Finding Universal Meaning in the Short Stories of Edna O'Brien

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

Although written from the female perspective and showing the influence of Irish-Catholic roots, Edna O'Brien's works of short fiction reach many audiences. The topics and issues covered in her stories are universal; that is, males as well as females coming from vastly different religious and ethnic backgrounds, and of various generations, can gain knowledge and understanding through O'Brien's fiction writing.

This study focuses on the responses and reactions of nine individuals who volunteered to read one of the following three O'Brien stories, "Epitaph," "What A Sky," and "Sister Imelda," fill in a short biographical information sheet, and answer a series of open-ended questions. After a brief introduction to O'Brien is given, each of these three works will be looked at in turn. A basic plot summary will be given followed by an "expert" analysis of each selection based on my own reactions, knowledge, and research as well as my replies to the same questions posed to the nine volunteer readers. Pertinent biographical background information for each individual will be given preceding their reactions and responses to the reading. Finally a comparison of the reactions to the stories will be made with emphasis on similar conclusions, answers, and/or replies given by individuals of diverse backgrounds.
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I.

Introduction to Edna O'Brien

Good writers pour their soul into their work, allowing their emotions, beliefs, and lives to be expressed through their written word. After reading a well-written work, people should feel as if they know at least a bit about the person behind the writing and what they care about, like or dislike, and how they have lived. Edna O'Brien, perhaps as much as any other contemporary author living and writing today, exposes her true self through her work, allowing millions of diverse readers a glimpse into her life, feelings, and very heart. She shares with her audience messages about life that regardless of sex, race, ethnic background, religion, occupation, age, or other "restrictive" elements can be embraced by and understood by all.

Edna O'Brien, a "60ish" redhead, has been writing about her life both past and present for some 35 years now under what she herself has described as "a dark shadow" (McQuade 48). Without a doubt, this shadow is cast by her native Ireland. Born the fifth child to a farmer and his wife in the western county of Clare in the 1930's, O'Brien never felt especially loved or desired at home, believing her mother was too tired and disappointed in her own life to be a source of joy and affection for her children. This sort of rejection by her mother forced her to seek the attention of her father who not only could not provide it, but also, for reasons O'Brien cannot fully explain, instilled within her a fear for all men.

The feeling of lovelessness and her fear of men developed early in life were only deepened as she progressed through her strict Catholic education and upbringing. She found it difficult to uphold and find comfort in the harsh rules and beliefs of the Catholic church which surrounded her. With her contempt and disdain for Ireland and all it represented to her growing daily, Edna soon found herself leaving her native land which, she believes is for all writers, a move that "is a prerequisite for writing about Ireland"
citing Joyce among others who have followed the same path (Wilber 12). In London, O'Brien felt she could express herself and her thoughts without being subject to the criticism of the Catholic church and its supporters in Ireland, but, as she quickly learned, her effort to rid herself of this scrutiny was in vain.

In 1960 shortly after her move from Ireland, O'Brien published her first novel in London. *The Country Girls* was met with modest acclaim and commercial success throughout England, but was a great embarrassment and horror to O'Brien's family, the Catholic Church, and her Ireland home. The book, dedicated to her mother, was defaced by her (mother) and the dedication page ripped out of the copy Edna sent and, with the other copies found in local Irish bookstores, burned by a local Catholic priest. Not only had Edna enraged her family, but she also alienated them from the rest of the community who now viewed the whole family with scorn. Her following six books were banned in her native land.

The subjects she covered in her first book, as well as those she continues to write about, show deep emotion often hinting about sex and love that, for one reason or another, is forbidden. Edna writes from her own failed experiences as a Catholic and first as a girl and then as a woman trying vainly to love and be loved. Before making her move out of Ireland, Edna, who claims never to have been in a mutually loving relationship, married her first boyfriend, Ernest Gebler, who was himself an established novelist. The two of them then made the move to London together where they had two boys and an unhappy, unfulfilling marriage. One night while making dinner Edna simply walked out. The two soon divorced and the marriage became yet another failed attempt at love for Edna who remained in London with the children while Gebler returned to Ireland.

O'Brien has only recently begun to be accepted and read by those in Ireland and the attitude there towards her and her work can be described as tolerable at best. She seems rather unfazed by the Irish Catholic views of her realizing and acknowledging that she
will never be popular or highly regarded but not letting these reactions bother her. Perhaps O'Brien's work is too truthful and too realistic for the Irish to handle; they prefer to see themselves in a different, purer light, but O'Brien continues to write for and about them as she knows.

O'Brien's short stories and novels, whether written in the early stages of her career or more recently, seem to be "obsessed" with love as she herself is obsessed (Wilson 9). Readers of her works have come to expect and long for the tales of the "enduring pain of human love" told as only a voice of experience could tell them through the feelings, thoughts, hearts, and souls of a wide variety of female protagonists (Wilber 12). O'Brien indeed does lend herself and her voice wholly to her characters from confused young Catholic girls to lonely middle-aged divorcees who all seem to be speaking fully their ideas and emotions. Edna O'Brien's own experiences in Catholic Ireland are seen in many of her works both directly and indirectly. Covent life, nuns, Catholic holidays, and Irish ways of life often play a significant part in the stories, illustrating clearly her influences and background. Other facets of O'Brien's life including lost love, fears of men, feelings of inadequacy, and isolation appear nearly universally in her works drawing on those experiences O'Brien herself has had due, at least in part, to her time spent in Ireland.

The themes and characters, all centered to varying degrees around the notion of love, can appeal to and clearly speak their message to a broad audience, making O'Brien's works very universal. Three of her short stories, "Epitaph," "What A Sky," and "Sister Imelda," although written from the viewpoint of an Irish Catholic female, deal with concepts and ideas central to all life, making them understood and worthy of appreciation by all.
II.

"Epitaph"

"Epitaph" is one of the exceptional selections from Edna O'Brien's latest short story collection, Lantern Slides, published in 1990. As is the case with all her other works, O'Brien focuses on issues of and related to love. The protagonist is a familiar one to O'Brien and her readers: a middle-aged woman who is the victim of a romance, this time with a married American man. Although O'Brien uses the "exotic" Greek islands and her home of London as the setting for this story, the influence of her time and life in Ireland can still be detected in the tale.

The poignant and painfully truthful story about a London woman's attempts to come to terms with her own life and views on love after an affair has gone bad starts with an upbeat, hopeful statement: "When I first met you I thought it too good to be true. I was incredulous when I found that you, too, were smitten." In true-to-life and O'Brien fashion however, a quick twist of attitude, emotion, and events leads us to the darker side of love with the lonely woman speaking of the first time "I began to have some premonition of your slipping away from me" (53). It is with the dark, unfulfilling love that O'Brien and her characters seem to be most at ease to express themselves.

One quickly notices that the story is written as a series of the woman's thoughts on what she would say given the chance to divulge her thoughts in a one-sided conversation with her ex-lover using "you" and "we" to convey her ideas and feelings on the events which have transpired between them over a period of years. The use of this form to write the story starkly illustrates the isolation of the jilted woman in her thoughts of the affair and her tendency to obsess over the situation years later recounting not only one winter holiday that passed, but admitting to thinking of her ex-lover on one "Christmas that passed, and the next, and the next, and so on for I don't know how many years" (59). She sees all aspects and areas of her life only as they relate to her finished love affair allowing her feelings of hopelessness and loneliness to take over her life causing her, in many
ways, to die as the love died. This death-by-love is also a theme common to O'Brien stories.

However, unlike many other O'Brien protagonists, the woman in "Epitaph" uses not only examples from her own life to show her emotional pain and loss, but also "tells" her lost love about another woman who must cope with life after love. This story-within-the-story involves a woman who is pushed out of her son's heart and her own home when the son returns with a demanding, selfish bride. The tale is effective in showing that the woman (the protagonist in "Epitaph") and her story are not unusual; love lost can change anyone's life completely and permanently at any time for any reason. This sub-story is an example of the many types and degrees of unrequited love O'Brien addresses in her writing and adding depth to and enriching the emotional central story of the protagonist in "Epitaph."

"Epitaph" ends with the woman's recounting of the moment of separation between herself and her lover recalling "We said good-bye, three or four or five times; we clung, we fumbled for words. To think it happened as cleanly as that" (72). This final statement aimed at the lover who left her shows how completely the affair and its end have affected the woman. She is able to recount verbatim conversations that took place between them and uses these episodes to remind herself and him of the love they once shared. These memories have very different effects on the couple, trapping her in the past but serving him only as nostalgic reminders of another time. The description of the break up as happening "cleanly" may very well be true as seen by the man, but to the woman, this statement is full of irony and sarcasm. It would seem to be an amicable ending as such things go, but the woman continues to relive the past in her thoughts and refuses to let go of the love and go on with her life. To her, the ending was anything but clean.

Although written about a middle-aged, single woman, the story told in "Epitaph" can be understood and enjoyed by people of many different backgrounds. Being a 22-year-old single white female college senior studying English/Secondary Education at Ball
State University, I have had some experience with Edna O'Brien's works in the past and have found them to be insightful as well as entertaining reading. My family moved to the small community of Georgetown, Indiana from Lexington, Kentucky, shortly before I entered elementary school. My family still live there and attend Roman Catholic mass each week. Based on background information, it is clear that I have several elements in common with author O'Brien which may influence my feelings towards, understanding of, and appreciation for her works.

After reading "Epitaph," I reacted to and answered the same series of questions I posed to volunteers representing a portion of the diverse population of readers (see appendix for list of questions). To me the theme of "Epitaph" is one of love lost. Although the woman is forced to be physically separated from her lover, she still cannot remove herself from her feelings of love and attachment for the man. The speaker throughout the work is a middle-aged woman who is lost in the past and in her unrequited love for a man who used to be her lover. She tells her story through a series of stories and events recounted from their past told as if she were speaking to him (the ex-lover).

I like the way O'Brien in "Epitaph" expresses raw emotion and illustrates starkly the pain and feeling of loss that come when a romantic relationship does not come to a mutually agreed upon ending. The obsession the woman has with the man is evident in the events retold and language used to vividly describe details and scenes that no one under normal circumstances would commit to memory. I dislike the outcome of the story wishing that, instead of continuing to live in and for the past, this woman would realize the love she shared with this man is dead and overcome it to begin living again. The scene which stands out most in my mind illustrates her living only for this man and the love she has for him regardless of his feelings. She recalls buying a watercolor that she thought he (her ex-lover) would like while waiting for him to return to her knowing all along that her thoughts of being reunited and presenting him with this and other gifts were in vain.
I enjoyed reading "Epitaph" as I do all of Edna O'Brien's works. Although I wish the woman would realize her love is over and stop making this defunct romance the center of her world, I know that this is not O'Brien's way or the way of her protagonists. The realism of characters in her works is raw, often saddening, and always reflects real life.

Also reading "Epitaph" and responding to the same questions is Jeffrey Okrzesik, a sixteen-year-old boy born and raised in my hometown of Georgetown. He is single, a practicing Catholic, and a high school junior who works part-time at a local grocery store.

Jeffrey sees this story simply as a "lady's relationship with a man." He sees the narrator as a woman who is sad because the man left her...the man she always missed. Jeffrey admits that what he likes most about "Epitaph" is the fact that it was "fairly short," but nonetheless found it to be quite boring and this attitude, which he has toward reading in general, may affect his answers. He really didn't enjoy reading this story as a whole, but does remember certain scenes in it which stood out to him, most significantly is the passage where the woman describes getting through "all the Christmases without the man."

Coming from a very different background and offering her insights on "Epitaph" is Dr. Karen L. Bixler-Steves, a professor of Spanish and Applied Linguistics at Ball State University. Dr. Steves was born in Indianapolis, Indiana and currently lives in nearby Cicero. She is 51 years old, married, and a Methodist with some family history of Catholicism among other religions. Having traveled extensively abroad and being a fluent speaker of Spanish, Dr. Steves adds a distinctive viewpoint to the discussion of the story.

To describe the theme of "Epitaph," Dr. Steves refers to a quote from the text, "Love is a prison" (41) and categorizes the protagonist and her man as "star-crossed lovers" bringing to mind the doomed romance of Romeo and Juliet. When trying to describe the speaker, Dr. Steves is quick to note that she did not automatically assume that the speaker was a jilted woman, but thought perhaps it could be a man. Only when the story began to
unfold and reveal that the speakers love had a wife did she realize that the narrator must be "the other woman" addressing her now ex-lover. Dr. Steves also has this to say about the protagonist: "She seems to be a woman of quality who keeps her emotions outwardly in check while suffering in silence on the inside." This "silent suffering" and the sensitive way the woman's feelings are portrayed is what Dr. Steves most enjoyed about this story. She admits however that "at the same time I wish she (the protagonist) would recognize the relationship for what it is" and get on with her life. Dr. Steves recalls most easily the scenes, though few, in which the woman and the man "came together" and "expressed momentary happiness and fulfillment." While enjoying the story, Dr. Steves wishes the outcome was different thinking that the lonely woman "deserved more than she was getting."

Offering an experienced, male point-of-view on "Epitaph" is Jeremy Banks. Jeremy is a senior at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor near the city of Dearborn where he was born and raised. Although he is a student of electrical engineering, he describes himself as a "reader and writer at heart." At 23, Jeremy, a white male with "unknown small amounts of German and Native American" ancestry, is an unbaptised agnostic who has never practiced any organized religion. He is currently single but "in love" with his girlfriend and loves the idea of love.

Jeremy, being a technical person by nature, but having a hopelessly romantic heart, sees the theme of "Epitaph" simply as "love." He elaborates by saying that the love given by the woman was "unconditional," and this love, taken by the man, was "undeserved." He describes the speaker as "a very emotional person...capable of loving someone without limits" even if her love is not returned. The vivid descriptions of emotions and events seen through the speaker's eyes were what drew Jeremy into the story, "(the words) provoke images but (aren't so) explicit not to leave some imagination to the reader" helping him to "totally like" the story. Admitting several times that he thoroughly enjoyed reading "Epitaph," Jeremy cited several incidents which stand out to
him from the story quoting passages from the text including, "My own room, with its Prussian-blue walls, was like a tomb--a tomb that I wanted to break out of, except that I did not know how," (55) and "Her incarceration made my own seem ridiculous, but love is a prison," (60) which poignantly convey the feelings of hopelessness and despair felt by the narrator. More unusually, Jeremy pointed out O'Brien's use of metaphor when describing the woman's emotional state by tying it to events going on around her such as "The prone feathered birds scattered about were like thoughts within my head" (59) and, his personal favorite, "You see, everyone is holding on..." (62). These lines not only show the direction the story is going, but also tell most effectively to Jeremy what is going on in the narrator's mind.

Going even further than Dr. Steves in explanation and analysis of O'Brien and her story, Jeremy details O'Brien's great use of comparison and metaphor to describe not only the scene of what is going on around the narrator, but also what she (the speaker) is thinking. Citing several examples from the text (see above), Jeremy, in spite of his age and lack of formal training in literature, looks deeper into the text than any of the other readers and reveals to himself and others pure examples of emotion as best expressed by O'Brien.

Jeremy seems to have put the most effort into answering the questions and responding to the reading of "Epitaph," but perhaps it only appears that way. It is important when comparing reader responses to recall the differing backgrounds of those surveyed. Jeffrey, for example, came largely to the same conclusions regarding the state of the narrator and her feelings towards the man in the story as did Dr. Steves and Jeremy in spite of his (Jeffrey's) expressed distaste for reading and his lack of higher education. All those questioned mentioned some degree, notion, or category of love when describing the theme of the story. Although Jeffrey did not use the word "love" specifically in his answer, he hinted to the idea of it by focusing on the relationship between the woman and the man. Based on their ages and own relationship experiences, it is not surprising that
Dr. Steves and Jeremy both focused more on the emotional aspects of love in the story than did Jeffrey.

The responses themselves, studied separately from the questions they address, reveal the differences of the respondents. Jeffrey, being young and adverse to reading, gave short, general answers and failed to quote a single passage from the text while Jeremy and Dr. Steves showed their experience with and appreciation for literature by referring to exact passages and lines when responding, even taking time to look up the page numbers as reference points. Nearly all of Jeffrey's answers, although being "correct," are not as complete as those of the other readers. He does differ greatly from the opinion and thoughts of others on at least one point by believing that, at the end of the story, the woman will leave the man and go on with her life causing one to believe, because of his age and lack of experience with deep emotional love, that Jeffrey may not fully understand the message of the story and what O'Brien is trying to convey to her readers.

Despite this one bit of misunderstanding, it is not justified to dismiss all of Jeffrey's thoughts and conclusions on "Epitaph" as they bear resemblance to those of Dr. Steves and Jeremy. Both Dr. Steves and Jeremy see the hopelessness of the relationship and the feelings of despair and isolation felt by the narrator. Their understanding of the story is evident when the passages they quoted are studied. Based on their own lives and loves, it is logical that they would be better suited to read and respond to "Epitaph" than would someone of Jeffrey's background. The pleasure that Jeremy and Dr. Steves had reading "Epitaph" is most likely due in part to their own experiences with love and the fact that they can relate to, at least on some level, the feelings and thoughts of the narrator. They draw the same conclusion from O'Brien's story, the conclusion that is intended; the woman, for whatever reason, cannot let go of the past and or the man and will continue to love and wait for him in vain.
III.

"What a Sky"

Another excellent selection from O'Brien's Lantern Slides short story collection is a tale about a woman and her relationship with her elderly father titled "What A Sky."

Rich in description and detail, this story follows a female protagonist's difficult and heartwrenching visit to her father at a nursing home in Ireland. The somber tone is established even before she actually sees her father as sounds of crows which "denoted death or something more blithe" (75) were heard upon her arrival at the home.

Sympathy is generated for this woman, like many other O'Brien protagonists when she is greeted harshly by her father with a gruff "What kept you?" and these feelings continue throughout the early portion of the story. The woman's attempts to share with her father the gifts she has brought with her father are rebuffed as he is "too disgruntled to appreciate them" (76), and he is even so rude as to use the lavatory without closing the door, leaving her to hear and view his actions. The father goes on to ignore her seemingly helpful and logical suggestions on how to ease his aches and pains and ways to insure his health mumbling to himself about other issues that he sees as important.

Just as O'Brien thoroughly introduces her characters in a manner which generates feelings of warmth and understanding for the visiting daughter, the focus shifts with the father's statement "I spent Christmas Day all by myself" (77) opening up the struggle between the two sides. The pattern of interaction becomes a battle between the father, with his complaints about life and his situation, and the daughter's justification of her own part in his life during which O'Brien expresses the characters' thoughts and feelings vividly.

After the protagonist offers her father a reason why she left him on Christmas Day, an excuse given more for her own comfort than for his, he quickly switches the conversation back to himself, discussing his wonderful friendship with a nun whom he plans to visit in America soon. Not only does the father show great joy about the impossible trip, he is
telling his daughter that he "might not even come back," placing her on the defensive end of things again (78). She complacently listens to his tales of his rough childhood, being "dumped" on relations at an early age following the death of his parents, and how he overcame all these hardships and many more as her thoughts turn to her own childhood and wonders of how and why things could have been different.

O'Brien does a brilliant job of going beyond the present situation between the father and daughter into the years gone by and examining what brought about this battle of strength and wit. Although the daughter has good intentions of looking past her father's words and faults and forgiving him in his old age, she cannot stop seeking the love and attention which she has been denied throughout her life. Since the old man is unable to fill her need for affection and acceptance, she is unable to forgive his current behavior. They are both desperately in need of each other and too stubborn to allow it to happen.

Indeed the daughter realizes her own need to have the father in her life and plans to make things good between them again by taking him for a grand outing. She thinks of this wonderful surprise which she has planned for him while he again retraces the steps of his great life, steps that, as he sees it, unjustly lead him to the nursing home and a lonely life "which is no life for a father" (82). The outing, like all other cheery and thoughtful things she plans for her father, are done for the daughter's own piece of mind and self-satisfaction rather than the sincere desire to do something nice for her father. She admits that she "wants with all her heart to see him happy" (84), but is unwilling to do all that it takes to make him happy. The daughter has grown to become cold to her father just as he has been to her.

Determined to remedy the situation, the daughter rises to announce her great outing treat to her father but each time is stopped by her feelings that he will ask her to show him overwhelming love as she did when she was a child. She knows that now she cannot share love with him as he killed her love for him years ago by not returning it. Making excuses for him and reasons why it was acceptable for him not to dote on or even know
his daughter years before no longer comfort or move her but instead upset and frighten her; the daughter decides it is time to depart alone. Listening politely while he finishes a story of his travels from the past, she rises to go disliking "herself even more than she ever disliked him" (87). She vows to return soon and silently promises herself that she will "patch things up," knowing full well that that is impossible.

In "What A Sky," O'Brien again tells a story to which many people from differing backgrounds can relate. Feelings of acceptance and love are essential in nearly every relationship and are universal themes with which all people are familiar. Following my own reading of the story, I reacted to and answered the same questions which were posed to the other readers representing a sample group of readers.

"What A Sky" focuses on the dysfunctional relationship between a grown woman and her elderly father. Clearly strong feelings of loyalty, devotion, and, on some level, love define the relationship but other issues get in the way confusing emotions. The daughter harbors deep resentment for the lack of affection and attention the father, for whatever reasons, gave her as a child while she supplied him with unconditional love. Now, when the father is old and softened, he is able to openly love her to some degree while she cannot or will not return this most-needed love. The conflicting voices inside the daughter's head are heard easily through O'Brien's writing expressing her (the daughter's) desire to "see him happy" in one sentence and her fears of "being with him at all" in the next (84). Vivid, descriptive words make this story enjoyable to read while the gloom and sadness depicted makes the tale unlikeable.

The images, episodes, and/or scenes which stand out most in my mind are those which describe the going-ons around the daughter and her father. These descriptions of the noisy crows, the "dark, massed and purposeful" clouds (75), the physical state of the nursing home itself having "rain-splashed" windows, and the smells and sights of the other nursing home residents paint a hopeless, cold picture which complements the feelings of the daughter and her father. I think of the action between the two being
played out in black and white while their surroundings are a consistent gray leading to a most depressing story. It is for this reason that I believe "What A Sky" to be worthwhile, "good" reading, but not necessarily enjoyable.

Julia Hume, a volunteer reader of O'Brien's "What A Sky" agrees that the realism of the story is wonderful, but depressing. A life-long resident of Noblesville, Indiana, Julia is a 47-year-old housewife and mother of two college students who married a "local man" at the age of 19 and never attended college herself. A white, non-practicing Methodist, her hometown of Noblesville is made up of many people like herself and Julia is very content and happy with her life there. Although her parents died while she was young, Julia experienced many feelings similar to those of the protagonist when dealing with the care of her grandparents.

Julia sees the theme of O'Brien's story as the role reversal that takes place between children and parents when parents age. While the daughter was able to love her father as a child in spite of his lack of affection for her, she is now unable, in her adult years, to love him as he now has love for her. This relationship between the narrator and her father is complex. Julia says that the father believes he gave the daughter a good life providing food, shelter, and money even if love was missing and now he "feels that she (the daughter) owes him." She goes on to say that the daughter "seems to want to do nice things for her father" but cannot risk "another broken heart" and that sometimes it is "hardest to show kindness and love to the ones we love the most."

The story is "very well written realistically depicting life between a child and their aging parent," and Julia believes the narrator did an excellent job of setting the mood for the story as well. The cloudy day described as the narrator entered the nursing home brought to mind Julia's own visits to see her grandmother. She (Julia) also pointed out the "clouded" past of the father who lost his parents at an early age: "I feel our view of life is clouded by our past experiences...possibly why it was so difficult for him (the father) to show his daughter the love that she needed."
Although the story clearly held Julia's attention and interested her, she feels that it was not one that should be called "enjoyable." Dealing with unpleasant issues that most children must face, she thinks of "being around aging parents and observing their deterioration... (which) reminds us of our own mortality." This "reminder" is undoubtedly something O'Brien intended.

Offering many of the same thoughts on "What A Sky" is Gayle Hack, a 61-year-old wife, mother, and grandmother. Born in Augusta, Georgia, Gayle married and moved shortly after finishing high school. She now lives in Georgetown, Indiana, where she is retired from cafeteria work. A "very practicing Baptist" of Irish, English, and Indian descent, Gayle loves people and loves reading and was more than happy to read O'Brien's short story and share her ideas.

Simply put, Gayle believes that this story is about a father and daughter who "love each other very much but don't know how to show it." The description of the daughter entering the nursing home stands out most to her, and this, being depressing and sad, sets the mood for the story...a story that Gayle really didn't like. "It (is) sad to see the non-communication...it made me feel bad, maybe I could see some of myself in it."

Gayle's views, which echo those of myself and Julia, are largely shared by Richard Okrzesik as well. Richard is a Polish Roman Catholic born and raised in Chicago, Illinois who moved to Georgetown, Indiana with his wife and three children about 18 years ago. A college educated purchasing and sales agent, Richard claims to have never read a book in his life and was pressed into reading and responding to "What A Sky."

"Stormy" is the word Richard uses to describe the relationship between a father living in the past and a daughter dreaming of a life in the future. "The daughter wants to give her father the love she feels he never gave her as a child, but she cannot." Richard relates the situation to the song "Cats in the Cradle" which chronicles the life of a child who grows up making the same mistakes his father did: "He's grown up just like me...my boy is just like me." Richard believes that the narrator/daughter had no intention of taking her
father anywhere and this detail stands out most to him. Although he would not have chosen this story to read himself, Richard sees it as well written flowing "from start to finish."

In spite of varying ages and backgrounds, the readers of O'Brien's "What A Sky" responded in very similar ways to the story and the questions. All viewed the conflict between the daughter and her elderly father as sad but realistic. The fact that the daughter was denied love from her father throughout her childhood was central in all the responses and that seemed, to varying degrees, to justify the daughter's cold treatment of the father now. Each of those responding, whether they were avid readers or not, seemed to appreciate the story rather than enjoy it citing the depressing subject and stark realism of the story as reasons they would not choose to read it themselves.

Vivid descriptions of the weather surrounding the nursing home and the nursing home itself were the most memorable portions of the story for the three women readers while Richard, the lone male, had thoughts centering around the intentions of the characters, specifically the daughter. This difference is most interesting when considering that Richard, besides being the only male, was the only non-reader among the group and his selection of "stand-out" passages from the story involves not only reading the written words, but also interpreting them. In any case, Julia, Gayle, Richard, and I all came to the same overall conclusions about this selection agreeing that it is a story which all people can relate to even if they don't find it enjoyable reading.
"Sister Imelda"

The final short selection to be studied is taken from O'Brien's earlier collection Returning and reprinted in A Fanatic Heart. "Sister Imelda" is one of Edna O'Brien's most well known and most acclaimed short stories. Taking place in Ireland and dealing with the life of a young Catholic girl as she makes her way through school in a convent, it is O'Brien completely in her element.

The setting of this short story, "Sister Imelda," is essential to the relationship between the young student narrator and the title character. The relationship they share develops to help both fill an empty place in their lives. The narrator and Sister Imelda are placed in the same harsh, intolerable environment, and there they find comfort in each other. The convent, with all its dreariness and dreadfulness, is what makes this unlikely friendship possible and even necessary.

Life at the convent for the nuns as well as the boarding students is not at all a comfortable one. Housed in "cells" with damp, cold beds, the residents are allowed only to leave at designated times with these being few and far between. The given meals consist of "bacon and cabbage or a peculiar stringy meat" (125) and are far from enjoyable serving only to further depress those subjected to them daily. Banned from taking baths because "they are considered immoral" (138), students must wash with cold water from enamel basins and let out cries in discomfort as they bathe. Life inside the cold confines of the convent is made worse by the discouragement of communication with the outside world. Students are allowed to write home only once a week (nuns once a month) and these letters are censored. These conditions and restrictions make it nearly impossible to maintain a loving, close relationship with anyone on the outside. This forces the narrator to search within the convent walls for someone with whom she can have an intimate friendship. The narrator finds the love and attention she is lacking when she forms a powerful relationship with Sister Imelda.
Sister Imelda enters the life of the narrator as a geometry teacher and quickly becomes so much more providing a break for the girl from the usual solitude and gloom she lives in. Leaving her small but meaningful gifts such as holy cards and prayer books, Sister Imelda immediately takes an interest in the narrator and her affections are returned by the narrator who becomes known throughout the convent as the teacher's pet. Their friendship begins to grow and flourish into a sort of mother-daughter relationship, and the narrator wants nothing more than to please Sister Imelda and to win her attention and praise.

The kind of loving, bonding friendship which develops between the nun and her student is unheard of and frowned upon. However, they remain unshaken and their loving escape from the cruel confinement of the convent continues to take place. The friends share holiday gifts and enjoy each other's company just as a young girl and her mother do, with Sister Imelda encasing the narrator "in a shower of silent kisses" (133) after the play to show she is proud of "her" girl. The nun continues to mold the young girl, stressing studies and vocation above all and providing the narrator the attention, love, and encouragement that normal convent life, with its strict policies and harsh ways, deprived her of.

Their relationship grows throughout the school year as the narrator offers sympathy for the death of Sister Imelda's brother and attempts to comfort her as she was comforted by the nun. As the narrator nears graduation, she is thinking of becoming a nun so that she may live side by side with Sister Imelda forever and makes the nun aware of her intentions. Sister Imelda shows her faith in the young narrator by revealing her hair color, an unheard of act. Promises are made to keep in touch and be reunited, but soon the outside world proves too much for the narrator who all but forgets the memory of Sister Imelda.

This relationship, which made life inside the convent bearable, has no place in the outside world, as the narrator quickly learns. She meets up with Sister Imelda years later
and is unable to look her in the eye or even acknowledge her presence out of embarrassment and pity. The love they shared was out of necessity and a result of their environment; it was not an everlasting love, but a conditional love limited to the setting which O’Brien so artfully brought to life.

Although I have never attended Catholic School or been to a convent, I have heard many stories about the harsh way of life endured by the students and nuns as well and can imagine the need for a relationship similar to that of the narrator and Imelda as a means of survival. The theme of the story centers around the unlikely yet necessary relationship which develops between a boarding student and a teaching nun as they struggle to make it through the harsh life inside the convent. The relationship develops as any friendship does with the nun and the narrator exchanging gifts, helping each other, and sharing secrets. What strengthens this bond is the danger of the situation; nuns and students are forbidden to become close and must maintain a strictly professional relationship or be severely punished.

I love the way the story is told from the point of view of a confused adolescent girl. O’Brien does a wonderful job conveying the mixture of feelings felt by the narrator toward Sister Imelda and the situation as a whole wanting to "run after her and say that I was sorry to have caused such distemper" (128) in one instance, and then being completely "happy to be near her" (129). It seems to be the narrator’s first time consciously developing a loving relationship and she makes mistakes along the way which are very human and very real. I found the story to be a complete joy to read wishing only perhaps that the outcome was a bit different but knowing that that is not O’Brien’s way.

It is the ending, when the narrator sees Sister Imelda on a bus years after leaving the convent school and ending communication with the nun and all thoughts of religious life, which stands out most to me. This passage reminds me of the earlier episode when, after being defeated in a game of rounders, the nun tells the narrator that "humiliation is the
greatest test of Christ's love, or indeed any love" (136). Since the narrator is unable to confront "her nun," and face the humiliation of telling her the truth after all the time that has passed, she never really shared a love with the nun. The relationship was one of convenience, and lasted only as long as both women lived within the restricted confines of the harsh, cold convent. The "test of love" proved to be too much for the relationship.

Seeing the story in much the same way is Keith Okrzesik, a 20 year old college student from Georgetown, Indiana. Keith was born in St. Joseph, Michigan, but moved to Southern Indiana before he was even walking. He is of mixed ethnic background including Polish, French, and German and is a sometimes practicing Catholic. A business major who doesn't read very often, Keith was surprisingly willing to read and respond to "Sister Imelda."

Keith describes the story as a tale about the relationship between a young, troubled girl and a new nun at her school who heavily influences her. What starts off as a student/teacher relationship evolves into a very intimate friendship. O'Brien's use of the narrator's point of view and strong imagery made the story interesting and easy to follow. One of the images that stands out most is the description of Imelda "sitting on the edge of the table swaying her legs" (129) making her seem very human. Keith adds that the story "seemed to be more of an excerpt from a novel than a short story. There was no real closure at the end" and this, along with the actual tale, is enough to make Keith decide that it is not one he would have chosen to read.

In contrast to Keith, Diane Okrzesik, a married mother of three born and raised in Chicago, Illinois and currently living in Georgetown, Indiana was eager to read "Sister Imelda." A practicing Catholic, Diane attended a church school through eighth grade then went on to an all girls Catholic high school to finish her formal education. She currently works as the secretary for special education transportation for the local public school corporation and is involved in many activities, leaving little time to read.

Diane immediately recognizes the special relationship between the narrator and Sister
Imelda and sees the love they share as an unequal one. "Sister Imelda's love for the narrator is one of a special teacher-student relationship, while the narrator's love for Sister Imelda is a homosexual fantasy type of relationship." In any case, Diane believes that the love and the relationship are encouraged by Sister Imelda in spite of the fact that it is considered improper for such an intimate relationship to be shared and likes the way that the nun addresses the narrator showing Sister Imelda to be human and feeling like everyone else. Having seen this "human" side to the nun, Diane greatly dislikes the outcome, wishing that "they would have spoken to each other."

Diane is certain that part of the reason the relationship between the two grows is because of the narrator's thoughts of becoming a nun and how Sister Imelda, as would anyone, felt flattered. Thoughts of becoming a nun, as Diane recalls, are part of every girl attending Catholic school and the passages when the narrator considers it such as "at certain moments it did seem enticing to become a nun" (125) are her favorites. She enjoyed the story because of her own Catholic school experiences and the way O'Brien showed the sacrifices and hardships nuns go through for their vocation.

Offering the final response to "Sister Imelda" is Loretta Fern Wheeler, a 70-year-old housewife and mother born, raised, and currently residing in Georgetown, Indiana. Fern is a "good person with strong family ties, love of God, church (Methodist), and places a great value on friendship." She attended local public schools through high school and is currently active in church and community activities.

Fern sees the relationship as one that illustrates the need one person may have to seek approval and acceptance from another for everything they do, namely the narrator looking to the nun for this. Under freer circumstances, Fern believes the relationship could be a lesbian one but under the close scrutiny of the other nuns and students it is not developed. "Imelda made living in the confines of this dreary place more bearable for this young girl" and did so by showing her own human side to the narrator. Like Keith, Fern enjoyed the passage when Imelda gave the narrator the jam tarts feeling like it made
Imelda more real and human. Through gestures like this, Imelda softened to the narrator, although she tried to maintain a strict and firm hand, and it is these elements which make the story especially enjoyable to Fern.

"Sister Imelda" is definitely the most "O'Brien-ish" story of the ones discussed embodying many of the elements that make O'Brien's work her own including a female protagonist in an Irish Catholic setting. In spite of these elements, the tale is one that can be enjoyed and understood on many different levels by a variety of readers. Keith and I take the relationship between the narrator and the nun to be a close, loving, intimate friendship; a relationship that could be described as a mother-daughter relationship. Diane and Fem, somewhat surprisingly, see elements of homosexuality and believe that the relationship could be more under different circumstances. Perhaps that is where the largest difference lies; I see the relationship as one of circumstance that would never have existed at all outside of the walls of the convent.

Regardless of what type of relationship they have, all the readers agree that it is a necessary one. Without the love, affection, and support that the narrator and nun give each other, life inside the convent would be too much to bear. The human element O'Brien gives to the nun makes this unlikely relationship one that is realistic and can be understood by all regardless of religious background, age, or sex.
V.

Conclusion

As a future English teacher, this project has proved to be an enlightening task allowing me to study a variety of "students." It is important to remember that the interpretation of all literature is subjective: that is, viewpoints, opinions, and ideas vary from reader to reader depending on a number of variables. While one individual may consider a work worthless, another may see it as a masterpiece. Both could be correct as long as these conclusions are justified.

Justification of an opinion or idea pertaining to a work of literature involves personal analysis as well as specific detail support from the writing. It is important to stress to students that they must do more than just read the words on the page; students must understand their meaning. Tolerance of different thoughts and/or "takes" on the point or purpose of a piece of writing must be exercised just as complete and thorough study must be conducted to adequately back a conclusion. Keeping these ideas in mind, any work can be studied and appreciated by any reader.

Universal themes are popular subjects of study in literature. As a teacher, I can present information and resources to students so they may form their own opinions on subjects familiar to all on some level such as family life, nature, death, illness, and, as was the case in this study, love. Although opinions and thoughts on the value of a work may vary as the background and experiences of the readers vary, constants in theme and underlying meaning remain, as was proven in this study.

In "Sister Imelda," "What A Sky," and "Epitaph," the protagonist women have an air of hopelessness about them. The stories are rich in detail and vivid description but leave the readers wanting better, more satisfactory outcomes for the players. Part of what draws readers into Edna O'Brien's writings is the lure of the impossible; her protagonists are not built to overcome the pains of love. It is this element of love which is common to all her tales that makes them irresistible and understandable to people from all walks of
life. There is love everywhere.
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WORKS CITED


APPENDIX

A. Letter of request for participation in study
B. Personal/Biographical information sheet
C. Questions
Greetings!

As part of my Ball State Honors College graduation requirements I am writing a thesis based on the work of author Edna O'Brien. As part of this project, I am asking you, along with several others, to read one of O'Brien's short fiction works and answer some biographical and literary questions. Please fill out the personal information as best you can supplying any details you believe to be pertinent. Also, feel free to mark on the pages of the story as you go along and make notes of things that you find particularly good, or not so good. The literary questions are designed to make you think about what you read and to help me understand what you really think...there are no right or wrong answers and it is important that you respond honestly to all questions.

The enclosed envelope is provided for you to return the story and question sheets to me as soon as possible. The tentative deadline set for this paper is May 6th so prompt responses are appreciated. Thank you so much for your time and effort helping to make my thesis a success.

If you have any questions or concerns, I can be reached at (317) 214-9210 and/or Wilson Hall Box 67 Muncie, IN 47306.

Sincerely,

Heather M. Okrzesik
PERSONAL/BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

Name: ____________________________________________

Age: __________________

Birthplace: __________________________________________

Current Home Address: _____________________________________________________________

Current Phone Number: ___________________________________________________________

Sex: Male or Female (circle one)

Marital Status: Single, Married, Divorced, Widowed, Remarried, Other (circle all that apply and explain if necessary)

Religious Background: (practicing or non-practicing)

Ethnic Background: _________________________________________________________________

Educational Background: (completed formal education thru 8th grade, high school, etc.)

Occupation: ________________________________________________________________

Other: (anything else you believe to be important; what defines or characterizes you)

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________
Questions

Questions for "Epitaph"
1. What do you like about this story? What do you dislike?
2. Describe the speaker/narrator and her relationship to the man in the story.
3. What is the theme (or main idea) of this story?
4. What detail, scene, episode, written passage, etc. stands out most to you?
5. Did you enjoy reading this story? Why or why not?

Questions for "What a Sky"
1. What is the main idea (theme) of the story?
2. Describe the relationship between the narrator and her father.
3. What do you like about this story? Dislike?
4. What detail, passage, scene, episode, etc. stands out most to you?
5. Did you enjoy this story? Why or why not?

Questions for "Sister Imelda"
1. What is the main idea (theme) of the story?
2. Describe the relationship between Sister Imelda and the narrator.
3. What do you particularly like about the story? Dislike?
4. What detail, scene, episode, written passage, etc. stands out most to you?
5. Did you enjoy reading this story? Why or why not?