



# The Light of Evening

*Edna O'Brien*

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## **The Light of Evening** Edna O'Brien

Brimming with the lyricism and earthy insight that are the hallmarks of Edna O'Brien's acclaimed fiction, *The Light of Evening* is a novel of dreams and attachments, lamentations and betrayals. At its core is the realization that the bond between mother and child is unbreakable, stronger even than death.

From her hospital bed in Dublin, the ailing Dilly Macready eagerly awaits a visit from her long-estranged daughter, Eleanora. Years before, Eleanora fled Ireland for London when her sensual first novel caused a local scandal. Eleanora's peripatetic life since then has brought international fame but personal heartbreak in her failed quest for love. Always, her mother beseeches her to return home, sending letters that are priceless in their mix of love, guilt, and recrimination. For all her disapproval, Dilly herself knows something of Eleanora's need for freedom: as a young woman in the 1920s, Dilly left Ireland for a new life in New York City. O'Brien's marvelous cinematic portrait of New York in that era is a tour de force, filled with the clang and clatter of the city, the camaraderie of working girls against their callous employers, and their fierce competition over handsome young men. But a lover's betrayal sent Dilly reeling back to Ireland to raise a family on a lovely old farm named Rusheen. It is Rusheen that still holds mother and daughter together.

Eleanora's visit to her mother's sickbed does not prove to be the glad reunion that Dilly prayed for. And in her hasty departure, Eleanora leaves behind a secret journal of their stormy relationship -- a revelation that brings the novel to a shocking close.

*The Light of Evening* is a contemporary story with universal resonance. In this beautiful and moving new novel, Edna O'Brien delves deep into the intense relationship that exists between a mother and daughter who long for closeness yet remain eternally at odds.

## **The Light of Evening Details**

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# From Reader Review *The Light of Evening* for online ebook

## Heidi Burkhart says

A story about a woman who is dying, as she reflects upon her life and relationships. O'Brien's writing is wonderful so I feel compelled to read more and more by her. It is rather depressing as well, so take that into consideration.

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## John Thorndike says

O'Brien can make you work: "Men are queer fish hard and soft both all pie when they want you so sweet and whispery sweeter than a woman then not."

Or she can write as if wielding a blade: "Gabriel, the man she might have tied the knot with except that it was not meant to be. Putting memories to sleep, like putting an animal down."

I'm not alone in finding the book's first 120 pages a work of genius, the middle of the book erratic and sometimes confusing, and the end more genius, as an aging Dilly writes a dozen rambling and evocative letters to her daughter, Eleanora.

Though it's a mother-daughter book, Eleanora plays no part in it for a hundred pages, as Dilly travels from Ireland to America near the start of the last century. Even the New World to her is pretty much Irish, and I love O'Brien's portrait of a yearning girl in Brooklyn. Just as convincing is Dilly in old age, wanting more than her daughter can give her: "I haven't got the same energy but didn't I do my bit for ye all and maybe God will give me a few more years though I'd be no loss to anybody. Sad to say, years and months seem all one now, the same pattern, eat, feed the animals, sit at the fire at night and brood."

In the middle of the book I was sometimes lost. Who was speaking? What were they talking about? I don't need to be cosseted, and what I couldn't figure out I read through, assuming it would all come clear—and most of it did. But it was the beginning and the end of the book that moved me. O'Brien is new to me, and I'll be reading more of her.

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## Vivian Valvano says

I strongly suspect that this novel is an attempt by O'Brien to deal with the complicated relationship she had with her mother - but I don't like to read novels over-biographically and don't believe that they should appear over-biographical if they are truly art. In this case, it seems to me that O'Brien had a hard time fictionalizing. Of course, I could be wrong. But feeling like I was somewhere between memoir and fiction was a bit disconcerting. Dilly, the mother, is a fascinating character, and I found her portions of the narrative to be better than the Eleanor/daughter portions. One thing is certain, though: O'Brien is absolutely masterful when conjuring descriptions of natural locales, landscapes, fields and flowers and trees and everything in between. I read a review that faulted some of her prose here as "empurpled" (!) and "pseudo-Joycean" (!) O'Brien's Joycean allusions and echoes are still beautiful to me, and I welcomed them with great satisfaction in this

novel. (The very last sentence echoes Joyce - magnificently.)

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### **Marie says**

Loved it, but struggled with it. Just as you think you are going to be given the secret, the "thing" that has been driven between this mother and daughter, you are led back around to something else. But it's there - I think it's there on the last page of Eleanora's journal, the one her mother wasn't supposed to read (or was she?), and then confirmed later when we're told of a young boy watching a woman storm up and down the banks of raging river. Or at least I think we're told. And the tragedy of it - of the mother dying with the horrible truths she's read, but without ever being able to discuss them with her deeply troubled daughter.

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### **Suzanne says**

Dilly Macready lies in her hospital bed, waiting to be reunited with her daughter, Eleanora. Their relationship has been strained, separated by distance and by lifestyle choice. But O'Brien narrates this story from the third person and also from letters written by mothers to daughters.

This is my first novel by Edna O'Brien, and upon it's reading, I can understand why she is so highly praised. She is a master wordsmith - the descriptive nature of her prose, the connections she makes and the messages she sends. In *The Light of Evening*, O'Brien unravels the story behind a mother and daughter, being female, being Irish and struggling to break free from convention and into their own selves. The bond between them is related beautifully and accurately, as we see the love and challenges that come of such a relationship.

There were times when the writing jumped around and I found that it did more to detach the reader than draw me in. But still, I enjoyed the journey from Ireland to Brooklyn to London and back home to Ireland again. Makes me want to spend a day at Rusheen. 3 1/2 stars.

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### **Phrynne says**

Sadly I cannot honestly say I liked this book and have therefore only given it two stars. I recognize that the writing itself is beautiful but that just was not enough to redeem the book. The author jumped around constantly between characters, place and time and I found myself having to guess when and where we actually were. She frequently seemed to start an explanation and then drifted away leaving so many things vague that I was just plain unsatisfied. It may be a while before I try this author again.

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### **Katherine says**

"...the milk-white china cups with their beautiful rims of gold, dimmed here and there from the graze of lips..." (3-4).

"...telling her that she would have to go to Dublin for observation. Observation for what? As is she were the night sky" (8).

"...I'll never forget this moment, the hum of the bee, the saffron threads of the flower, the drawn blinds,

nature's assiduousness and human cruelty" (81).

"...finding himself outside under a roof of frozen stars..." (96).

"It was snowing in the vast cemetery in Brooklyn, big bulky overcoats of snow on the tall tombs, draping the headstones and the flat tablets with their long loving recitations" (96).

"A multitude of small bells, followed by bigger bells, are ringing inside Dilly's head, chimes half a century apart, bringing her gradually awake, her mind clogged with memories and with muddle" (119).

"...Nolan deems her as only a step above buttermilk and kinda mad" (120).

"...clouds like great liners roaming across the rinsed blue heavens..." (131).

"A moment of vindication when she read of Christina Rossetti, Christina Rossetti dressed in black at a tea party of Mrs. Virtue Tebbs, having to listen to banality, social nothings, suddenly standing up in the middle of that room, holding a green volume of her poems and saying to the frivolous group, "I am Christina Rossetti. 'Bring me poppies brimmed with sleepy death.'" Yes, she would be Christina Rossetti when she confronted her mother" (145).

"He worked at night. A light in his window and a light in hers is what a traveler would chance on, two disparate lights signaling a divided house" (148).

"If ever there was a moment for reconciliation it was there, it was then, the softness of the night, the trees in their spring vesture and the signing of the leaves, not like winter's brawl" (149).

"It was coming from your country and I thought of the mist on the mountain, the clods so big, so roaming, reluctant to cross the Irish Sea and come and hang over this great wide blotch of a city of London and hang over me" (151).

"...visiting little malices on one another in lieu of their missed happiness" (164).

"...rummaging in their rush baskets, asking of their baskets if they had forgotten this or that and the evident relief at finding a bottle of pills or a crochet pattern" (170).

"...and elsewhere lagoons of lit candles, hosts of waiters and waitresses all in black, like fledgling birds, swooping to be of use" (214).

" 'I ate my dinner cautiously and without schnapps,' he says, quoting Strindberg, poor Strindberg with his deathly melodies" (215).

"...separate and tensed as they listen to the wheels pawing the ground outside and the engines pattering in an indecision" (218).

\*Side note: the author uses the word "baleful" quite frequently, but she doesn't seem to use it correctly.

\*The book becomes much more complicated (I shouldn't be surprised, in dealing with relationships among family members) during the letters section at the end of the book.

"The room felt icy, even though the fire was on. It was one of those tall electric fires fronted with a simulation of logs, broken chunks of coal, lit from within by a red bulb that gave a semblance of heat, but not real heat" (267).

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## Laura says

Not so good as expected.

3\* Saints and Sinners

2\* The Light of Evening

TR Mother Ireland: A Memoir

TR The Little Red Chairs  
TR In the Forest  
TR Girl With Green Eyes  
TR The Country Girls Trilogy

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### **J.S. Dunn says**

Rather like the last rose of summer from this author's long-cultivated garden. Some of the recurring themes might have been omitted from this latest novel, and some of the pokes at Ireland/country folk/the Church are no longer on the mark as in earlier decades,

or have since been done in fresher fashion by younger writers, the newly provoked. But all in all, a satisfying read from the self-exiled doyenne.

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### **Sarah says**

The novel opens with "The past is never dead. It's not even past," words from Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury* (please correct this if I got the wrong book), and to an extent the novel is about the relationship between a mother living in rural Ireland and her cosmopolitan semi-famous novelist daughter who doesn't seem to have the time to visit. Beyond the geographical divide, O'Brien's novel is an exploration of the presentness of memory, its ability to keep one rooted in the past while slipping through present moments without experiencing them, the danger of never breaking the pattern of repetition, the fear that one's memory is a lie. The novel is also an experiment in language as O'Brien takes cues from Faulkner, Flaubert, Joyce and others while shattering and maybe extending characteristics that have become archetypes of modernism. The work is lacunal, as it opens spaces of possible narrative, possible detail, yet never quite fills them and that seems to be her project. How can one write a novel of emptiness, about people who cannot speak to each other about the things they must resolve before death? O'Brien does this through blending epistolary prose with town gossip, deeply biting personal revelations, and anesthetic-induced dreamscapes, and by limiting the voices of external characters or filtering them through the two protagonists. The relationship between the mother and daughter is lived through the material gifts they send back and forth to each other, painstaking handiwork from the mother is exchanged for boutique bought ill-fitting articles of clothing from the daughter. Cloth is a trope for its connection to women's labor and its ability to veil bodies and truths.

As a reader, one feels veiled like falling asleep during a movie and missing really crucial sections of the narrative. This feeling is persistent; just as the narrative flow picks up, one is flung into a new voice, in a new time period. It's difficult but worthwhile for the gorgeous descriptions of the rural country and for the emotional impact the silences press into the reader. O'Brien creates a wonderful clash between folklore and modernity, pastoral and urban life, and past and present.

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### **Ally Atherton says**

Dilly is lying in her hospital bed and her thoughts fade in and out through the years of her life, from her frightening but exciting journey from Ireland to America in the 1920's, to lost love and her struggle to exist and to have a meaningful relationship with her children. Her lost daughter, Eleanora has her own struggles (and many lovers!) and is on her way to her dying mother's side.

This is another book that I came across on our bookshelf at work, having never read Edna O'Brien before I was interested to find out what this Author was all about. I am absolutely divided in opinion about 'The Light of Evening'. On paper this has to be right up my alley, it is literary fiction and it is beautifully and absorbingly written. Each page is like a work of poetry dressed up as a work of fiction and it is quite imaginative and original. It could have been amazing if it had had more of an interesting story and a better ending and I found it to be frustratingly Arty Farty!

Too often I found myself in the past and then the present and then inside a classic literary work of fiction and then a dream and then back again. I like it when books have depth and dimensions but sometimes (as in this case) it actually got in the way of a good book. It has wetted my appetite to read more from this Author in the hope that her other titles are more readable.

This book, from my point of view anyway, walked too close a tight rope between interesting and boring, frustrating and genius. It could have been genius and other readers may think it is.

3/5

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### **Porkpie says**

This was a gorgeous book. Easily one of the best novels I'll end up reading in 2013. Edna O'Brien can do no wrong.

The prose is lyrical, evocative and loaded with deep, conflicting emotions that play out in bittersweet tones. The Light of Evening is not an easy read, and definitely not summertime beach fodder. It's the kind of novel that you savor, like sipping 20 year old tawny port.

The plot revolves around the difficult and contradictory relationship between a mother and her children, specifically her daughter. But the plot of this book is the last thing the reader needs to track - if you're looking for a book with a slam-bang action-packed story, this won't be your choice.

However, if you love deep characterization, deft handling of interior thoughts and emotions and especially great depictions of time and place, this novel delivers on all cylinders.

It's the reading equivalent of watching your relatives drive away after a long time together, with that special ache we reserve for those closest to us as we retreat back into the long journey of our lives. Just a heartbreakingly gorgeous book.

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### **Bettie? says**

Portrait of a mother-daughter relationship read by Tina Kellegher.

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## Shari says

Reading Edna O'Brien's latest novel was sort of like reading a cross between James Joyce -- I definitely noticed his influence here -- and Alice Munro, and maybe a little Virginia Woolf, too. I wish I remembered more of *The House of Splendid Isolation*, which I read in 2000. Reading this was a lovely yet somewhat devastating experience, but then, I read about mothers and daughters differently now. The story centers around Dilly, a woman dying from ovarian cancer, and Eleanora, her daughter. Eleanora is a writer with a scandalous personal life, and her relationship with her mother is, predictably, often strained. Her final visit to her mother's bedside doesn't provide the closure her mother hopes for; instead, it opens new wounds and much is left unsaid. O'Brien takes us through Dilly's life and experiences as a young Irish woman living in New York City in the 1920's to Eleanora's adult life. It is a heartbreaking yet somehow lovely and familiar account of all the ways in which we lose each other.

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## Michelle says

Beautiful, sentimental, harsh...I loved it-but since I can't find the words I'll let the book speak for itself-here's the prologue...

### Prologue

'There is a photograph of my mother as a young woman in a white dress, standing by her mother who is seated out-of-doors on a kitchen chair, in front of a plantation of evergreen trees. Her mother is staring with a grave expression, her gnarled fingers clasped in prayer. Despite the virgin marvel of the white dress and the obligingness of her stance, my mother has heard the mating calls of the world beyond and has seen a picture of a white ship far out at sea. Her eyes are shockingly soft and beautiful.

The photograph would have been taken of a Sunday and for a special reason, perhaps on account of the daughter's looming departure. A stillness reigns. One can feel the sultriness, the sun beating down on the tops of the drowsing trees and over the nondescript fields, on and on to the bluish swath of mountain. Later as the day cools and they have gone in, the cry of the corncrake will carry across those same fields and over the lake to the blue-hazed mountain, such a lonely evening sound to it, like the lonely evening sound of the mothers, saying it is not our fault that we weep so, it is nature's fault that makes us first full, then empty. Such is the wrath of the mothers, such is the cry of the mothers, such is the lamentation of the mothers, on and on until the last day, the last bluish tinge, the pismires, the gloaming, and the dying dust.'

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