

DWELLING WITHIN THE FOURFOLD: HOME IN EDNA O'BRIEN'S (2011) "SINNERS"

Habitar los cuatro elementos: El Hogar en "Sinners" de Edna O'Brien (2011)

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Recibido 17/01/2020

Aceptado 27/02/2020

ABSTRACT

Home, both as representation and as lived experience, has always been central to the narrative of Irish author Edna O'Brien. In this article, though, we seek to explore issues of space and identity that go beyond the question of Ireland. Written at the age of 81, *Saints and sinners* display a series of characters who, engulfed by loneliness, experience a persistent crave for a home. In the collection of short stories, homes are constantly constituted by transient representations in an attempt to articulate the Heideggerian fourfold. It is to these representations that the characters in the stories temporarily cling and make theirs in order to provide their lives with meaning and to continue living. Mostly based on an initial BA dissertation devoted to the study of the entire literary work, this article explores the notion of home in "Sinners," the most representative of the short stories in view of our hypothesis. We expect our reflection to develop not only current discussions on space and identity but also on home as a place to dwell, a concept that has become truly elusive in contemporary times.

Key words: Irish literature, Edna O'Brien, home

RESUMEN

El hogar, como representación o como experiencia vivida, ha ocupado un rol central en la narrativa de la autora irlandesa Edna O'Brien. En este artículo, sin embargo, intentamos explorar asuntos de espacio e identidad superadoras de la cuestión de Irlanda. Escrita a los 81 años, *Saints and sinners* muestra una serie de personajes que, entregados a su propia soledad, viven en una constante búsqueda del hogar. En esta colección de cuentos cortos, los hogares constituyen efímeras representaciones y vanos intentos por recuperar los cuatro elementos del hogar heideggeriano. Son precisamente esas representaciones a las que los personajes se aferran y hacen suyas como experiencia vivida. El artículo, basado en una tesis de licenciatura, explora el hogar en "Sinners," la historia más representativa de la colección en función de nuestra hipótesis. Aspiramos a que nuestra reflexión informe no solo a los debates actuales sobre espacio e identidad sino también a la noción universal de hogar como morada, un lugar que se ha vuelto cada vez más esquivo en el mundo actual.

Palabras clave: literatura irlandesa, Edna O'Brien, hogar

Edna O'Brien was born in 1930 in a small village in the west of Ireland, which she described as "enclosed, fervid, and bigoted" (Guppy, 1984, p. 22). Her mother vociferously refused her career as a writer, and she considered the publication of her first novel brought "ignominy and disgrace" on her own people (O'Brien, 2012, p. 152). As a result of her frank portrayal of sex and her questioning of sexism within Catholicism, O'Brien's first novel, *The country girl* (1962), was banned by the Irish Censorship Board, which forced her to leave Ireland, a place where she still declares to feel a hint of "oppression and strangulation" (Guppy, 1984, p. 39). Since then, O'Brien has lived in London and written several novels, plays, poems, and short stories, and, as stated in a recent note in *The New Yorker*, she has been #metoo-ing for 50 years (Stokes, 2018); she has helped pioneer women's movements

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not only in the world of letters but also in real life, not only in her native Ireland but also around the globe.

Written at the age of 81, *Saints and sinners* is O'Brien's (2011) last collection of short stories. Even though she has not abandoned the characteristically realistic tone of her previous work, O'Brien shows in the 11 stories of which the volume is constituted, a deliberate tendency towards open-ended narratives, the juxtaposition of events from the present and the past, and a strong questioning of the reader's stability, close to that experienced through fragmentary postmodernist texts or turbulent postcolonial writing. The stories broadly illustrate conspicuous aging, failed marriages, and exile from self and home, together with a persistent sensation of loneliness which seems to flood the entire collection. Engulfed by loneliness, O'Brien's characters always crave for a home, and, self-exiled from her native Ireland, perhaps O'Brien's have always done so as well. In her memoir, when recalling the house where she used to live as child, she declared "the whole place seems to hold, and would forever hold, ... the thing that gave it the sacred and abiding name of Home" (O'Brien, 2012, p. 18), the remark somehow pointing at the constructed nature of home in time and memory. In this text, we sought to confirm our hypothesis that in *Saints and sinners* homes are constantly constituted by transient representations or heterotopias in attempt to articulate the Heideggerian (1971) fourfold. It is to these representations that the characters in the stories temporarily cling and make theirs as a lived experience.

Home as Representation and as a Lived Experience

Homes as places are socially constructed. They function as lived spaces in which people interact with one another in a myriad of complex, inter-related, and contradictory sociocultural relationships. As claimed by Mallett (2004): "home brings together memory and longing; the ideational, the affective, and the physical; the spatial and the temporal; the local and the global; the positively evaluated and the negatively" (p. 8). Here, we offer a brief overview of different concepts in the representation of home as reviewed by Mallett (2004) and Der-Ohannesian (2013)

From a sociological perspective, home has sometimes been considered a haven or refuge, a place where we are able to retreat and relax. This notion is generally connected with our initial home, the place where we were born, as a secure, safe, free, or regenerative space (Wright, 1991, cited by Mallett, 2004). Nevertheless, some sociologists believe that home as haven represents an idealized or romanticized view of the place, a nostalgic construct that is different from our real experience of it. For some people, home may even turn into a place of fear and isolation (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998, cited by Mallett, 2004). However, if we consider that the meaning of home depends not only on its social and historical context but also on the personal experiences of the mind that represents, it is plausible to state that different people in different times and places will have different conceptions about what home means to each one of them. These persistently dichotomous views suggest that "most people spend their lives in search of home, at the gap between the *natural home* [conceived as the home environment conducive to human existence, i.e. dry land] and the particular *ideal home* where they would be fully fulfilled" (Tucker, 1994, p. 184), more often than not this one being a continuous search for a lost time and space.

In literature, the *ideal home* has taken all the attention since it has had a relevant role both in the field of the narrated action and as a thematic element as regards the characters' origin and sense of belonging. In the former, home or, in more familiar terms, the setting, includes the idea of a physical structure or dwelling (e. g., a house, a flat, or an institution) where space and time, as in the literary work itself, can be controlled. The processes of

identity formation are not only based on the recognition of shared characteristics with a certain group but also as belonging to a place constituted by the buildings, kinfolk, and representations around us. Therefore, the home is taken not only as a place but also as a source of both personal identity and security. In contemporary and especially in postcolonial literature, staying and leaving a place have been unceasingly represented, and home has been significantly recreated as a dwelling or the *homeland*, to which multiple, displaced, and decentred colonial and postcolonial subjects desire to go back (e. g., Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002).

What is constant in both sociological and literary approaches to home is the relationship between the physical dwelling and the usually idealized construct. Home is a multi-dimensional, multi-layered lived experience in which the connection between these two, idea and reality, must be defined and redefined, especially in view of the fact that we are trying to study a particular sociological notion as represented in literature. Particularly worthwhile for this discussion becomes the philosophical disquisition proposed by German philosopher Martin Heidegger in his text “Building Dwelling Thinking,” first published in English as part of *Poetry, Language, Thought* in 1971 but which originally appeared in German in 1954. In it, the philosopher ventures on a phenomenological exploration that seeks to provide an answer to two basic questions: (a) what is it to dwell? and (b) how does building belong to dwelling?

In order to answer the first question, what is it to dwell, Heidegger’s (1971) initial proposition is that we dwell only as long as we build. The buildings we construct are therefore key to our existence. Moreover, he claimed that even those, such as bridges, hangars, dams, and market halls, which Augé (1996) would later label *non-places*, still remain in the domains of our dwelling. Dwelling is in any case the end that presides over all building. “To build is in itself already to dwell,” (p. 144) asserted Heidegger (1971), as he embarked in an etymological examination of the word *building* which leadshim to conclude that *building* and *being* are intricately related. We never merely *dwell* in a place, and when we speak of dwelling we generally connect it to what men and women do alongside many other activities, such as practicing a profession, travelling and lodging, building up a family. In Heidegger’s words, “the old word *bauen* German for *house, home* says that man *is* insofar as he *dwells*” (p. 145). We are as long as we dwell, as long as we build.

Likewise, *building*, also rooted in the German *bauen*, is inseparable from preserving goods and providing shelter, all of these actions that tend to be performed at home. Consequently, “it recedes behind the manifold ways in which dwelling is accomplished, the activities of cultivation and construction” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 146), whose meanings can be traced back to the Latin words *cultura* and *aedificare*, both containing sparing and caring. Even though it is nowadays seldom considered the basic character of human beings, in Heidegger’s (1971) views, dwelling is central to the experience of who we are.

In order to answer the second question, how *building* belongs to *dwelling*, Heidegger (1971) studied then the etymology of the word *dwelling*, whose roots he claimed to mean *to be at peace and safeguarded*. From that, he determined that the basic character of dwelling is to spare, to preserve, and that men dwell only if they preserve the fourfold. The fourfold is the unity of the four elements in which we dwell: (a) on earth, (b) under the sky, (c) before the divinities, and (d) belonging to men’s being with one another and to their being capable of death. These elements in turn comprise the oppositions earth versus sky and human beings versus God. “To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature” (p. 147), concluded Heidegger (1971).

Now, in order to preserve, we build. Heidegger (1971) exemplified this with the concept of a bridge. A bridge is a building for which room has been made and which, once

made, has the function of preserving men within the fourfold among things. Consequently, places receive their being from the locations we build, not from empty space. Yet, there is another way we can build: “even when we relate to those things that are not in our immediate reach, we are staying with the things themselves” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 154). This idea somehow goes against our initial understanding of spaces as representation and in the direction of considering places as phenomenological instances of being. “The relationship between man and things is none other than dwelling,” Heidegger (1971, p. 155) claimed, and that dwelling is by no means some representational content in our mind. In dwelling we persist through spaces by means of our being among things and locations. The making of such things is building. Building is then “a founding and joining of spaces,” (p. 156), a “letting-dwell” that “responds to the summons of the fourfold” (p. 156), be it in real places or in the confines of our minds.

Nowadays, however, the postcolonial and the postmodern experiences may have disrupted this unity of being in building and dwelling, making it therefore quite difficult to deal with a definite idea of home. In times of migration and diaspora, we may not be able to discern whether home is a mental construction, a *representation*, or an actual phenomenon, even if created in our minds and not close to us. The colonial condition brought with it a displacement, a dislocation, which in postcolonial times many people have tried to heal going back to their *homes*, either physically or mentally, in search of their roots and in order to learn aspects of their culture and history that they consider to have forgotten. The postmodern condition seems to offer non-places in which it may be complex to build and dwell and in which our experience of home can also be one of disruption and fragmentation. There always persists, however, both at an anthropological and sociological level, the possibility of complementary places, of heterotopias, and of homes as sites of articulation and of momentary closure. A heterotopia, a concept originally coined by Foucault (1986), constitutes “the actually lived and socially produced space of sites and the relations between them” (Soja, 2001, p. 114), and, in Foucault’s (1986) words, it is “another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill-constructed, and jumbled. The latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation” (pp. 25, 27). These homes in which we expect to revive our identities are always hard to find since they are continuously changing, persistently fluctuating. It is these mental representations, these fleeting phenomena that we seek to explore in the stories of Edna O’Brien

Home in “Sinners”

Ireland seems to constitute “the heart, or more properly the soul, of all of O’Brien’s narrative” (Brownrigg, 2011). However, we must concur with Murray (2013) when he stated that, “given the persistent presence of migration in the work of O’Brien, it is surprising how marginal a theme it is in critiques of her work” (p. 87). For this reason, we try to unveil in this article the connections between space and identity that go beyond Irishness. In our opinion, *Saints and sinners* deserves to be read as a work through which O’Brien makes us ponder about our place in the world and our contemporary loneliness, about the chances of total plunder, and about the many and terrible roads back home. We offer in this section a description of homes as represented in the short story “Sinners,” which exhibits the particular case of displacement caused by old age. Much of this analysis is based on Cepeda’s (2016) BA dissertation titled *Home as representation: Space and identity in Edna O’Brien’s Saints and sinners* (2011). The dissertation examined four of the eleven short stories contained in the collection, but only the analysis of “Sinners,” the most representative of them in view of our hypothesis, was singled out for this article.

The whole of “Sinners” takes place in a house in Ireland owned by Delia, the main character in the story, which is turned into a Bed and Breakfast place during the summer months. Delia is an aging widow who lives alone, and is waiting for an English family who has rented two rooms. “Sinners” is a story told by a partially omniscient narrator who mainly knows only about Delia’s thoughts. It is then through the internal perspective of a third person narrator that is not a participating character but who has knowledge of the main character’s feelings that we are introduced to the most significant aspects of Delia’s life: her house and its memories and her new lodgers. Equally important happens to be the very end of the story, in which Delia’s relation with the fourfold turns full circle.

The souvenirs of her past

Delia finds it difficult to feel her house –the building where she lives– as her home. While the *house* is mentioned five times throughout the story (pp. 37, 38, 43, and 44) mostly in reference to the improvements already made or to be made at the place, *home* is used only once in the set phrase *go home* (p. 38). At some point in Delia’s past her house has been felt as a home, but now it only contains the remains of a home. The derelict building still keeps, though, the memories of past events, the carcass of a life already lived, as the personification “the whole house listened” (p. 43) seems to suggest. Delia knows every corner of the house, and she distinguishes every sound made inside it as she knows herself: “So at night, awake, she would go around the house in her mind and think of improvements that she would make to it in time” (p. 37). Moreover, she is able to tell what her lodgers are doing by only listening to their movements. At some point in the story, for example, she realizes that “they climbed the stairs. They used the bathroom in turn. She could tell by their footsteps” (p. 39). The house functions then as an extension of Delia, faithfully reflecting the stillness she feels at the moment. This immobility clearly opposes the past lived in the house, when there have been a husband and children and when she has been an active wife and mother and not the passive lonely lady she has become with age.

The souvenirs of the past seem to be contained in the rooms and the objects in the house. In only one part of the house is Delia able to feel safe from the *immoralities* of her guests: “She hurried back to her room and sat on the edge of her bed, trembling” (p. 44). Her current room constitutes a refuge where she feels safe against not only the private life of her lodgers, but also her own past life still haunting her memories. Her room is a different room from the one in which she has –rather unpleasantly– fulfilled the functions of wife and mother:

the blue room... had been her and her husband’s bridal room, the one where her children were born

and where, as the years went on, she slept as little as possible, visiting her husband only when she was compelled to and afterwards washing and rinsing herself thoroughly. Five children were enough for any woman. Four scattered, one dead, and a daughter-in-law who had made her son, her only son, the essence of graspingness. (p.40)

The room is displayed as a memento of the time in which the house has been inhabited by her unloving husband and when her children have been born and raised. Yet, we can read that as a time when, with all the hardships and unpleasant situations of family life, Delia’s house has been a home, in contrast with her present, in which she seems to have withdrawn from life and receded to the sheltered loneliness and lifelessness of her room.

Similarly, Delia's remembrances of her family life are mainly related to the objects she keeps in the house. They either bring back to life memories of her close kin, as "a little round box in her bedside drawer, she felt for the sleeping tablet that was turquoise in colour, identical to the sea on a postcard that her youngest daughter had once sent from the Riviera" (p. 44) or trigger feelings of lost affections, as the china tooth mug her lodgers break in the bathroom: "She would miss that tooth mug, she would mourn it. Her things had become her faithfuls, what with all else gone or scattered" (p.40). She has become strongly attached to the objects in her house because they have become the remains of past relationships and gone-away people. However, as the rest of the house, the things in it are in a highly deteriorating state, as "the dish cloths [which] smelt of milk, no matter how thoroughly she soaked or boiled them. They had that sour, gone-off smell" (p. 38). That state most probably stands as a token for Delia's current lonely life, revolving only around the house and its components. Through an accurate comparison, we are told that Delia "knew, yes, she knew, that the love from children became fainter and more intermittent with time, not unlike a garment washed and rewashed, until it is only a suggestion of its original colour" (p. 40).

Nevertheless, even from the beginning of the story there is the need to heal the ties with life. As we have already spotted, awake at night, Delia ponders on the improvements that she plans to make to the house. Those include

new wallpaper in the good room, where the existing pink was stained around the window frames, brown smears from repeated damp. Then in the vacant room where apples were stored, the wallpaper had been hung upside down and had survived the years without any visitor noticing that the acorns and hummingbirds were the wrong way around. (p. 38)

There persists in Delia the strong desire to rebuild the house and to care for it as she has cared for her children and despised her husband. There is in Delia the need to dwell there and to start feeling it as her *home*, a temporary feeling she is oftentimes able to recreate through the presence of her lodgers.

Sinners

Delia has lived alone ever since her husband's death and her children's departure and, apart from the lodgers she keeps in the summer, she rarely interacts with any other people. It is when an English couple and their daughter arrive at her lodge that the actual events in the story take place. The first night, "after they [the lodgers] went out to dinner, she [Delia] had peered into their room. She did not open their suitcases, as a point of honour, but she studied some of their possessions" (p. 42). It is through their belongings that she can recover their lives. So, here again, we can notice how objects become significant as tokens of people's lives and for Delia's sense of a tie to life.

Her new lodgers are the ones who bring back to life the house and the objects inside it. Through the use of the mugs, the cups, the towels, the tea towels, the dishcloths, the bed, the bedroom and the bathroom in the house, the place turns once again into a temporary home. The couple rents the blue room where Delia's marriage bed is located and

she imagined them, professional man and plump wife, lying side by side, the square pouches of the quilt rising and sinking with their breathing, and she remembered the clutching of it as her husband made wrathful and unloving love to her. (p. 41)

What she really imagines is life: by reconstructing their breathing reminding her of the times when her husband has been alive and sex a regular though undesired action, she projects what she has lived throughout her life. Once again, though, her memories are not necessarily sweet: life is sometimes bitter, and love can also be made unlovingly.

But not only has the couple brought back Delia's past and troubled feelings. Their daughter Samantha also plays a key role in her remembering. Delia is truly judgemental of the girl's appearance and personality even from their very first encounter. Samantha is portrayed as arrogant and wicked, which discloses Delia's initial envy of her, as illustrated from her perspective by the following extract:

The daughter, Samantha, was cocksure, with toffee-colour hair, narrowing her eyes as if she were thinking something mathematical, when all she was thinking was, 'Look at me, spoil me.' Her long hair was her chief weapon, which she swept along the table.... Samantha's short skirt drew attention to her thighs, which were like pillars of solid nougat inside her cream lace stockings. (pp. 38-39)

Even though there is not a first person narrator in the description, we can recognize the highly prejudiced version of the girl that emerges from Delia's perspective. With her long hair, short skirts and firm thighs, Samantha is a reminder of the youth, sensuality, and sexuality that Delia has lost. She stands then in an opposite position to her: "the diaphanous pink nightie was laid out on her [Samantha's] pillow and looked *life-like*" (p. 42, emphasis added).

Yet, more revealing of her guests' activity and of Delia's passivity becomes the first climatic scene in the story, in which she hears the three of them apparently having sex. First, "she hears her [Samantha] going towards the parents' room," and then she hears "a series of taps," and "whispers and tittering and giggles" (p. 42), and then "the exclamations" (p. 43). As readers, however, we only know Delia's "pictures" (p. 43) of the action supposedly taking place in the room and her knowing in advance that "it would reach the vileness of an orgy" (p. 43). There is no distinct evidence that the lodgers are actually having sex, but for Delia's recognition of the sounds they make. The sexual innuendo of those sounds is enough, though, for her to acknowledge her willingness to feel desired and alive once again. This is confirmed by her later dream in which she appears in a regal, but very profane church surrounded by naked saints and asked to undress and help herself to wine. So strong is her desire to feel alive that "she kept believing that she was not dreaming, except that she was" (p. 45). Moreover, there is also a hint that the lodgers are the ones who possess life in Delia's fear that they "get forward and start to think that the house [is] theirs, opening wardrobes and drawers, finding the souvenirs of her past" (p. 41), to which we have referred in the previous section.

On the whole, it seems that the real issue with her lodgers is that they bring their lives and more specifically their youth and sex inside the house, thus disrupting Delia's world of stillness. In contrast with her, they apparently enjoy the life that she has lost. The moment they enter the house, they unlock her past memories and disturb the passivity that has protected her for so long.

The give and take that is life

If we consider that to feel at home we have to keep to the fourfold or, in other words, to the natural communion of earth, sky, divinity, and mortality, we can conclude that Delia has remained in her house for a long time, but she has not been *at home*. First, there are no instances in the story in which Delia is in contact with earth and sky since, as in “Plunder,” most of it takes place inside the building. The moment she sees her dog coming from under the hedge, she just goes to the window and looks at the outside from inside the house. Furthermore, it is through her guests that she learns of the natural qualities of faraway places, but also of the Irish countryside surrounding her. Second, Delia has also lost her connection with the divinity. “Prayers,” we are told, “come only for her lips and not from deep within anymore” (p. 37). A figure of the Virgin Mary has also become a mere “cold plaster statue” (p. 42). The rapport with God, in sum, has gone. Last, Delia has seen her relations with her fellow mortals wane almost to disappearance. Her unloving husband has long been dead, and the love of her children has faded away, and, as a consequence, Delia has only remained attached to the objects that remind her of her past and to the brief and provisional contacts with her guests.

Nevertheless, the lodgers in the story force her back to life. Having noticed the youth in Samantha opposite to her forthcoming death and witnessed what has been from her perspective an orgy that make her body “stiffen[ed] with revulsion” (p. 43), Delia decides to act and take revenge: with utter sarcasm she tells the guests that she will charge them for one room only for the other has not been occupied. To that, the couple chooses not to react as she has expected and they only doggedly insist on her taking the money, after with they leave. Once the car is out of sight, “she flopped onto the grass and began to cry. She cried from the pit of her being. Why was she crying? It has to do with herself.” (p. 47). It is in contact with the grass and soil that she realizes how within the artificial boundaries of her house she has built up a wall not only against nature but also against the life contained in the rest of humanity, how “her heart had walled up a long time ago, she had forgotten the little things, the little pleasures, the give and take that is life. She [has] forgotten her own sins” (p. 47). After all of that have left, Delia has not been able to rebuild a home. It is only within the fourfold that we construct our homes and our identities, the pit of our being. Moreover, it is precisely this that Delia has started perceiving through the visit of her guests, if we consider that her identity, as everyone’s, is founded on a sense of home or a sense of belonging. There are chances then for Delia going back home, to live within the fourfold. After a blank space in the page, we are told that “the grass was soft and silken and not too dry, nourished from rain and spells of sunshine” (p. 47)

Home as the Heideggerian Fourfold

In *Saints and sinners* most of the characters connect home with early physical houses set in the past. Mostly geographically located in Ireland, those are places where the characters are born or which stand for secure spaces in their memories. As in O’Brien’s previous works, the figure of the mother does not only play a powerful role in the characters’ lives (Pelan, 2006) but also stands as a key element in their construction of home. In “Sinners”, though the protagonist is a feminine character, her motherhood remains in the past, and so the place has lost its sense of home. Delia is absorbed by and amalgamated with the house itself with all its rooms and ornaments. In other words, she has mentally made of her house a private museum where she has collected the remains of a life and has found protection against those changes that she has not been able to control. It can be claimed, then,

that Delia inhabits a provisional and ephemeral non-place (Augé, 2000), defined by its loneliness and its lifelessness. Nevertheless, most of the characters in *Saints and sinners* manifest a strong desire to build their dwellings in which they may spare and preserve the unity of the four elements, earth and sky, divinities and mortals (Heidegger, 1971), thus feeling at peace and safeguarded as at home. This ideal seems to be difficult for most of them, but it is not completely impossible since. From a metaphorical perspective, at the end of “Sinners,” nature gives Delia the opportunity of a new beginning when she, in contact with grass and earth, has new chances of going back to life after having remained for so long enclosed within the walls of her house.

As regards the earth and sky, although in “Sinners” most of the story takes place inside the house, there are a few instances in which Delia gets in contact with the nature that surrounds her place. One of them leads to the moment when she goes to the window and sees her dog coming from under the hedge. This case, in which she looks at the outside from inside the house, signifies Delia’s entrapment in the material world and her detached relationship with the natural world. A similar event constitutes her guests’ telling her about other places.

Often with guests, she would [...] learn of faraway places –the coral reefs, or the wildly contrasting climates in different parts of Australia, or Table Mountain in Cape Town, [...]. (p. 45)

Once again, she envisions the outside from inside the walls of her house. Her costumers –the outsiders– are the ones who tell her about the nature she cannot see and the life she does not enjoy because of her never abandoning the house and always worrying about its decay. Moreover, Delia’s relationship with the divinities has also been broken, as shown by the following passage:

In her wide-awake vigils, she prayed or tried to pray, but prayer, like sleep, was on the wane now, at the very time when she should be drawing closer to her blessed Maker. The prayers came only for her lips and not from deep within anymore. She had lost that most heartfelt rapport that she once has with God. (p. 37)

Delia has tried to keep a connection with the divinities, but she has lost the capacity to do it and has become too attached to the material elements that remind her of the people in her life. In stressful situations, she attempts to re-establish that link, as when “put[s] her hand on the cold plaster statue of the Virgin, asking for protection” (p. 42). That relation, however, is not possible anymore, and she only receives as an answer the coldness of a frozen object without life.

Lastly, it is through the recognition of our inevitable death that we begin to accept our human nature and that, in some cases, we experience moments of epiphany. At the end of the story, when Delia realizes that she is growing old and leading a lifeless existence, nature reappears, and the connection that she is now able to re-establish with the natural elements offers her a new chance of going back to life. This is, however, in contrast with all her preceding actions throughout the story, messy and ill-constructed, as “she flopped onto the grass and began to cry” (p. 47). It is to this representation that Delia temporarily clings and makes hers as lived experience. Even though the open ending leaves exposed the possibility of rebuilding a communion with the fourfold, readers cannot make sure that this will be the

case, and therefore the heterotopia stands only as compensation, and not necessarily as illusion.

In sum, in contemporary times, the preservation of the fourfold becomes a difficult task for the characters in *Saints and sinners* because of their fading ties with either earth and sky or divinities and mortals. It can be suggested, however, that there is in O'Brien's work a constant struggle to reach that connection with nature. Furthermore, we can make that notion extensive to our undeniable connection with it due to our mortal quality: in the end, we human beings will all go back to nature. In postmodern times or perhaps in old age, the contact with the divinities, though, is still persistently elusive.

By Way of Conclusion

Some preliminary conclusions can be suggested here about home as representation and as lives experience in "Sinners," which can be made extensive to other stories in the collection. Here, we tried to examine the ways in which space and identity are articulated in the construction of homes in "Sinners" as a token of the postmodern times we are living. We also make passing references to other short stories in the collection as well.

First, many of the characters in the stories are either physically or imaginatively in search of a home. In "Sinners," Delia discovers that the natural and the human elements are missing from the house she inhabits, that she has been displaced due to her old age, and that therefore she actually needs a home. Similarly, in "Plunder" the unnamed characters are expelled from their home just to realize by the end of the story that, though difficult, there are always many roads back home. In "Black flower," Shane wishes to settle down and he provisionally does so just for the brief period that the dinner retold in the story takes place. In view of all this, we should concur with Akbar (2011) in that in *Saints and sinners* "notions of home –real and flawed, imagined and Edenic– pulse through these stories, alongside its inverse –alienation, exile and spiritual homelessness" (n. p.). Many of them, especially the latter, we tried to explore in this text.

Second, the search for a home in all cases involves an attempt to reach the fourfold. In Heidegger's (1971) view, dwelling is only accomplished through the activities of cultivation and construction, caring and preserving. Those in turn include in the stories mostly the presence of the natural or the human elements already described in the previous section. Thus, the characters trying to build their homes require the presence either of the natural and rural spaces or of fellow human beings. These include occasional acquaintances in "Shovel kings" and "Sinners" and family members and prospective partners in "Plunder" and "Black flower," respectively. As we have already evidenced in "Sinners," there is also in all cases the acknowledgement of the tangible presence of death and the absolute absence of the divinities. The latter can be read, of course, as a signal of the author's well-known position against Catholicism, but it can also function as a trait of modern and postmodern times.

Third, even in that perpetual process of becoming, there always persists the possibility of heterotopias and of homes as sites of articulation and of momentary closure. In *Saints and sinners* both space and identity are framed as representations that the narrators and characters temporarily make theirs in order to create transient homes. It is in this process that heterotopias become significant. Being places that function in the non-hegemonic conditions that the characters inhabit, the heterotopias let them build real and fictional homes at the same time. Pubs in "Shovel kings," the dinner at the Glasheen hotel in "Black flower," and the future prospect of Delia's home and her final epiphany in "Sinners" all represent heterotopias, fluctuating sites in which neither the actual place nor the imaginary one are totally lost or utterly complete. Perhaps due to O'Brien's (1962, 2011) concern with contemporary

loneliness and the failure of human relationships, it is through their subjective experience that the protagonists produce their own mental spaces that may change according to their needs.

The postmodern condition, O'Brien (2011) seems to assert in *Saints and sinners*, offers non-places in which it becomes difficult to dwell and in which the building of a home, as well as the construction of identity, are always fragmentary and in progress. Nevertheless, it is in these sites where the characters find the possibility of homes that can provide momentary closure. In sum, temporary homes are taken as physical or mental sources of personal identity. The places in which we try to construct our homes and eventually dwell become fundamental to the formation of our identities, even though, as O'Brien (2011) fictionally claimed, "many and terrible are the roads back home" (p. 100).

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