

Modernist evaluation of land of spices by kate o'brien



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Part A

For my modernist assignment I hope to discuss the novel, *Land of Spices*, published in 1934 by author Kate O'Brien (1897-1974). Kate O'Brien was a Dramatist, Novelist and Journalist from Co Limerick. As a feminist Kate promoted gender inequality in her novels. In the *Land of the Spices*, she deals with Irish religiousness, feminine identity and cultural ignorance.

I believe this book to represent several modernist characteristics to which I will discuss below;

1. Stream of Consciousness: The narrative centres around two female protagonists who have a hunger for independence in Ireland in 1910's. Having predominantly female characters set in convent was a radical way of thinking at the time, as it provided an alternative to the patriarchal gender hierarchy that was the norm. Throughout the novel O'Brien allows the reader to delve into the inner most thoughts and consciousness of the two main characters.
2. Cultural aspect: The author herself came from a wealthy Catholic middle-class family and the story focuses on the women of this class. O'Brien portrays a realistic depiction of the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie from within.
3. Political Context: It is clear O'Brien is conveying a political message in her work as the theme of the book is for women to be as free as men. The author makes connections between gender roles and female independence and highlights the obstacles that institutions play in the social construction of gender, such as the Catholic Church, the State

and the educational system while also determined to deconstruct the negative images of feminine identity of the time.

4. Historical Context: There is a strong historical context throughout as it is set during violent Nationalist times in Ireland and before the outbreak of World War One, there is much reference to this throughout.

5. Structure: Her structure is fluid throughout with an appreciation of time and space. Her writings were so liberal in style that the CPBI censored this book for the newly independent 'Free State' which was still very much a religious population.

Part B

'Modernism was not a unified or coherent movement' (Unit 2: 2). It was a break from previous traditions and reflects a sense of cultural crisis which was both exciting and disquieting, in that it opened up a whole new vista of human possibilities at the same time as putting into question any previously accepted means of grounding and evaluating new ideas. It was hugely diverse affecting every form of creativity such as art, music, literature, science, politics, dance, architecture. There is a consensus understanding among scholars, however, that the Great War of 1914-18 was the signal event of artistic modernism. Paul Crosthwaite refers to this event as, 'global in scope, shattering in its impact on national traditions as well as class structures and gender identities, this First World War scored a profound disruption into prevailing standards of value and so opened the space in cultural time in which radical artistic experimentation would be fostered'.

Michael Levenson notes that 'in the last two centuries in European and

American culture a sense of rupture and novelty pervaded the collective consciousness, the reasons are familiar: revolutions in Europe; the age of steam industry; railways; urbanisation; class conflict; religious doubt and the struggle between sexes (2011: 7). Author Kate O'Brien was certainly a non-conformist, a literary outsider and someone who was not afraid to abandon the classical text of her time. In *Land of Spices*, she explores a number of social and historical issues such as the rise of the narrow-mindedness Irish middle class, rigid Catholicism, the role of the repressive female and sexuality in Ireland in the early 20th Century. Geraldine Meaney remarks, 'the period between 1922 and 1960 is often characterized as one of social and cultural stagnation in Ireland. Irish fiction was dominated by an avant-garde writing in exile and the local dominance of the short story' (2010: 107). I believe *Land of Spices* to be an example of modernist literature, both in its thematic and formal features, to which I will discuss below.

Kate O'Brien was born into a wealthy middle-class family in Limerick in 1897 and received a strict education in a Laurel Hill convent after her mother died when she was five. This undoubtedly laid the foundation for her semi-autobiographical novel, *Land of Spices*. The story is set in an affluent Irish convent boarding school in 1904 to 1914, whereby the plot follows a double narrative of two female protagonists, Anna Murphy, a young girl who experiences some of life's hardest lessons during her time at the convent and Helen Archer, the Reverend Mother of the Convent, whereby her life story is told in retrospective, where reader gradually learns her motive for her becoming a nun. Depicting life in a predominantly female setting was something of a rarity in Europe and most certainly a radical way of thinking

at this time. One such thematic feature is that it provided an alternative to the patriarchal gender hierarchy that was the norm in most classical literature. In the ancient world, male published writers outnumbered female which inevitably generated bias against females. Roberta Rosenberg alludes to this when she notes, ' Virginia Woolf, like Simone de Beauvoir and other feminist writers, see clearly the way women are ' locked out', excluded and marginalised by a society that makes them feel like the ' other' (1990: 109). All too often in classical literature, women are depicted as either paragons of virtue or of vice. Personal agency is infrequent for such characters, and even when they do have it, there is almost always a romantic incentive. O'Brien certainly espoused avant-garde views on a variety of contemporary issues, including that of woman's place in society. She depicted a strong all female community which was different to the women who bowed down to their fates and accepted their subsidiary roles at this time. The novel certainly offers an alternative to patriarchy to which there is very few male characters in the plot and the characters that are introduced are portrayed in a negative view. Such as that of Anna's father who is referred to as a ' monster' (1941: 41) and a ' drunkard' (1941: 129), to the paedophilic references about Mr Lawson who lived in Doon Point (1941: 215) to Father Conroy's consistent anti-British and nationalistic remarks to Helen Archer (1941: 96).

O'Brien was among the first writers to dare to write about the rising middle class in Ireland and overemphasize it in the same way as the Irish peasant was by Revival writers such as W. B Yeats, Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney. In her portrayal she was concerned with the women determined to deconstruct the social norm and the negative images of feminine identity of

the new Irish 'Free State'. *Land of Spices* represents the new rising bourgeoisie class in Ireland from the perspectives of someone who was one of them. The story's success lies in her evocation of this shrewd and smug middle class and the events that both Anna and Helen Archer encounter. There are constant reminders throughout each chapter about social class and segregation. This can be seen with the treatment of one border Molly Redmond who was ostracised by her fellow students after learning that her father was a 'bookie'. (1941: 127). Further snobbishness can be seen when Anna mentions her brother's Charlie's attendance at Lissanmoher National School, as being in the 'company of common boys' (1941: 120).

There are certainly many cultural and social undertones throughout the novel. One in particular is that of the sacrament of marriage. O'Brien's most revolutionary work is in the field of women's rights. Throughout the novel O'Brien develops her characters' identity without the constant pressure to conform to the societal expectations of motherhood and marriage such as that of the lives of the women of Ireland outside of the convent walls. The role of women in Irish society has developed dramatically throughout the centuries, from female pagan warriors of ancient times to equal rights in the 12th Century to the 17th century whereby women took a subordinate and submissive role, dominated by men. One particular change was that of the 20th century whereby arranged marriages were common place. Often women were married off to a man they often never met before, but whom their family chose for them because of his social role and wealth to secure the family's economic stability. The role of the woman was seen primarily in the household where she would provide care for the well-being of her

husband, bear him children and be a dutiful mother. Because of this, the words woman, mother and wife became almost identical during this time. O'Brien seeks an alternative to the trajectory of Irish womanhood to the one that is set down in the Constitution of 1937, entering a convent in that time was not only a vocation, but was a highly esteemed life path for a woman. She depicts marriage as something that is a social symbol and has quite a cynical view on romance. This can be seen with the multiple references to the unhappiness of Anna's parents' marriage and it being 'too late for a legal separation' (1941: 137), possibly alluding to the fact of an arranged marriage. Maud Murphy is the illustrative example of a typical woman of the time: unhappily married. Education was very important to O'Brien, to which it was paramount in liberating women from a male dominated world.

There is an undeniably strong socio-political ideology and perhaps a feminist critique running throughout the novel. Adele Dalsimer alludes to this when she makes the point that "The subject of feminism is never openly raised in Kate O'Brien's work. But the theme of her novels is the necessity for woman to be free as man." (1990: 128). She certainly shares the feminist idea that the only ideal working relationship is that between women; such as the women in the convent of La Campagnie de la Sainte Famille. Throughout the novel there are several remarks made by Anna's mother and grandmother Mrs Condon alluding to the fact that because Anna was female, education was a waste of time, though they are prepared to finance her older brother university studies. A strong character who acts like a man of that time, does not believe in education of women as her grandmother had plans in place for Anna to work as a bank clerk in the local area when she finished school

(1941: 276). Thanks to the intervention of Mother Superior that Anna Murphy can go to university, although this is against her family's wish. This was met with strong opposition in which eventually she had to use the name of the Bishop as he is one of Anna's supporters to which eventually breaks the woman as she believes in the authority of the Church. ' Mrs Condon is rich as she never quarrels with power, particularly hierarchal power' (1941: 278).

One such aspect that O'Brien does not shy away from is sexuality. Eibhear Walshe speaks of a ' melancholy within Kate O'Brien's literary sensibility, the melancholy of the lapsed Catholic, at odds with sexual codes of her religious education, yet still enraptured with the beauty of its ceremonies and its liturgy' (2010: 96). In 1941 the novel was banned for publication by the Irish Censorship Board due to a reference of homosexuality, on the basis of one line whereby Mere Helene Archer returned home one afternoon to see her father in the ' embrace of love' with another man. Ian Hunter remarks, ' O'Brien's real challenge to the public morality discourses did not lie in the explicit depiction of sex in her novels but in her adherence to the idea that sexuality had inescapable moral consequences for the individual and for the social order. Her fiction clearly shares a modernist vision of sexuality as a vital force with the potential radically to transform the self and revolutionize society, one most notably associated with D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce in English literature and, in later decades, with the political thought of Herbert Marcuse'.(1993: 96) While this line triggered a moral debate in the years after the Irish Free State it saw such opposition as many believed in the Seanad at this time that human sexuality and information on sexual matters needed to be tightly regulated by the state. In C. B Murphy's view, ' the perverse

decisions of the Censorship Board were not the consequence of its members' Catholicism but were ' the attempt of Victorianism to survive in Ireland long after the English people, including the English Catholics, have very sensibly dropped it' (1941: 67).

There are several formal features of the modernist narrative found in this novel, such as the lack of traditional chronological order, multiple narrators and the use of a stream of consciousness. This confusing chronology, jumping from one historical period to another and from one character's thoughts to another character's thoughts without any indication is seen throughout the novel as the narrator switches from the life of Anna to Helen's, much of this in retrospect. As the story progresses the reader is exposed to both protagonists innermost thoughts and worry such as that of Anna and her quest for autonomy and Helen's utterly selfish motive for entering the convent, not to follow a vocation but intent to hurt her father. There is an unspoken allegiance between both characters, but it is intentionally kept at a distance. Throughout the text, there are several examples of German and French text that it not translated for the reader, letters sent to and from Mère Generale and Helen's father in Belgium. (1941: 142). Another such aspect of the novel is its open ending, leaving the reader unsure whether Anna gained emancipation or not.

To conclude, Kate O'Brien was very much ahead of her time giving women free will and power to decide how to live their lives. She created novels that were unreliably conventional in form but radical in content. She was certainly a forerunner for women's literature and the modern Irish literary canon.

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