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## Liminal Space and Minority Communities in Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* (1936)

By Amy Finlay-Jeffrey<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Despite blatant references to homoerotic desire in Kate O'Brien's oeuvre — two of her novels *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *As Music and Splendour* (1958) contain lesbian characters, whilst gay male characters appear in *Without my Cloak* (1931) and *The Land of Spices* (1941) — it is only in recent years that scholarship has considered O'Brien as a writer of homosexual themes. There are obvious reasons as to why the lesbianism in O'Brien's work and others who wrote about it during the mid-twentieth century has suffered from such neglect. It is only since second-wave feminism that an academic critique of sexuality has seemed appropriate to the academy. Tom Inglis notes that in comparison to British cultural history 'the lack of research into the history of Irish sexuality is puzzling, although it corresponds to a general lack of interest in sexuality in Irish academia' (10). Before 1990, there were few references to lesbianism in criticisms of O'Brien's novels. Emma Donoghue explains this as 'not so much by covering up her bonds with other women, as by denying those partnerships were of any relevance to her work ... most of those who have written on Kate O'Brien have simply avoided the lesbian issues in her work' (*Out of Order* 37). Drawing on anthropological ideas pertaining to liminal space, this article seeks to discover how twentieth century Irish author Kate O'Brien's construction of queer communities in novel *Mary Lavelle* (1936) can be understood as liminal spaces that exist in opposition to governing heteronormative ideologies. I propose that Ireland is configured as a closeted space in *Mary Lavelle*, and upon leaving Ireland, O'Brien's lesbian characters can experience and experiment with different facets of their gender identity and sexuality and enter into what I define as a space of queer liminality.

*Keywords:* Kate O'Brien, queer, liminality, space, gender

### Introduction

Irish novelist and playwright Kate O'Brien's third novel, *Mary Lavelle*, a book, 'traditional in form but subtly radical in content' (Tighe-Mooney 125) was banned in Ireland on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1936 by the *Censorship of Publications Act* of 1929. As an exploration of female agency and non-normative sexuality, *Mary Lavelle* was amongst a number of Irish books banned under the premise that they were 'indecent or obscene or advocated the unnatural prevention of conception or the procurement of abortion' (Article 6:1). Indecent in this context referred to a work that was 'suggestive of or inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice or likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave' (Article 2). The novel follows Mary, an engaged Irish governess who, whilst working in Spain, has an affair with the married son of her employer. It is traditionally assumed

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that the reason *Mary Lavelle* was banned was due to its depictions of Mary's premarital sex with a married man — made all the more provocative considering she is portrayed as the sexual initiator — but other factors such as fellow governess Agatha's confession of lesbian desire for Mary or the implied sexual licentiousness of the local priest may also have contributed to its prohibition.

Despite blatant references to homoerotic desire in Kate O'Brien's oeuvre — two of her novels *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *As Music and Splendour* (1958) contain lesbian characters, whilst gay male characters appear in *Without my Cloak* (1931) and *The Land of Spices* (1941) — it is only in recent years that scholarship has considered O'Brien as a writer of homosexual themes. Rediscovery is a word that surrounds O'Brien — she was a popular and well-read novelist in Britain throughout the 1940s before falling into obscurity for decades, only to be rediscovered and subsequently republished in the 1980s. In 2005, Penguin reissued her final and most overtly lesbian novel, *As Music and Splendour* which had been out of print for many years. In 1993 Emma Donoghue lamented that 'lesbian historians and critics seem never to have heard of her or know of no Irish context of "Irish lesbian fiction" in which to place her' (*Out of Order* 37). Lacking a place in an established literary tradition of Irish lesbian writing, criticism on O'Brien has tended to focus on other themes in her work. Critics interested in situating O'Brien in an Irish context have gravitated towards reading her as a writer of the emerging Irish Catholic upper middle class, as a writer interested in the construction of Irish and Spanish national identities or, most commonly, as a realist. Notwithstanding the fact that Kate O'Brien can comfortably be classified as a writer of all of these themes, the academic predominance on these aspects in her work has diluted her corpus of its most potent and radical subjects. Whilst the feminist aspects in her work has since been examined by contemporary scholars, the lesbian elements in her work have been neglected by all but a small number of academics.

This article proposes that the descriptions of the communities frequented by the governesses in O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* (1936) can be interpreted as what queer theorist Alan Sinfield describes as 'minority communities' (103). Sinfield defines 'minority communities' as alternative sites of kinship for queer people that exist as alternatives to heteronormative ones, or, as Kath Weston refers to in the title of her book on queer kinship, *Families We choose* (1991). Reading *Mary Lavelle* in this way may advance theoretical understandings of Sinfield's concept, to explore how concepts pertaining to space and the concept of liminal space as derived from anthropology also offers the characters the freedom, to differing degrees, to exist in opposition to governing heteronormative ideologies. In this regard, liminal space confers a queer liminality that offers a certain liberation from the ideologies of Ireland. In this original reading, Ireland is configured as a closeted space, and once they leave, they can experience and experiment with different facets of their gender identity and sexuality and enter into a space of queer liminality. This article will consider the concept of minority communities in O'Brien's novel, before detailing specific spaces of queer liminality throughout the text. A queer reading of O'Brien therefore seeks to recover and provide an alternative reading of this historically overlooked female Irish author.

Derived from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold, in anthropology the liminal is a transitory moment that is representative of being in-between. The fluctuating nature of liminality can be considered in a positive fashion. Roísín O'Gorman proposes that, 'the liminal holds a promise of growth, change and possibilities' (104). Such descriptions recall the fluidity associated with the word queer. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick posits that 'queer names an open mesh of possibility ... lapses and excesses of meaning when the ... elements of sexuality ... cannot be made to signify monolithically' (8). By its very nature queer celebrates ambiguity and can be said to celebrate the fluidity offered by the liminal space. These definitions, however, are not to be understood as static.

Rather, they assist in examining the points of intersection between queer and liminal space. From this perspective I argue for what could be defined as a space of queer liminality that exists in Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle*.

### **Mary's Liminality**

The prologue to *Mary Lavelle* describes a state of liminality: a theme with which the narrative is concerned. In the prologue, Mary is crossing the Pyrenees mountains in a train (xiii). Travelling is associated with liminality as it is associated with border crossing and thresholds (Thomassen 16). Mary's physical border crossing in this scene anticipates the transgression that she will commit in Spain as well as her metaphorical journey from naivety to wisdom. Writing on the temporality of liminality, anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen states that 'single moments, longer periods, or even whole epochs can be liminal' (16). In *Mary Lavelle*, through her status as a temporary worker in a foreign country, Mary enters into a liminal space. This is reflected in her description of travel as granting her the ability to enter into an in-between space as neither daughter nor wife before she gets married and undertakes the next societal rite of passage into matrimony:

To go to Spain. To be alone for a tiny space, a tiny hiatus between life's two accepted phases. To cease being a daughter without immediately becoming a wife. To be a free-lance, to belong to no one place or family or person – to achieve that silly longing of childhood, only for one year, before she flung it with all other childish things upon the scrapheap. (30)

It could also be argued that in *Mary Lavelle* the community of Irish governesses exist in a liminal space as they exist in an in-between role between inside/outsider. The majority of governesses are clearly dissatisfied with their lifestyles and exist on the periphery of Spanish society which they are not fully integrated into, often by choice. Mary anticipates that she will live in a liminal existence between teacher and foreigner when in Spain:

But to everyone she would be a foreign and more or less a satisfactory machine. She would be unobserved, uncherished and, she hoped, unproved. She had in fact put on a cape of invisibility, from under which, however, she could use her unlearned eyes with circumspection and in peace. (33)

Anthropologist Victor Turner writes how invisibility is a condition of liminality (359). The text repeatedly illustrates the social ostracisation of the governesses. Governess Agatha argues that 'we come out here with the good old Irish small-town notion that we're ladies — and then by degrees we discover we're — nothing. It turns us into — what you see' (177). This ghosting is to an extent self-induced; the majority of the misses have consciously refused to assimilate into their adopted culture, refusing to learn the language and keeping to their Irish customs, clinging to their 'violent and terrible Irish purity' (81). As the narrator notes:

These women were too lonely, unimportant and unamused to be graceful or gracious; they were too poor to be decorative, and their only social intercourse — with each other — slowly exasperating and starving them, they learnt in jealousy and self-defence, to give each other no more than the roughest camaraderie. (82)

Theories of identity and migration by Julia Kristeva have provided an important understanding of how Irish women have negotiated their position in the nation state. Identity, according to Kristeva, is based upon exclusion, either at a national or individual level. In *Nations without Nationalisms* she notes that ‘women have the responsibility of being boundary subjects’ (35). Such descriptions posit women as existing in a liminal position within the nation; but for Kristeva this is a positive liminality, as they can subvert entrenched nationalisms. In Ireland in the early years following independence, rigid gender roles were solidified. As is often discussed by critics, the role of women was associated with domestic space. The 1937 Constitution confirmed wifehood and motherhood as the natural state-approved role for Irish women. It is relevant that *Mary Lavelle* is set in 1922 which was the founding year of the new Irish nation and therefore coincides with the strict gender formations that the Irish state would come to embody.

### **An Irish closet?**

In *Mary Lavelle*, Ireland is configured as a closeted space that cannot accommodate women who do not fulfil the traditional female spousal and maternal role. Given the insistence on culturally validated forms of female identity in post-independent Ireland, Ed Madden has argued that any expression of homosexuality in Ireland ‘constitutes a diasporic project’ (8). Tina O’Toole proposes that ‘migration is central to the Irish coming out story, [and] that same sex desire in Irish literature is almost always represented as occurring abroad’ (131). Given this literary precedent, Ireland can be considered as a space synonymous with the gay closet and the characters must leave Ireland in order to explore their sexual identity. According to Agatha, the women have come to Spain, because their ‘parents had no money to spend on us and saw no likelihood of getting us husbands’ (178). Failing to conform to the Irish ideal of womanhood, the women cannot be absorbed into the nationalist trope of Irish female identity. As a result, they are therefore literally and metaphorically expelled from their home nation. Robert Miles argues that the creation of a nation ultimately produces outsiders which are reminders of that which the nation has abjected. The women as unmarried, surplus spinsters constitute ‘an untidy reminder of what the nationalist myth of seamless origin cannot absorb’ (31). Due to their failure to conform to socially acceptable versions of Irish female identity, the governesses must leave Ireland and symbolically come out of the Irish closet into a different nation. Whilst their lives in Spain grant them more autonomy than they would experience in Ireland the women are not fully accepted in Spanish society. Being ‘nothing’, the women are ghostly presences which exist on the margins of their adopted society. In this reading the governesses exist in a liminal in-between space where they are neither fully accepted into society nor fully expelled from it. Their rejection from the home nation is solidified by the fact that they can never return, as Agatha explains to Mary: despite the fact that the majority of the governesses detest their employment and cling to their native customs, they cannot return to Ireland as ‘most of us have no one to go home to, and no way to keep ourselves alive, if we did that’ (178).

The descriptions of the liminal and nearly invisible state in which the governesses live recall Terry Castle’s descriptions of the apparitional lesbian. The invisibility of lesbians in western societal discourses and indeed in narratives that include lesbians, as implied by Owens Weekes, has led to the formation of what queer theorist Terry Castle has defined as the ‘apparitional lesbian.’<sup>2</sup> As Castle notes:

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<sup>2</sup> Moira Eileen Casey’s doctoral thesis on Twentieth Century Irish lesbian fiction also draws on Castle’s theory of the ‘Apparitional Lesbian’. However, her reading argues against the erasure of the lesbian character in Irish literary

The lesbian is never with us it seems, but always somewhere else; in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night ... Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian — even when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us? In part because she has been ‘ghosted’ or made to seem invisible — by culture itself (3-5).

In lieu of an official accessible literary history, they exist in a world that straddles visibility and invisibility, or as Castle asserts, lesbians have been ‘made to seem invisible by culture itself’ (3-4). In Irish society, it is perhaps not an arbitrary task to recognise the analogy between nuns and lesbians. Given O’Brien’s interest in demythologising the ‘accepted’ roles for women in Irish society, through her critique of the institution of marriage, a common trope in her fiction and one pertinent to *Mary Lavelle*, is that the alternatives that she creates to heterosexual unions are positively rendered. One such alternative is the convent.

Kate O’Brien’s corpus is generally favourable towards nuns and they are shown as presenting a positive, alternative way of life for women.<sup>3</sup> Mary Breen writes that in Kate O’Brien’s later works such as *The Land of Spices* (1941) and *The Last of Summer* (1943), ‘the family is replaced by a successful community of women [in the convent who seek] autonomy and agency outside the home and marriage’ (188). The positivity with which O’Brien views nuns is already evident in *Mary Lavelle*. The novel only includes one nun, Mother Liguori who taught Mary history at her convent school and who acts as the facilitator of Mary’s self-development. It is at her suggestion that Mary takes up a position in Spain as a governess, a fact, as noted by Heather Ingman, that ‘mirrors the actual situation in Ireland at the time, when convents like the one Kate O’Brien herself attended had excellent networks in Europe and often sent young Irish women to study abroad’ (180). Similarly, to the community of governesses in *Mary Lavelle*, nuns also exist on the limen borderland in society in a place between inside and outside of society. It is significant that all of O’Brien’s lesbian characters are described as nunnish. Agatha Conlan considered joining the convent before deciding that she was ‘not saintly just religious’ (180).

Kate O’Brien, a ‘Catholic agnostic’ (Reynolds 118), did not join with other members of the modernist movement in their often-virile attacks on institutional religion. It is clear in her works that religion, specifically the Catholic religion into which she was born is an obvious concern. Whilst she vehemently disagreed with the insular, puritanical and patriarchal brand of Catholicism that would be later personified in de Valerian Ireland, she was enamoured by the elevation of female idols within the Catholic Church. In particular she was interested in St Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth-century Spanish nun, a figure whom she regarded as an exemplar of female courage and strength and of whom she wrote a biography (Tighe-Mooney 126). An undated film script which she wrote, but which was never produced, *Mary Magdalene*, made a bold assertion that Mary Magdalene and Mary mother of Jesus were the same person. By portraying the Virgin Mary as an independent and self-assured woman, as she did in the film script, we can better understand O’Brien’s concern in viewing religious women as powerful (Mentxaka *Fiction* 127). This also suggests that she was attracted to the importance of the Marian tradition in the Catholic Church and saw it as being empowering to women. This can partly explain why O’Brien was attracted to

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texts. Casey argues ‘for when lesbian characters and examples of lesbian desire surface in the works of two of Ireland’s celebrated and critically acclaimed women writers - Kate O’Brien and Molly Keane — it would seem that the Irish lesbian is in fact “in the midst of things”’ (72).

<sup>3</sup> In *As Music and Splendour* however, the nuns exploit Rose and Clare’s musical talents for their order’s own material gain.

Catholic mystic writers such as St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila and why O'Brien herself considered joining a convent. Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka notes how 'her interest in reclaiming the Magdalene exemplifies O'Brien's attitude towards Christianity' (*Catholic Agnostic* 97). This is not, however, to overstate the liberty that O'Brien allows her nuns. Subject to male ecclesial authority their freedom is compromised by their obedience to a system which endorses patriarchal values. Rather, my assessment of nuns in O'Brien's work agrees with Elizabeth Cullingford's assessment that 'although their independence was always compromised by their allegiance to a patriarchal culture ... [the convent] offered in their time a greater degree of autonomy for women than was available in the world' (34).

In *Mary Lavelle*, the community of governesses in the Spanish town of Altono functions as a substitute convent. Similarly, to the convent, the in-between positioning of the governesses in society does allow the women a greater degree of autonomy to transgress expected codes of female behaviour. Moira Casey proposes that this community 'is clearly rendered in opposition to the heterosexual social world that either controls women through marriage or rejects them' (75). This is not however to propose that this community is a fully liberating space as, in their rigid insistence of class boundaries, many of the governesses actually replicate many of the values of the heterosexual world, with the exception of O'Toole and Agatha. The women who belong to this community come from the same demographic that attracted women to Irish convents in the early years following the formation of the Free State: the Irish middle classes. As the narrator notes, 'these women came undoubtedly from impoverished wings of that not easily definable section of society, the Irish Catholic middle classes' (80). For women who lacked the option to become wives and mothers, or to live independently as 'spinsters', the convent was a viable option. The link to the convent and the governesses is made clear by Agatha who notes that two former governesses 'have become nuns' (178).

Queer theorist Alan Sinfield has spoken of the construction of minority queer communities which function as alternatives to heterosexual ones. He acknowledges 'most of us [homosexuals] are born and/or socialised into (presumably) heterosexual families [and that] we have to move away from them, at least to some degree; and into, if we are lucky, the culture of a minority community' (103). In *Mary Lavelle*, the community of governesses' functions as a 'minority community' which, to a certain extent, both challenges and replicates hegemonic societal rules. The spatial dynamics of the governesses reflect this. The café Alemà where the governesses frequent is a space associated with liminality as it reflects their insider/outsider positioning in society. Despite it being a public space, the women do not integrate with other people. Mary reflects that 'there seems to be a lot of misses' (69) in the café, illustrating their marginal status within wider society. O'Toole declares that 'we of the underworld make a home from home of it' (69) which further illustrates the liminal position of the governesses. In the café the governesses are allowed to indulge in behaviour that, in Mary's estimation, is unacceptable for 'genteel' women. In this regard the café is a space of queer liminality where they can speak, to a certain extent, unconstructed by normal societal conventions. The brazen conversation and outspokenness of the governesses initially repulses Mary, who is accustomed to women, much like her subservient Aunt Cissy, who 'never stood up for anything, never took anyone's part, never uttered an opinion' (21). The women in the heterosexual matrix, as represented by Mary's aunt Cissy, conform to behaviour deemed acceptable for Irish women; 'her mother, aunts and grandmother had been restrained and low-voiced women' (80). In comparison the misses' counter cultural behaviour in the café initially appears vulgar to Mary:

Mary wondered if she would get used to these personal comments. She found the crudity of the misses' intercourse surprising; their rudeness to each other, their use of surnames *tout court*, their interest in the male sex, their prudery, their vindictive attitude towards their employers, and non-intelligent insolence towards the life that went on about them, their obvious poverty and social isolation, their distorted self-respect, their back handed decency and *esprit de corps* — these distinctions of which this first afternoon's acquaintance gave her a considerable indication, made up a sad but novel picture. (80)

Having learnt that 'the *sine qua non* of becoming a miss was not so much that one should be genteel by birth as that the veneer of gentility should have been sufficiently lacquered on by education in a good-class convent school' (81), Mary is only attracted to two of the governesses: O'Toole and Agatha. In varying ways these women do not conform to the rules established by this insular community. It is significant that it is in the café that Mary first encounters Agatha:

She had a pale, fanatical face, nobly planned but faltering below the large eccentric nose to a too mobile, too bitter mouth. 'What beautiful eyes!' Mary thought. They were deep blue and full of light, with black brows arching delicately. (74)

Agatha's introduction is foreshadowed by negative comments from the other governesses who describe her as a 'lunatic' (73). Katherine O'Donnell details that 'Mary's observations might be read as innocent and naïve, but it also succeeds in unsettling the generic depiction' (85). Not only do Mary's comments unsettle but they could be said to queer normative descriptions of female beauty. In this reading the space of the café confers a queer liminality, where Mary, similarly to the governesses can think in a way that is unexpected of her, by regarding Agatha as beautiful as opposed to her prevalent description as odd.

Ingman has provided an illuminating reading of the foreigner in *Mary Lavelle*. She explains how at the end of the novel, having discovered autonomy and desire, Mary cannot remain in her native country as her new identity is one which is not culturally validated. Mary 'has become akin to the Kristevan abject, that which has to be excluded from the self or the nation in order for identity to form' (182). The abject is something which disturbs social consciousness; it represents a taboo and unsettling element which does not assimilate into social hegemonies. As such, the abject must be expelled from society. I would like to further Ingman's argument by suggesting that in *Mary Lavelle*, Agatha is an abject figure. Agatha challenges the modes of identity as indoctrinated by both her native Irish and adopted Spanish communities. Having assimilated into Spanish culture more so than the other misses, Agatha can speak Spanish 'like a native' (72), a skill that most of the other governesses have failed to achieve.

Agatha is not altogether free from the stereotyping that hallmarked early twentieth-century lesbian descriptions. As is often argued, Radclyffe Hall's Stephen Gordon in *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) established a precedent for literary portrayal of lesbians as mannish and angry. Agatha fits this description. Donoghue notes how Agatha has 'the mark of the martyred androgyne' (*Out of Order* 42). Initially described as 'a bitter pill' and 'the crossest woman in Spain' (23), she embodies the early twentieth-century medical description of the lesbian who was commonly presented as a sullen and hysterical figure (Faderman 57). Physically Agatha has a spectral appearance, she is described as being 'tall, pale and thin' and a 'very hungry-looking woman' (73). Being 'just not like the rest of us [the governesses]' (3), her difference is palpable. Agatha is an abjected figure of the Irish nation. As an outspoken woman and a lesbian, she is more radical a



threat to the national construction of female identity than Mary. Although more sexually transgressive because of her affair, she is still firmly imbricated in the heterosexual matrix.

### **Agatha's closet**

Writing on the spatiality of the closet, Brown details that, in its original etymology, a closet 'referred to a small private room used for prayer or study. By the early seventeenth century it referred specifically to a small room or cupboard, while later that century it was resignified to connote "private" or "secluded"' (5). Agatha's room is a type of closet; its religious descriptions associate it with the closet's clerical origins. It is described as 'immaculate and as impersonal as a monk's' (84) – and recalls for Mary a nun's bedchamber in a convent:

[Mary] looked about her nervously — at the picture of the Holy Family above the bedstead; at the *prie-dieu* and the crucifix, the holy water font beside the door; the modest screen about the washstand ... Above the writing table near the window a dozen books were stacked on a little shelf, all dressed in brown-paper covers, as nuns cover books. (87)

The room lacks anything that connects her to the outside world such as 'photographs' and 'odds and ends from life' (87). Agatha's closeted bedroom symbolically reflects her marginal status within the community of governesses as well as her closeted sexuality. Her bedroom is also physically removed from the rest of the house; there is a 'long corridor to Conlan's room' (84) highlighting her liminal positioning as neither insider/outsider within the family. To get to Agatha's bedroom they have to walk down a 'dark tiled hall' (84) which also associates Agatha with seclusion.

The view from Agatha's window is to a church, which again aligns her closeted private space to a religious space. Agatha's link to the convent is established several times throughout the novel. She admits to Mary that she had been tempted to join a religious order but her 'evil nature', perhaps a coded reference to her lesbianism, has stopped her from doing so (180). Unlike the other governesses Agatha wears a mantilla (73), a piece of clothing reminiscent to nun's wimple that is associated with religious occasions. Eibhear Walshe notes that 'Agatha Conlan is the first holy woman or secular nun in Kate's fiction' (*Writing Life* 66), further highlighting the link between lesbians and nunish characters. It is also significant that Agatha prays several times a week in a Carmelite Convent, the order to which Saint Teresa of Avila belonged to, and who according to O'Donnell, like Agatha 'struggled with her lesbian desires' (85). Irish lesbian fiction has found resonance with the order of the Carmelite nuns. Agatha's association with the Carmelites is interesting because, in Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 short story 'Carmilla', the vampire/lesbian named Carmilla also recalls the religious order of the Carmelites.

Tellingly, Agatha is not the only character who is linked to the convent. Milagros, one of the daughters under Mary's care, is described by O'Donnell as 'decidedly queer' (81) because of her refusal to abide by the conventional gender roles expected of young debutante. Milagros muses that she might decide not to come out to society and instead will 'be a nun' (14). This is yet another instance of how the liminal space of the convent is associated with non-normative behaviours. There are several instances in the novel where Milagros defies traditional gender roles as she is overly political and generally outspoken compared to her sisters. Her mother wonders 'what sort of husband they would ever find for the queer child' (37) and when her brother Juanito is jokingly

referred to as one of ‘Spain’s great men’, Milagros depicts herself as a man in stating ‘there’s room for more than one’ (81).

The fact that Agatha is a devout Catholic is significant in *Mary Lavelle*. Sexuality in Kate O’Brien’s novels is held in juxtaposition to Catholicism. Any discussion of lesbianism in her work naturally leads to a consideration of how it is held in an uneasy tension with a Catholic moral code. Despite Eamon Maher’s declaration that ‘in the course of the twentieth century, it is hard to find too many Irish novels which grapple in a searching manner with questions of Catholic faith’ (489), the interface between desire and Catholicism is a main concern in both *Mary Lavelle*, as well as in O’Brien’s oeuvre at large. Walshe writes that in O’Brien there is ‘the melancholy of the lapsed Catholic, at odds with the sexual codes of her religious education yet still enraptured with the beauty of its ceremonies and its liturgy’ (*Writing Life 2*). According to Joanne Glasgow, writing on the Catholic Church in the twentieth century:

When one begins to look at church teaching about sexuality as it was generally interpreted, two major factors emerge — first, the erasure of women as instrumental agents of sexuality, an erasure which is itself a result of deep misogyny in the church; second, the instrumentality of language itself in determining the reality of individual acts. (248)

The erasure of women as sexual agents is not limited to Catholic teaching but corresponds to a general sentiment throughout western societies which saw women as non-sexual beings. In *Mary Lavelle* it is notable that Mary’s fiancé John claims to fall instantly in love with her from across a crowded room, but it is impossible for a woman to experience a similar sentiment; ‘he was in love then and for ever, but that sort of thing never happened to a girl’ (160). Sexual desire was thought to belong exclusively to men. According to Glasgow ‘lesbianism did not exist as a Catholic reality’ (243) because the phallogentrism of society rendered such sexual expressions impossible. In its rigid enforcement of sexuality as a heterosexual construct in catechisms and in official doctrine, the non-existence of lesbianism in Church documents lead some twentieth-century lesbian writers to convert to Catholicism. Sensing this omission, they were able to reconcile their religion with their sexuality.<sup>4</sup> Emma Donoghue has questioned the extent to which the Catholic silence regarding lesbianism may be taken as an endorsement of it. She explains that the Church’s silence on lesbianism may have been in an effort to avoid publicising it. She notes ‘I was taught by nuns who never mentioned female masturbation or lesbian sex — but I knew their silences covered sins too awful to be named’ (*Muffled Voice* 181). In this regard, lesbianism is rendered liminal in the space of the Catholic church as it is neither fully visible nor invisible. Having already established that Agatha, through her failure to conform to the established hegemonies of either Spanish or Irish societies, is the societal abject, her interest in the bullfight further reinforces this point.

### **The bullfight**

Repeatedly in the novel, Agatha takes Mary under her wing, instructs her in Spanish culture and invites her to the bullfight, which is significant as she has never asked anyone to accompany her before (103). It is also interesting to note that Mary’s desire to go to the bullfight stems not

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<sup>4</sup> Radclyffe Hall converted to Catholicism from Anglicanism in 1912. Hall and her partner Mable Batten had a semi-private blessing with Pope Pius X at the Vatican the following year.

only from a desire to explore Spain's cultural pursuits, but also to unsettle and surprise Agatha. Following her acceptance of Agatha's invitation:

She was somewhat gratified by the flicker of surprise on Conlan's face. She knew that her willingness to take Spain as she found it, and to like her findings, roused some kind of irritation in this woman. So perhaps her decision was only a shoddy bravado, but she felt all the terror of the brave as she made it. (95)

Significantly, in attending the bullfight Mary is transgressing the spaces normally associated with the governess, to the extent that the other governesses are ashamed that Agatha would extend an invitation to Mary (95). Attending the bullfight is shown to be Mary's first act of self-assertion and disobedience as she deliberately breaks the promise made to her fiancé that she wouldn't attend (92). The bullfight scene in *Mary Lavelle* is also highly sexualised. It is a space associated with transgression and masquerade, it is where upper class *débutantes* initiate their 'coming out', the matador is described as looking like a 'lovely toy' by Mary (98). The spatiality of the bullfight impacts upon Mary's desires. Amidst the heaving crowd Mary feels a mixture of shame and exhilaration (92). This is arguably a queer space as the bullfight alerts Mary to her desires; after the event she felt 'outside herself' and was 'more full of news of life's possible pain and senselessness and quixotry and barbarism and glory than anything ever before encountered by this girl' (101). The bullfight is described in a sexualised manner, the 'wound of the bullfight was in fact — though she had tried to forget and ignore it — the gateway through which Spain had entered in and taken her' (112).

The bullfight represents Mary's discovery of her sexual agency. Inspired by the courage of the matador (and perhaps the sacrificial bull), Mary finds the courage to follow her illicit desire for the married Juanito. Considering this, Dalsimer reads the bullfight as 'Mary's preparation for Juanito and for all that Spain will teach her' (36) as it foreshadows Mary and Juanito's sexual consummation which is described in a similarly brutal manner (269). Moreover, it is Agatha who invites her to the bullfight, therefore the discovery of her sexuality is facilitated by a lesbian. It is also significant that Mary's sexual awakening occurs in a quintessentially Spanish space which is considered transgressive (for an Irish woman). The transgressive space of the bullfight also leads Mary to think in ways that are associated with gender-transgression. During the bullfight:

Mary looked at Conlan. Her blue eyes were shining. The hungry, unbalanced face looked smooth and young. 'You might take her for a boy just now', Mary thought. (102)

These decidedly queer descriptions of Agatha are facilitated by the queer space of the bullfight. The bullfight also carries religious connotations. The sacrifice of the bull is related to the religious imagery that is employed following Mary's sex with Juanito. In this reading, Mary has sacrificed herself to her desires, or to Juanito. As such, after their intercourse, she is described as 'a broken, tortured Christian, a wounded saint Sebastian' (269). According to O'Donnell, Saint Sebastian holds a 'long queer genealogy, both as icon and fetish in Christian Europe. Oscar Wilde adopted the pseudonym Sebastian Melmoth on his release from prison' (83). These descriptions destabilise gender binaries by likening Mary to a male saint. The obvious reference to the homosexuality of Oscar Wilde as well as Saint Sebastian's connection to homosexuality also destabilise or 'queer' what is otherwise a very heterosexual act. Notably Mary's second trip to the bullfight is with

Milagros, another nunnish and arguably queer character.<sup>5</sup> According to Pepe, Agatha ‘understands [the bullfight] like a Matador’ (277) which further establishes the link between Agatha and the transgressive space of the bullfight. It is after the bullfight that Agatha eventually finds the agency to come out to Mary and admit that she harbours romantic feelings towards her (248). In this reading the bullfight could then be said to function as a queer space in the novel because it initiates a process whereby Mary and Agatha discover the agency to follow their non-normative desires.

### **Agatha’s coming out**

It is interesting that, after the event, Mary recognises the transgressive power of the bullfight. In a later conversation with Agatha she is weary of discussing it as ‘the bullfight was not a safe train of thought. It created uneasiness, suggested that life is perverse and tragic’ (177). The bullfight is also a cogent incident in the development of *Mary Lavelle* because it reveals how Agatha reconfigures her concept of sin, which will later be revealed to be in contrast with her lesbian desires. After the event, Mary questions:

‘I wonder why the Church doesn’t make it a sin to go to the bullfight!’  
Mary looked down the river towards the mountains.  
‘I think it is a sin’, she said slowly.  
Conlan laughed.  
‘Not for me until the church says so.’ (104)

This is a telling disclosure which suggests that Agatha has discovered a technicality in Church teaching, implying that until the Church prohibits an action it is permissible. Upon learning of Mary’s intention to leave Spain, Agatha’s confesses her feelings to Mary:

‘I like you the way a man would, you see. I can never see your face without wanting to touch you. I could look at your face forever. Every time O’Toole calls you “Alannah” I want to murder her. It’s a sin to feel like that.’  
‘Oh, everything’s a sin!’  
‘I knew it was wrong, but lately I’ve been told about it in confession. It’s a very old and terrible vice.’ (248)

It is significant that Agatha’s disclosure occurs outside the Catholic Church, which again highlights how, because of her lesbianism, she is both physically and symbolically removed from full inclusion. During their conversation, Mary watches the ‘baize door swing and swing again in the porch of San Geronimo and caught each time the gleam of the candles’ (249). This is interesting considering a door is associated with liminality, because when entering/exiting a door, a threshold space is crossed. Thomassen writes that ‘specific places [such as] thresholds (a doorway in a house, a line that separates holy from sacred in a ritual’ (16) can be considered liminal. Similarly, the grille separating priest and penitent in the confession box is also a boundary between sacred and secular. The physical enclosed structure of the confessional box recalls the confined space of the closet which is befitting considering the already detailed association between the closet and religion. These physical spaces illustrate how Agatha is on the limen, or borderline, between inside

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<sup>5</sup> In the 1998 film adaptation of *Mary Lavelle, Talk of Angels*, Milagros is repeatedly barred from attending the bullfight by her father, as it is deemed an inappropriate place for a young lady.

and outside of her religion. Mary and Agatha's spatial location in this scene reflect their similar positioning as outsiders in relation to the morality of the Catholic church.

The ambiguity in this scene is notable. It is difficult to decipher if the 'sin' Agatha is referring to is in wanting to touch Mary or her anger towards O'Toole. What Agatha reconfigures as 'wrong' is the fact that her desire is physical; it is not the feelings themselves. Realising that her desire to touch Mary is somehow 'wrong', suggests her knowledge that the Church has condemned homosexuality. However, what is implied in this scene is that the action itself is sinful, but not the desire to commit the action. In this way, the liminal status of lesbianism in Catholic discourse offers her the freedom to discreetly recognise her sexuality, albeit within the binds of chastity. Through her liminal position on the periphery of the social boundary and as the social abject, Agatha has the power to challenge traditional gender and sexual roles. In doing so she 'can subvert entrenched nationalisms and open them up to a more fluid identity' (Ingman 178). In this regard Agatha exists in a space of queer liminality. Through her friendship with Agatha, Mary begins to question her culturally inherited Catholic morality — which she momentarily abandons in order to commit adultery with Juanito. After her confession:

[Agatha's] relationship with Mary had not suffered or been made painful. Instead a certain relaxation, even an affectionate, unspoken peace had entered it. For Mary had not been frightened or repulsed. Perhaps Juanito was right in calling her a pagan and her face Aphrodite's; certainly, now that feeling consumed her for him, her understanding of feeling in others, as for instance, in O'Toole and Pepe, was immediate and natural. So, though no word more of emotion was said between them, her voice and manner with Agatha had automatically become easier and more sisterly, not so much because Agatha fantastically and perversely loved *her* but because, like her, she was fantastically and perversely in love. Agatha felt this unuttered sympathy, and it made her reaction from her own confession less savage, easier to bear. (257-8)

It is interesting that following Agatha's confession their relationship becomes 'more sisterly' which could be interpreted as a double entendre, referring both to the familial bond and the bond between nuns, or sisters, that exists in a convent. This is a pertinent interpretation considering Agatha's similarity to nuns in the novel.

This discussion has shown that Mary and Agatha, as the societal abject, embody a queer liminality that allows them to engage in a process of refashioning accepted gender formations. In doing so, they question and revise Catholic morality. Agatha, the lesbian 'nun' fashions her own concept of sin and Catholicism. Arguably Mary has also embraced this queer liminality. The novel ends in another liminal space, with Mary boarding a train to return to Ireland to break off her engagement to John (299). Through her experience with the abject, Mary can accept other relationships that are deemed socially unacceptable. In this way, she challenges nationally validated norms, thus engaging in what Kristeva notes as women's capacity to subvert the homogeneity of the nation (40). Pepe and O'Toole's marriage, which is abhorrent and 'queer' (240) to the other governesses due to its class difference, is endorsed by Mary, who can see how 'natural' it is (240). Mary's own sin in committing adultery with a married man is likened to that of Agatha's love for Mary. Being both 'perversely' in love with someone who is unattainable in Catholic discourse, homosexual and heterosexual desire are shown as equally transgressive, a theme which is further explored in O'Brien's 1958 novel *As Music and Splendour*.

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