throughout the world and through them to the whole Church. They are used as a mode of papal teaching to apply Catholic Church beliefs to the contemporary world in the religious, social, economic or political spheres. For a description on the origin and practice of the issuing of encyclicals, see the Introduction to J. Michael Miller (ed.), *The Encyclicals of John Paul II* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996). See also <http://www.papalencyclicals.net>.

7 In order to avoid repetition, the term, 'the Church', is used to denote the Roman Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland, without prejudice to the ecclesiastical status of other denominations.

8 Dermot Keogh, 'Church, State and Society', in Brian Farrell (ed.), *De Valera's Constitution and Ours* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), p. 103–122, p. 109.

advisor, as well as the Holy Ghost Order, played a more direct role. The result became Articles 41 to 45 of the Constitution.⁹

The early twentieth-century onset of communism, secularism and materialism in Europe had given a new impetus to discourse on Catholic social teaching, which had been formulated in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) in his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Things or Of the Conditions of the Working Classes). The remit of Leo's encyclical, according to Anne Fremantle, was the 'Church's complete answer to Karl Marx' *Das Kapital*, and, indeed, to Communism and Socialism in whatever forms.¹⁰ In addition, Tony Fahey asserts that from the beginning of the nineteenth century, in a reaction to the new emphasis on individualism, the Church's 'pastoral, educational and social services were focused very much on the family'.¹¹ As women were deemed responsible for the home and family, they became the targets against which all critiques of modernity were directed. Papal rhetoric on women's 'nature' and women's roles implied that because women give birth to children, they are biologically the natural carers of those children. In this influential encyclical, Pope Leo used the expression 'the law of nature' repeatedly, and quoted extensively from St Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who had integrated into Christian thought the philosophy of Aristotle. Aristotle's Natural Law Theory understood world order as a well-regulated, patriarchal, and hierarchical world order, with the community having a more privileged status than the individual. Adherents believed in a fixed divine plan and a static worldview. As a result, knowledge was perceived, in Louise Fuller's view, 'as existing outside, independent of, and in a sense, superior to, the person. People were supposed to

9 For a detailed account of the drafting of the 1937 Irish Constitution, see Dermot Keogh and Andrew J. McCarthy, *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2007).

10 Anne Fremantle (ed.), *The Papal Encyclicals in their Historical Context* (New York: Mentor, 1956), p. 166.

11 Tony Fahey, 'Catholicism and Industrial Society in Ireland', in J.H. Goldthorpe and C.T. Whelan (eds), *The Development of Industrial Society in Ireland* (London: British Academy, 1992), pp. 241–263, p. 263.

conform to a ready-made corpus of knowledge, rather than question it'.¹² This method of teaching, called the Thomastic or Scholastic approach, was the type used in Maynooth seminary, and a perspective that infiltrated crucial areas in which Catholicism held sway, such as education, health and issues of morality. As a result, in the opinion of Georgia Masters Keightley, Pope Leo's views on women's place, revealed his assumption that a woman's activities were 'defined as well as circumscribed by her nature'.¹³ Moreover, Keightley argues that Papal teachings ensured that the notion that human experience could be divided into two spheres, 'public' and 'private', would become central to Catholic social thought. With this influential encyclical, women's role within the home was cemented, a role that continued to be promulgated in subsequent encyclicals.

The purpose of Pope Pius XI's (1922–39) encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno* (On the Restoration of the Social Order), published in 1931, was to adapt and develop the doctrine outlined in *Rerum Novarum*. The close relationship between this encyclical and Articles 41.2.1 and 41.2.2 of the Constitution, can be seen when placed side by side. In *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pius wrote:

Mothers, concentrating on household duties, should work primarily in the home or in its immediate vicinity. It is an intolerable abuse, and to be abolished at all cost, for mothers on account of father's low wage to be forced to engage in gainful occupations outside the home to the neglect of their proper cares and duties, especially the training of children.¹⁴

Article 41.2.1 states: 'In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the

12 Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004), p. 12.

13 Georgia Masters Keightley, 'Catholic Feminism's Contribution to the Church's Social Justice Tradition', in Francis P. McHugh and Samuel M. Natale (eds), *Things Old and New: Catholic Social Teaching Revisited* (Maryland: University Press of America, 1993), pp. 333–363, p. 340.

14 Claudia Carlen (ed.), *The Papal Encyclicals 1903–1939*, Vol. 3 (Ann Arbor: Pierian Press, 1990), p. 426.

common good cannot be achieved', while Article 41.2.2 goes further: 'The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home'.¹⁵ The import of the words 'by her life within the home' is particularly striking, as is how the terms 'woman' and 'mother' are used interchangeably. In this way, to be the Irish woman described in the Constitution and in Papal Encyclicals, one must be a mother and at that, a particular kind of mother. Moreover, the ideology implicitly demands a selfless dedication on the part of women to the service of others in a private domestic space.

The promotion of large families was a significant facet of the lives of Irish Catholic mothers. Una, in *Pray for the Wanderer*, is expecting her sixth child. Her feelings on this matter echo those of Father Malachi, who expresses the Church's position in the novel, and who tells Matt: '[T]here is a clear faith, a definite duty to God, in the raising of a family' (*PW* 119). Similarly, Una explains her perceived duties to Matt: '[W]e're still Catholics here, you know, and believe that man is a spirit, and that it is our duty to go on propagating him to the glory of God' (*PW* 139). Una's sentiments reflect Leo XIII's views, as expressed in *Rerum Novarum* where he wrote: 'No human law can abolish the natural and original right of marriage, nor in any way limit the chief and principal purpose of marriage, ordained by God's authority from the beginning. *Increase and multiply*'.¹⁶ The situation must be viewed in context, however, as at that time: '[T]he Catholic view that God and nature intended sexual intercourse to be fruitful was quite widely held as a correct principle, even if it was not always practiced or observed'.¹⁷ This ambiguity is also expressed by Una's sister, Nell Mahoney, in *Pray for the Wanderer*. Nell 'could not admit, any more by her fastidious nerves than by her religious training, the pitiful exigencies or crude materialistic ethic of birth control – though baffled indeed, too, by the appalling

15 *Bunreacht na hÉireann*. Second Amendment Edition (Dublin: Government Publication Office [1937], 1942).

16 Quoted by Fremantle, p. 171.

17 Mary Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*. Revised and updated edition (Dublin: New Island, 2000), p. 127.

problems and horrors of unchecked fecundity' (*PW* 109). In the context of Catholic teaching however, any frustrating of the 'chief and principal purpose of marriage' could only be deemed unnatural, as argued in the 1930 encyclical, *Casti Connubii* (On Christian Marriage). Pius XI wrote:

Since, therefore, the conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious.

... any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offence against the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin.¹⁸

The Pope's sentiments were echoed by Bishop Michael Browne of Galway who had strong words for those who advocated birth control. In 1938, writing in the *Catholic Truth Quarterly*, Bishop Browne wrote that people who promote birth control 'regard motherhood exactly as a prostitute does, something to be avoided at all costs'.¹⁹ The State imposed Church condemnation of family planning with the 1935 Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, Section 17, which prohibited the sale, advertising or importation of contraceptives. In addition, under the Censorship of Publications Act, 1929, the publication, distribution and selling of literature advocating birth control was prohibited.

The co-operation between Church and State after the establishment of an Independent Ireland reflected in certain articles of the 1937 Constitution, are dramatised in *Pray for the Wanderer*. Matt Costello's thoughts on what he calls 'Dev's tricky constitution' are as follows:

And now the proffered Constitution of the Irish Free State was before the world. Founded, intelligibly enough and even as this house was, upon the family as social unit ... but offering in its text curious anomalies and subtleties, alarming signposts. (*PW* 30)

18 Quoted by Fremantle, p. 239.

19 Browne, cited in Peter Martin, *Censorship in the Two Irelands 1922–1939* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p. 297. See also the *Catholic Truth Quarterly*, 1:5 (July–September 1938), p. 6.

The 'house' referred to is Weir House and its inhabitants, and its inclusion above, as a microcosm of the state, suggests its representation of the aspiration of social and cultural unity of 1930s Ireland. In addition, the question is raised later in the text, as Matt ponders: 'The harmony within this house, for instance – is that representative and does it promise anything?' (*PW* 184). In addition, Matt is appalled at how the new Constitution strengthens the dictatorial powers of the Irish Catholic Church. Una's cousin, Tom Mahoney, agrees, telling Matt: 'Religiosity is becoming a job in this country ... A threat and a menace. A power in the land' (*PW* 47).

In *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study*, Adele Dalsimer expressed the view that O'Brien approved of Una Costello and through her, espoused the traditional, domestic role of women.²⁰ In a similar vein, Joan Ryan writes that Una 'can be considered as the stereotype (sic) wife and mother who runs the home with infinite patience, efficiency and love, living through others with no obvious impulses of her own'.²¹ She too maintains that O'Brien approved of Una, and of the traditional, domestic role of women. These observations raise questions about the purpose of Una in the novel. Can she be read as the 'ideal' woman, living in the model family, and in that way, as a vehicle for the approval of the Irish moral and cultural ethos? Are there, in fact, 'alarming signposts' (*PW* 30) to be found within this idyllic family? The fact that every other family portrayed in O'Brien's work is dysfunctional to some degree should raise suspicion about the depiction of such apparent perfection. My reading argues that Una is not so sympathetically drawn, and that she is deliberately modeled on the 'ideal' woman rendered in the 1937 Constitution in order to explore the implications of ideological parameters on women's role in the family and in Irish society. In order to address these questions, I will now look a little more closely at the depiction of Una Costello.

20 Adele M. Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), p. 47.

21 Joan Ryan, 'Women in the Novels of Kate O'Brien: The Mellick Novels,' in Heinz Kosok (ed.), *Studies in Anglo-Irish Literature* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1982), pp. 322–332, p. 323.

In the text, there are few references to Una's corporeal person, but these provide interesting possibilities for reading her against the grain of Dalsimer's and Ryan's interpretations. Rather than relying on conventional terms of the physical beauty of a woman in the description of Una, O'Brien more powerfully compares her to a rose. This is a romance convention used by the silver poets of the sixteenth century. Matt recalls his first impressions of Una, as 'A wild and blowy rose' (*PW* 7). At dinner, on the first evening of his visit, Una is again under his scrutiny: 'Matt pondered her innocent unfoldedness of nature, the ease with which her untracked and native seduction spread its perfume. She was fading, but would live and die most recognizably a rose' (*PW* 11). Matt later tells Una that she has a 'lovely open rose of a face' (*PW* 140). *The Oxford Paperback Dictionary* defines the rose as an 'ornamental, usually fragrant flower', while the expression 'rose-tinted', evokes someone with an unrealistically cheerful worldview. The image of the rose, therefore, invites the reader to interpret Una symbolically. In addition, Matt's use of the description 'native seduction' in relation to Una suggests the use of the motif in eighteenth-century *Aisling* poetry. It was the poet Liam Dall Ó hÍfearnáin who initiated the tradition of Caitlín Ní Uallacháin as symbol of Ireland, who by embodying feminine beauty, personifies the nation of Ireland. In the *Aisling* genre, the poet, while wandering in stunning surroundings, meets a beautiful woman who reveals herself to be Ireland. She gives the poet the message that the rightful king will be installed and that all will be well. Poets such as Eoghan Rua Ó Súillabháin and Aodhagán Ó Rathaille promulgated this symbolism, and it continued to be made popular by poets such as James C. Mangan (*Kathleen Ny Houlahan*) in the nineteenth century, and W.B. Yeats (*Red Hanrahan's Song about Ireland*) in the twentieth century. In this context, the use of the rose motif in relation to Una suggests that, in the text, as well as a symbol for the 'ideal' woman of the Constitution, Una can also be read as a symbol for Ireland itself. And as Gerardine Meaney points out: 'Women have been denied a role in the life and history of nations and been

reduced to symbols of the nation.²² As symbols, women have ideological rather than actual power, an ambivalence that is reflected throughout O'Brien's texts. Moreover, concentration on the role of mother alone for women, as the interchangeable use of the words 'woman' and 'mother' in the Constitution suggests, implicitly withdraws status from women who do not undertake this role.

Una Costello's class is an important element of her portrayal, as the text proposes the rarity of families who have the means to live as Una and her family do, thereby indicating the empirical unreality of sustaining the model family illustrated in the Constitution, in the economic context of the 1930s. Una, Matt notices, quite simply 'lived for others' (*PW* 60). This reflects the selflessness of the 'ideal' woman of the Constitution, but the text indicates that Una can do this because others work for her. Una is not forced by economic necessity to work outside the home. As a middle class woman, she has the option of being able to hand over care of her children to her maid, Bridie, whenever she chooses (*PW* 65; *PW* 183). The text, therefore, situates Una as privileged and she is allowed to enjoy her many children and their company without the attendant labour. She has the time and the resources to 'live for others' and can, therefore, do so without denying her own needs. Women not of Una's class would have worked ceaselessly in the home, caring for small children without the luxury of paid help. Indeed, many worked outside the home, despite the aspiration expressed in the Constitution to keep them there. The predominant question put forward by O'Brien here is the prevalence of the model woman as posited in the Constitution, given that the census figures of 1936 show that over 54 per cent of the female working population were engaged in agriculture or domestic service.²³

Una's happiness is also emphasised in the text, as Matt observes that she 'loved her husband and, deriving from him, her children, with an unheed-

ing, unaware strength of generosity such as Matt had never before observed in an adult. He had never before met in normal worldly life someone who quite precisely lived for others' (*PW* 60). The words 'never before' are used twice here to emphasise Una's uniqueness, thereby questioning the validity of the idea that all mothers are completely fulfilled by Una's mode of living, as well as the notion that all Irish mothers have the economic means to do so. Una's uniqueness is explored further in the text in a scene where Una tells Matt that she has a happy life and 'cannot see why millions of others' (*PW* 134), as she puts it, cannot have the same. O'Brien frames the discussion that ensues as a way of highlighting that the 'ideal' woman of the Constitution can only exist within a very particular class and circumstance. Matt lists the reasons why everyone cannot be as contented as Una:

Millions of others are slaving, Una, or workless, or homeless, or fighting in some brutal army for brutal ideologies they don't even begin to understand, or wasting in prisons because they resisted such ideologies, or hacking coal out of death-trap mines, or working overtime on incendiary bombs, or ranting away in manic-depressive wards because they should never have been born ... (*PW* 134)

To this, Una simply replies: 'But these things needn't be. No decent person wishes it to be so' (*PW* 134). Una's naivety and innocence with regard to the lives of others is emphasised here. In addition, her lack of awareness can be read as a criticism of Irish cultural insularity, as well as suggesting that the preservation of ideologies can mask cruelty in their apparent naivety. Una believes that 'life is worth living on most terms' (*PW* 139). To this, Matt replies: 'Oh Una, I wonder! That's a conviction of the sheltered, and you've always been sheltered' (*PW* 139). Matt's view reflects Terence Brown's assessment of Irish culture during this period when he posits the view that '[d]espite some signs of change, there was a conservative continuum with pre-revolutionary Ireland and minorities and critics in the new order had little chance to make their will felt.'²⁴ The text, therefore, demonstrates the

22 Gerardine Meaney, *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics* (Dublin: Attic Press, LIP Pamphlet, 1991), p. 22.

23 See Caitriona Clear, *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), Table 1.1, p. 14.

24 Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (London: Fontana [1981], 1985), p. 10.

blinkered world view of the protected bourgeois woman, who cannot see beyond the horizon of her own life.

Dalsimer and Ryan's views of O'Brien's approval of Una are further undermined in an exchange at a family picnic, between Una's cousin, Tom Mahoney and Matt. Tom says:

'My cousin, Una – well, she's very nearly my favourite study.'

'Why?'

'Happiness, Matt. Happiness, you novelist, you! Happiness as innocent as our picnic. Have you ever seen it before, Matt? Will you ever see it again?' (*PW* 34)

The rarity of happiness such as Una's is stressed by the repetition of 'ever seen' and 'ever see'. Matt, later musing on Una, agrees: 'Yes, Tom was right. Here was something not to be seen again, and worth a man's observation' (*PW* 62). Una's 'innocent' happiness suggests that she is childlike and unrealistic as an example of an adult woman. This trope is repeated again in the text when her cousin, Tom, calls Weir House 'an idyllic kindergarten' (*PW* 79). In this novel, therefore, Una is explored in symbolic terms that examine her as representative of the model Irish Catholic Woman, in the model family, and in a particular cultural ethos. O'Brien recognised that women such as Una, happy to live for others and fulfilled by motherhood, existed, as in a discussion in the text between Matt and Father Malachi, who is championing the establishment of families, Matt responds: 'But I allow that, for those who feel it' (*PW* 119). O'Brien, at the same time, by drawing attention to Una's minority economic status and her unrealistic worldview, allowed a space for those who do not 'feel it'.

The political critique brought to bear on the representation of Una Costello as mother/mother Ireland is also particularly explored in *The Last of Summer* with the writing of State boundaries and policies on women's bodies and psyches as representation of Ireland's neutrality policy during World War Two, embodied in the matriarch of the family, Hannah Kernahan. The commentator on the European position in the novel, set in the few weeks preceding the outbreak of war, is Hannah's visiting French niece, Angèle Maury, who subsequently falls in love with her cousin, Tom. As Hannah's favourite son, Tom is the means for the deployment of her

sense of power, an abusive relationship about which Reynolds wrote: 'This study of frustration finding compensation in power is new to Kate O'Brien's work.'²⁵ Retaining her son's love is vital for Hannah's existence, and as such, Angèle as interloper who threatens the safe insularity of the family, and as a representative of modernising European influences, must be expurgated from the Kernahan family. Thus, Angèle and Tom's relationship is subtly but intentionally destroyed by Hannah, and although she is positioned in the text as an example of the 'ideal' mother of the Constitution by her devoted companion, Dotey, and her 'priest admirers', her public persona is rendered in marked contrast to her behaviour in the private sphere of her home. The son to whom she is unhealthily devoted, Tom, shares the opinions of Dotey and the clergy, but Hannah's second son, Martin, and her daughter, Jo, are compelled to love a mother whose flaws they cannot ignore, and the shadow side to the ideal is revealed through these relationships. In addition, Hannah's dealings with her French niece, whose presence threatens to deflect the attention of her favourite son, symbolises Ireland's cultural and political insularity in the face of a world war, as the oncoming war, Hannah tells her niece, is 'nothing whatever to do with us. [...] Eire is certain to be neutral in this war, you see, Angèle. Absolutely neutral.'²⁶ Thus, the dramatisation of the neutrality policy is depicted in Hannah's deliberate ousting of her niece, Angèle, from her home. In this way, Hannah, as symbol of Ireland, rejects variance. The mother-son relationship is the dominant relationship in *The Last of Summer*, and a dramatisation of the psychic excesses of the unfulfilled mother, as Hannah deliberately and systematically destroys the relationship between her son and his fiancé, to retain her position as first in her son's affections. Hannah is, therefore, as Reynolds noted, a study of 'frustration finding compensation in power.'²⁷ In this way, the image of the selfless woman of the Constitution is evoked

25 Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, p. 80.

26 Kate O'Brien, *The Last of Summer* (London: The Book Club [1943] 1944), p. 193. All subsequent references will be to this edition will be denoted by the abbreviation *LS* followed by the page number.

27 Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, p. 80.

as O'Brien dramatises the negative consequences of a woman who emulates the ideal of focusing her life solely on the home.

Although the concerns of *The Last of Summer* are different from *Pray for the Wanderer*, Hannah Kernahan and Una Costello both function as symbols and as dramatisations of the possible consequences of embodying the particular type of motherhood endorsed in the Irish Constitution. Additionally, Hannah, like Una, is of the middle classes, and the material comfort of the Kernahan family is rendered in the text with descriptions of good food, eaten in a dining room full of 'old-fashioned silver and china' (*LS* 46). Moreover, Hannah has a companion, Dotey, a penniless, unmarried relative, and therefore, not paid for her services. Dotey, however, is grateful for the security her position with Hannah brings and is, consequently, 'the one permanent nourisher of the now widely flourishing belief that Mrs Kernahan was a wonder, a sainted widow and a martyr mother' (*LS* 113). Dotey expresses her admiration for Hannah in pious terms, which elicit the wording in the Constitution, and situates Hannah's class distinction in terms of her public persona:

And now look at her – the best of Catholic mothers, unselfish and devoted, a most charitable and perfect lady, a widow who had suffered many's the dark trial all through her married life, and had had to keep her beautiful home together and bring up her children single-handed – an example to us all. (*LS* 113)

As 'the best of Catholic mothers', Hannah reflects the selfless model woman of the Constitution, while the word 'Catholic' evokes the similar model woman described in Papal Encyclicals, an image buttressed by the presence in the text of Hannah's 'priest-admirers' (*LS* 113). The current 'priest-admirer', Father Gregory, is effusive in his praise of her and tells her son, Tom, that Hannah is 'A walking saint, Tom' (*LS* 58). These glowing reports by Father Gregory and Dotey affirm Hannah's convincing performance as paragon of the family and the community. However, Hannah Kernahan's public presentation of herself, as 'the best of Catholic mothers' (*LS* 113), masks the mother who is prepared to go to any lengths to keep her favourite child's love focused solely on herself.

The discrepancy between Hannah's presentation of herself and her private thoughts is betrayed mostly by her tone of voice, which is observed throughout the text by Angèle, and narratorial dislike of Hannah is indicated by the framework of verbal irony in which her characterisation is framed. Furthermore, Hannah's antipathy towards Angèle is revealed in the text through Angèle's eyes, as she begins to read Hannah's body signals in contrast to the words she speaks. Walshe writes: 'Hannah Kernahan is Kate O'Brien's most intriguing characterisation in this novel, a woman of great charm and beauty, perceptive and civilised, yet dishonest and cruel.'²⁸ For instance, in reply to Angèle's explanation of her reason for visiting the Kernahan family, her cousin, Martin, expresses the hope that Angèle will stay with them for a time. Hannah's response to Martin's wish conveys her dislike of Angèle's unexpected visit, albeit in a veiled manner: "She's not very likely to give herself time to, Martin dear," said Mrs Kernahan. "You see, she belongs to the world – not to our old backwater." (*LS* 19). The use of 'backwater' is significant here, as it suggests a stretch of stagnant water, as well as a place unaffected by progress or new ideas.

Hannah's remark makes it clear to Angèle that she is unwelcome, different, foreign and worldly, as she draws attention to the distinction between Ireland and the world outside Ireland. Thus, Hannah does not define herself in the text as being part of 'the world'. Here then, the symbolic aspect of Hannah's characterisation is indicated, as the intense relationship between her and her eldest son is paralleled by her focus on her immediate surroundings. As she is disinterested in anything that does not concern Tom, similarly, 'the world' and its concerns, in this case, the issue of Irish neutrality in the face of a world war is of little interest. The contrast between Hannah's remark, which is conveyed in a 'soft' tone of voice, is registered by Angèle, who is 'unnerved by so many currents of mood' (*LS* 19). As a result, Angèle asks herself a question that foreshadows the hostile manner to which her aunt later subjects her, as she wonders: 'Was this Aunt Hannah cruel?' (*LS* 19) With this question, the suggestion is raised that Hannah's

28 Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p. 94.

soft-spoken, gentle exterior masks a strong character, single-minded and ruthless in the maintenance of her comfortable position at Waterpark House, and in the retention of the affections of her eldest son.

While Una Costello is portrayed as 'innocent' and 'sheltered', Hannah is more complex. In the absence of her husband, Hannah is dependent on her son to preserve the family model, and her sense of worth, which in her terms means the preservation of her son's full attention as a spousal-type companion and as a business partner. The transference of Tom's devotion to another would, therefore, result in a loss of status for Hannah that she is not prepared to accept. Although there is much more that can be said about the oedipal nature of the mother-son relationship in this novel, Hannah, for the purposes of this chapter, is rendered here as problematic by O'Brien, in terms of the ideal of the selfless Catholic mother.

The varied representations of mothers throughout O'Brien's texts counteract the stereotyping of women who are mothers, despite the expression of some bias in this regard, as by raising questions about motherhood providing total fulfilment, O'Brien is suggesting the redress of society rather than an outright condemnation of the failure of mothers. By focusing on the individual experience, O'Brien's novels 'quietly protest against the fates of middle-class Irish women who are sheltered, stifled, and forced into prescribed roles as wives, mothers, or spinsters.'²⁹ These prescribed roles are set within the family unit, and O'Brien's texts also suggest ambivalence in this regard, as on the one hand, O'Brien's representation of individual female experience, while placing much emphasis on the security of being in a family, at the same time renders the family unit a stultifying place for many of her female characters. It can be argued that this is a damning indictment against Article 41.1.1 of the Constitution where 'the State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society'.

In addition, analyses of female characters throughout O'Brien's fiction suggest a calling for a reassessment of the veracity of the woman and the family unit of the Irish Constitution as typical models in Irish society. As Margaret MacCurtain argues:

29 Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study*, p. xv.

It is rare for historical research to accomplish the task of getting a society to contemplate its own identity without the help of literature ... The clues to the position of women in Irish history are invariably present in the literature of a particular phase of Irish history.³⁰

In this context, O'Brien's texts are a valuable resource for 'clues to the position of women in Irish history', especially in the context of the model woman, as outlined in the Irish Constitution, and as underwritten by representations of Catholic women in Papal Encyclicals. The sustained political critique of the mother, with O'Brien's ironic portrayal of Una Costello and the rendering of the duplicitous Hannah Kernahan, attests to the need for a reassessment of the Catholic woman in her fiction as she conducts a sustained critique throughout her work of the influence of the Catholic Church and State on the lives of Irish women. While the aesthetic merits of *Pray for the Wanderer* can be debated, its relevance can be justified in providing a prism for a politicised reading of O'Brien's representations of women, as well as of Catholicism, in her other novels. To conclude, not only did Kate O'Brien question ideological perspectives that presume middle-class women's homogenised acceptance of their prescribed roles, she also pointed to the need for a place for the expression of female experiences in literary studies.

30 Margaret MacCurtain, 'The Historical Image', in Margaret MacCurtain, *Ariadne's Thread: Writing Women into Irish History* (Galway: Arlen House, 2008), pp. 115–138, p. 117.