

Kate O' Brien on transforming power

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I am honoured to have been asked to speak here this weekend. I must also confess quite a considerable degree of surprise. I was not, and am not, a good literature student – and it is with a sense of wonder, and some trepidation that I find myself addressing this very well informed gathering.

The *Transforming Power of Money* is a very apposite theme for a Kate O'Brien Weekend. Money is an important background to many of her novels (particularly the Mellick series). Interestingly, many of the characters in these novels are at ease with money ... and with the humble origins of their families. Money was also an issue in her own life. At times she was well off. For much of her life, though, lack of money, and worries about money, were big issues.

This morning I would like to talk about two aspects of the theme of transformation as presented in two of her novels. The first is her handling of the theme of unselfish love – leading to spiritual and personal growth. The other is the transforming power of obsession and control – and its ultimately damaging and tragic outcomes.

But first a bit of family history. Kate O'Brien's mother, Katty Thornhill of Kilfinane and my grandfather, Thomas Thornhill of Ballyriggeran, Kilfinane, Co Limerick were first cousins. Unfortunately, links between the O'Briens and the Thornhills became quite tenuous. Katty died in 1906 when Kate was a young girl. My grandfather was widowed as a young man with five young children – the eldest of whom was my father, John, who was six when his mother, Bridget Mullins, died in 1926. My grandfather later remarried and had three more children. Life was clearly busy and challenging for him and his family and I suspect he had little time and opportunity for keeping up links with distant relatives. In any event Boru House in Limerick had by then been sold after Kate's father's death.

My late aunt Sister Joan Thornhill played a big part in keeping Kate's reputation alive in our family. She had been a post graduate English, particularly Anglo- Irish literature, student and lecturer, before she was diverted into a successful career as an academic administrator in the UK. Notwithstanding Kate O'Brien's falling foul of the Censorship Board in Ireland she was very proud of her cousin. Joan had collected Kate O'Brien's

books (including some first editions) throughout her life. Some months before she died, she had much to my surprise given me a full set. Her main motivation in doing so was, I think, her confidence that Maura, my wife, would look after them well and nurture Kate O' Brien's memory and the family connection.

Kate O' Brien was born in Limerick (fictionalised as Mellick in some of her books) in 1897. Her father, Tom O Brien was the owner of a thriving business - buying and selling blood stock. He had inherited this business from his father, also Thomas O' Brien, a tenant farmer who had been evicted from his farm in Bruree in about 1850 and had made it, apparently in middle age, into Limerick. There he built up a substantial business. Her grandfather's rise from evicted tenant farmer to prosperous dealer in bloodstock was apparently quite rapid. Kate's father was born in 1852 not long after his own father's arrival into Limerick and, in what was then a mark of upward class mobility, (and maybe still is?) was educated by the Jesuits! Grandfather O' Brien appears to have been an assertive man. He built a substantial villa in Limerick beside his paddock and stables, which he called Boru House. This house had the O' Brien coat of arms emblazoned onto the roof ridge. This was where Kate was born. She was proud of her birthplace, Limerick, her origins and her class. They provide the settings for some of her novels – including *Without my Cloak*, *The Ante Room* and *Pray for the Wanderer*.

Her mother died in 1903 of cancer when Kate was a little over five years old. Her memories of her mother are faint and perhaps not surprisingly, she was very attached to her recollections of her mother's memory and family. Three of her mother's sisters feature in *Presentation Parlour* – an affectionate family memoir written in 1963 about her female relatives. In the same book there is a tendency to romanticise not just her O' Brien ancestry but also the Thornhills.

The transforming power of love

As we know before she was six Kate was sent to Laurel Hill convent in Limerick as a boarder by her father. Laurel Hill, a convent school established by the French Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus (FCJs) was, and still is, a leading school in Limerick. In Kate O' Brien's time it was a boarding school with over twenty teaching nuns, twenty – three lay nuns and forty students! Fictionalised as Sainte Famille, Laurel Hill is the setting for one of her best known novels "*The Land of Spices*" which was published in 1941. The two main characters are Anna Murphy, who like Kate herself, begins school at the age of six and the Reverend Mother of the Convent, Mother Marie Helene Archer.

At the book's opening in 1906, the Reverend Mother is presiding over a reception ceremony for new postulants. The account is enlivened by a colourful description of the infatuation for one of the postulants by some of the older girls. Mother Helene is at the end of her emotional and religious tether. We understand that she has been identified by the elderly Mother General of her order, who is based in the mother house in Brussels, as leadership material and has been sent to Ireland as Mother Superior of the Mellick convent and school. Born of English parents and brought up and educated in Belgium

she dislikes Ireland and particularly what she sees as the narrowness, insularity, complacency and authoritarianism of Irish nationalism and its impact on education. We quickly get the sense that Reverend Mother's spiritual crisis and aridity has been a long time coming. As a young nun, reports of various Reverend Mothers had praised her competence as a teacher and her austerity of devotion, but had commented on her apparent fear of love – according to one Reverend Mother “*even of the love of God*”. She feels unfit to lead the Mellick community and has drafted a letter to the Mother General asking to be relieved of her post. Her decision is changed by the impact made on her by the young Anna Murphy whose situation elicits her pity. Anna is the daughter of an alcoholic father and an immature mother whose life and decisions are dominated by her own narrow minded and autocratic mother – who awkwardly is paying for Anna's education. Mother Archer's reflections about Anna's situation bring back memories of her own childhood and particularly her relationship with her father. Something is wrong but we have to wait some time for the full story.

Anna, at the Reverend Mother's bidding recites a poem at a Sunday ceremony of thanksgiving in the school. Kate O' Brien describes the emotional reactions this induces in Helen Archer.

Reverend Mother's eyes fell on [Anna].And she thought gently that it was pathetic to be forced, when so small to become one of a large, alien body, merely because parents had neither the sense nor the sensitivity to keep a child at home. She reflected that the confusions created by parents for children are the most deep and dark of all, and that the relationship of parent and child is grievously important. She thought with sudden bitter sorrow of her father.....Reverend Mother heard, on the little voice wild floods and cataracts of memory. Much more than memory. She felt a storm break in her hollow heartShe saw this baby in herself, herself in those tear wet eyes

This interior episode calms her down, restores her energy and confidence and she decides to stay in Ireland.

Reverend Mother's mentoring of Anna is one of the themes of the book. This includes her skilful handling of some of the jealousies and narrow mindedness directed at Anna by one of the nuns and some of the pupils. She plays a critical role in helping Anna regain her equilibrium after the death of her much loved brother, Charlie, in a swimming accident. This mentoring takes place at a distance. Reverend Mother is careful to guide Anna's progress towards independence and adulthood. In this respect *The Land of Spices* develops a theme which recurs in Kate O' Brien's writings – the right of women to education, personal independence and their own careers and life choices. A crunch point comes at the end of Anna's schooling. She wins a County Council Scholarship to university but her grandmother announces that she has fixed Anna up with a job in the bank. Anna is devastated but with a bit of deft manoeuvring, including enlisting the help and influence of the Bishop, Reverend Mother checkmates Granny, and Anna, like Kate O' Brien herself goes to college.

There are other themes in *“The Land of Spices”* – including the theme which builds up to the central dramatic moment which led its banning by the Censorship Board in 1941. These themes are worked out against the backdrop of the spiritual and aesthetic world of the Mellick Convent, with its French inspired routines and conventions including the the Order’s motto of *La Pudeur et la Politess*. I would like to read a short extract which describes the emotional atmosphere on a May evening when the girls were taking their Night Recreation out of doors. This extract skilfully juxtaposes the subtlety erotic sensual character of the evening with the austerity of the convent.

“On this Sunday evening of May, the sky, open and infinite, renewed its glory in the radiant breast of the lake; the hills had the dark bloom of grapes and seemed to breathe and sigh; the impassioned flaming garden, held in as it was by conventual order and design, seemed for that all the more at breaking point – obliterated. The perfume of the wallflowers was palpable, troubling the air. Fuschia and sweet geranium foamed along the terrace, and pleasure cries, the distant sounds of bathers and boaters, rang sadly to the children from the far shore of the water.

But the trees of the convent spread their wide and tranquilising arms, and the great house stood deep based in reproachful calm, secure in its rule, secure in Christ against the brief assaults of evening or of roses. Girls about to leave, awaiting life, felt this dismissal by the spirit of the house of the unanswered lovely conflict implicit in the hour: heard the same victory in the voices, beyond the lawn, of nuns taking recreation in Bishop’s walk.

Other themes in the book include the growing influence of Irish political and cultural nationalism – which is not presented very favourably – and the evolution of the order of La Compagnie de la Sainte Famille. Just as Anna had been mentored by Mother Helene Archer, so she herself has been mentored, and closely observed, by the saintly but worldly wise old Mother General. As a young nun, before her assignment to Limerick she had spent some time as Mother Assistant General, in the mother house in Brussels where she herself had gone to school. In this post she received what Kate O’ Brien interestingly describes as Staff College under the Field Marshall’s eye.

“One morning Mere Générale examined a confidential report from Pondicherry on the lax seeming conduct of a young member of the community there. She discussed it with her assistant, seeming frankly to desire a moral judgement from her. Convention would have demanded, from this subordinate, an expression of pious anxiety, tinged with shock. on the suspected offence.

“How old are you?” Mother General asked her.

“I am twenty-nine, Mere Général”.

“So young? Yet already you don’t know right from wrong”.

Those of us who have worked in public policy will savour this exchange. There is a flavour here (but without the cynicism) of Talleyrand and his reputed counsel to young diplomats of "*Surtout pas trop de zèle.*"!

There is perhaps a consistency here with Mother Helene's parting advice later in the novel when Anna is about to leave school?

Spend your gifts, and try to be good. And be the judge of your own soul; but never, I implore you, set up as judge of another. Commentator, annotator, if you like, but never judge.

Meanwhile back in Brussels, Mere Generale knew that she could be the last Francophone occupant of her post. The demographics of the order were changing, with Anglophone nuns from the Irish, American and Australian provinces becoming the majority. In Mere Générale's world view the Americans and Australians were also Irish.... and the time was not yet right for the Irish to lead the order. But the inevitable had to be faced. Helene Archer, with her English parents and Brussels education was an ideal transitional figure. Her Irish posting was an essential part of Mere Générale's succession plan. In the final chapters we learn of Mere Générale's death and of Helene Archer's calm and accepting succession to the post of Mother General....and, again I quote

The trend of her thought surprised her, for it showed that she had slipped at once into acceptance of her new responsibility, and that she was not for the moment more than decently afraid of it.Perhaps she liked power, she conceded to herself; perhaps such power as she had wielded here had been more compensation than she knew for day to day frustrations; and perhaps she was even so conceited that as to let herself hope that, always trusting in God's grace, she had learnt over the years to understand power a little, and to use it with care.

This is an interesting embrace of authority, particularly the implied injunction to use power with care. The extract is one of a number where Kate O' Brien describes the complexity and politics of the Compaigne Saint Famille and its engagement with its environment. She is calmly asserting the right of women to achieve high office, to exercise power and to behave politically - a very progressive view in 1941.

The key psychological and spiritual drama in the novel is Helene Archer's spiritual reconciliation with her father, facilitated in very substantial part by her own unselfish engagement with Anna and her development. She had grown up in Brussels with her English parents. After her mother's death she had become a boarder in the mother house school of the order of Sainte Famille. Shortly before leaving school she had told her father that she did not intend to become a nun. After her final term in school the plan was that she would go to Italy with her father and then begin her university studies. One Saturday afternoon in the final term, at the bidding of one of the nuns she drops in unannounced to her home to pick some roses for the school chapel. She looks into her father's study.

“Two people were there. But neither saw her; neither felt her shadow as it froze across the sun”

The dramatic moment was seeing her father unknown to him and to his companion, in what Kate O’Brien describes in a short sentence as *the embrace of love* with a younger male friend.

The novel describes her psychological, religious and spiritual trauma, her anger at her father and her sudden decision, not explained to anyone, to renounce the world and join the Compagnie de la Sainte Famille.

This episode is of course the crux of the spiritual and developmental crisis faced by Helen Archer. She ultimately, through the mediation of her engagement with Anna forgives her father. Today, I suspect, *The Land of Spices* would be seen as a moral and uplifting book. But in 1941 it incurred the wrath of the Censorship of Publications Board. It was published in February that year and banned in May. A review published in the Irish Independent in March of that year probably reflects very well a prevailing view. In a piece entitled “*A Masterpiece Spoiled*”, the reviewer while admiring the book felt that

One could with charitable tolerance overlook some irritating passages. To use the word “loutish” in reference to a priest, and put into the Bishop’s mouth words about education and the Irish language which are little better than gibberish, might be forgiven. But there is one single sentence in the book so repulsive that the book should not be left where it would fall into the hands of very young people.

The ban was withdrawn in 1946 by a newly established appeals board.

Kate left Laurel Hill to go to UCD in June 1916. Her father also died that year. The family business and finances went downhill and Boru House was sold in 1918. Kate was now in UCD and effectively homeless. In 1919 she graduated with an honours degree in English and French and from then on had to earn her living. Her first full time job was as a translator on the foreign news page of the Manchester Guardian. Her next job was as a teacher of English in a Catholic convent school in Hampstead. This was then followed by six months working as a secretary to her brother in law, Stephen O’ Mara, a successful Limerick business man who had been sent to the US by Michael Collins to coordinate a fundraising campaign for the new Irish State. After her return from America she went to Spain to work as an English teacher (an “Irish Miss”) to the young son and daughter of a wealthy Basque surgeon. This experience provides the background for *Mary Lavelle* (published in 1936) – which was also banned by the Censorship Board. Her time in Spain seems to have been happy for all concerned and she retained a life long love for the country. But she left suddenly after about 9 months – apparently to get married to a Dutch journalist, Gustaaf Renier whom she had met in London. The marriage was short lived. She never referred to her marriage in her autobiographical writings and interestingly when he published his autobiography in 1933 he makes no mention of her even though by then she was a well know dramatist – and they had apparently remained

in friendly contact – divorcing only in 1938. The marriage also gave rise to an unproven rumour that Peter, an adopted son of her sister Nance O’Mara, was Kate’s son.

After the breakdown of her marriage she began working again, and she also began writing professionally. Her first play *Distinguished Villa* staged in 1926 was a success in the West End, prompting Séan O’ Casey to send her a congratulatory telegram “*Dublin ventures to salute Limerick*”.

Following this success her life was that of a professional writer and lecturer. In addition to 15 novels and plays, her output included travel books and a very substantial body of journalism.

Interestingly the play, *Distinguished Villas* had an English setting. Some English critics criticised her for her lack of insight into the English. This may have prompted her to turn to Ireland for subject material. From then on the two principal, but not exclusive, geographic poles in her novels were Ireland (particularly Mellick) and Spain. The Mellick novels, with the exception of *The Land of Spices* were minor family sagas. In *Without My Cloak* and in *The Ante Room* the crises and characters in the prosperous Considine and Muldoon families provide the setting. The Considines, like the O’ Briens, had moved quickly up the economic and social scale, they were not politically active and were comfortable with their gracious, haut bourgeois and Catholic life styles – but interestingly (and not always the case in Ireland) they were proud of their modest beginnings. In *Without My Cloak*, the founder of the dynasty is not the evicted tenant farmer Tom O’ Brien but, Anthony Considine, a pub brawling horse thief whose son John subsequently develops a thriving animal feed business.

The transforming power of obsession and control

That Lady is a sharp break with the Mellick/ Ireland focus. The story centres on a fictionalised account of the relationship between two historical characters, King Phillip II of Spain and a leading Spanish noblewoman, Ana Mendoza, the Princess of Eboli. Interestingly, Kate does not bring in Irish connections into the novel – there are no cameo roles for the Gaelic chieftains who were opening up lines of communication with Philip or references to the Spanish political interest in Ireland. The novel was published in 1946 but seems to have lived in Kate’s head for six years before that.

Ana’s family were the leading noble family in Castile and, though loyal, tend to regard Philip and his father, the Emperor Charles V as Teutonic arrivistes. Ana had been married off by Philip to one of his leading ministers – with whom she had an apparently happy marriage. When the novel opens Ana is widowed and living in her country estates. Philip arrives in state and courteously, but firmly, instructs her to return to Madrid. Ana has always attached importance to an early affection between Philip and herself from her single days and indeed as a girl felt that she was destined to be his wife. She feels free, both because of her noble background and this affection, to speak openly to the King.

Her return to Madrid brings her into contact with one of her late husband's protégés, Antonio Perez, who is now Secretary of State. Ana, coolly - and we sense initially, as an assertion of her independence - takes Antonio as her lover. But what may have initially started as a game for both soon develops into an emotional love affair. This is the setting for a complex story of murder and intrigues centred on the increasingly devious and obsessive figure of Philip. The King is portrayed as what we would now call a control freak, who keeps his Ministers operating in silos. He nonetheless appears to be increasingly wearied by the burdens of statecraft and initially welcomes his occasional visits to Ana, who relishes the opportunity to speak openly to him. A fatal breach occurs when Philip becomes aware of her affair, but being Philip, he moves deviously to address this affront to his propriety and - as Ana, confronts him - to his perception that Ana is his property. The story line is more complex than I've presented it here but eventually Ana is increasingly isolated and, after a spell in a miserable prison with her faithful woman servant, she is placed on Philip's orders under house arrest in her country estate. Then, after a clandestine visit from her lover, she is walled up with her young daughter in the living room and bedroom of her country house - under the supervision of prison warders - where she dies. She becomes a non- person, referred to in official circles only as *That Lady*.

Two themes feature in this book. The first is the assertion of the individual, Ana, to do as she chooses in the private domain. As she remonstrates to Philip

But my private life is truly private.But I do not present my private life to the world. Which is not the same thing as saying that I sacrifice it to the world. I own it, Philip. If I do wrong in it, that wrong is between me and Heaven. But here below, as long as I don't try to change it into public life, I insist that I own it.

The assertion of the rights of a woman to individual freedom, and the difficulties confronted by a woman, even one as hugely wealthy and influential as Ana, to achieve this freedom in the particular way she chooses is, of course, central to the novel - as it is in many of Kate O' Brien's books. There is also a reflection on the evil of authoritarianism - a theme which at the time the book was written and published would have been most topical and relevant - as Europe was emerging from World War 2 and was now going to have to deal with the threat of an authoritarian and expansionist Soviet Union.

In the book's epilogue and after Ana's death, Philip is portrayed as consumed by his obsessions. He is sitting in his study in Madrid - the window of which looks out onto Ana's Madrid palace. The novel describes his spiritual distress,

"Simply she had disillusioned him, and thereafter he could not, however he sought to, desist from vengeance..... and on the next pageHe looked out at the sunlight towards her empty house, and the glare hurt his eyes, and the bell seemed to toll for his loneliness, and the sins that drove him on, for ever further into loneliness.

And some final thoughts

When I began to think systematically about Kate O' Brien and her work, I had thought of exploring the unremarkable theme of Kate O Brien as an outsider.

Many of the signs appear to point in that direction. She had gone to boarding school at an early age, and if the young Anna Murphy in *The Land of Spices*, is Kate herself, she had begun to become quite self contained at a relatively young age. She had also spent much of her life after school and UCD living outside Ireland – except for ten years in Roundstone from 1950 to 1960.

Three obvious dimensions of “outsiderness” are her class, her sexuality, and her relationship with Catholicism.

On reflection, I now think that she was much less of an outsider then I initially thought.

Her class, the wealthy merchant bourgeoisie, which was constitutional in politics and portrayed by her as open to British and European influences was not part of the founding myth of the new State. This class provides the context for her early novels... and in some respects it was an outsider class at least in the then popular political culture and class consciousness of the mid 20th century. But she writes of this class, not as an outsider but as by and large as an admirer of its values and manners.

Her affection for her family was even stronger. Her nephew, John O' Brien, gave a Thomas Davis lecture some years ago which described the warmth which Kate had for her extended family.

In a similar vein she romantically extends this affection, this time uncritically to the Thornhills. In *Presentation Parlour*, published in the 1960s, she reflects sufficiently favourably and through rose tinted glasses on the Thornhill character to forever ensure her place in our affections!

“ Throughout the crazily difficult and tragic nineteenth century, the Thornhills kept on farming and raising good cattle stock with intelligence and success; so that they were able to hold onto their lands, meet the fantastic extortions of agent and absentee landlord, keep the trust and respect of their own class and kind, and put money in the bank. To have done all those things at one and the same time was to be at once spirited, quick witted and honourable”

The second apparent outsider dimension is her sexuality. Not surprisingly, this was a sensitive topic in the 1920s through to the 1970s. The late Clare Boylan in a foreword to an edition of *The Land of Spices* published in 1999 wrote that “so little is known of her relationships that survivors of her family still debate whether Kate could really have been gay”. In a recent biography Eibhear Walshe asserts her lesbianism and indeed Emma Donoghue has suggested

“Reading Kate O’ Brien as a lesbian novelist is as fruitful, and as necessary,..... as reading Elizabeth Bowen as Irish, Jane Austen as middle class or Alice Walker as black”.

The Ireland that Kate O’ Brien grew up in and later lived in would have been, in David Trimble’s much quoted phrase (used in a different context), a “*cold house*” for people of homosexual orientation. Same sex relationships feature in many of her novels and it is interesting that the treatment of these relationships becomes more confident as times goes on - perhaps the most confident treatment is in her last novel *As Music and Splendour* – particularly if we compare it with *Mary Lavelle*?

The outsider test is difficult to uphold even in respect of the matter of Catholicism in her writings. She records herself as having lost her religious belief before she left school in 1916. Catholicism looms large in all her novels – and not just in the Mellick series. She also admired and wrote a biography of St Teresa of Avila. The Catholicism she portrayed was authoritarian in some of its aspects – Father, and later Canon Tom Considine of *Without My Cloak* and *The Ante Room* is a recognisable example of late nineteenth and twentieth century authoritarian clerical self-confidence, but that is not the main focus. There is not a great deal of the railing against Irish Catholicism which we might expect from a writer who had two of her books banned in an Irish State where the Catholic Church had great influence. She is more critical of the Irish State in *Pray for the Wanderer* than she is of the Church. Rather, the tone is one of considerable religious sensitivity and respect, and the portrayal of rich interior lives. There is little attention given to, and no lampooning of superstition or pious observances. Some of her characters- for example, Agnes in *The Ante Room*, Ana in *That Lady*, Clare and Rose in *As Music and Splendour* and *Mary Lavelle* in the eponymous novel struggle with their Catholic consciences . In *As Music and Splendour*, the two main protagonists are Clare and Rose - both young Irish girls sent to Italy to train as opera singers where they both achieve success. Both have lovers. In the novel, Clare is confronted by a fellow student and admirer Thomas about her love life. Clare replies:

“Rose and I know perfectly well what we are doing. We are so well instructed that we can decide for ourselves. There is no vagueness in Catholic instruction”.

There may be an interesting contrast between Kate O’ Brien’s life and her work? She seems to have succeeded, if that was her intention, in leaving us scope for interesting speculation about her life. In contrast, and this was perhaps what she wished, there is little vagueness in the values and themes she conveyed in her novels.