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Q33602 – Modern Irish Drama and Literature

'The social and cultural position of woman has historically been one of symbolic centrality and subjective disavowal as both colonial ideology and nationalist movements promoted feminized concepts of the nation, while subordinating women in everyday life.'[1] How do two writers studied on the module rearticulate female subjectivity in twentieth century Ireland?

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Whilst written nearly a century apart, Lady Gregory's play *Grania,* first published in 1912, and Marina Carr's 1998 play *By the Bog of Cats* both work against the cultural signification of women as icons in twentieth century Ireland. The writers deconstruct the traditional symbols of women as mother and maiden by foregrounding female rage and emotion, and in doing so rearticulate the female experience. Jacques Lacan's theory of the *objet petit a* illustrates how the characters desire inaccessible fantasies, and how the effects of this manifest themselves on stage through rage and destruction.

Firstly, Gregory and Carr both contest gendered notions of space, deconstructing the religious ideal of women in the home. This dates back to Eamon de Valera's 1943 speech on 'the ideal Ireland that we dreamed of', where he imagines women as part of a country 'bright with cosy homesteads … and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age.'[2] De Valera also helped created the 1937 Irish Constitution, which still stands today:

> 41.2.1: In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
>
> 41.2.2 The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.[3]

As a result, the law and cultural ideas about women became bound up in religious expectations of the ideal family life, dutifully caring for husband and child. Whilst Gregory was writing before this, her play can still be read against the subjective disavowal of women in the home. Grania at first wishes to stay within the private sphere, having 'no wish to go travelling forth and hither to strange countries and by strange seas', and she 'would sooner pass my life at Almhuin.'[4] Waters articulates how Grania begins the narrative by wishing 'to remain safely within the community, fearing what is alien to her sheltered existence' embodying 'a conventional model of youthful femininity, Victorian rather than Irish'; Gregory is, therefore, also articulating the limitations and impact of colonial ideology on Ireland.[5]

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[1] Melissa Sihra, "Introduction: Figures at the Window" in ed. Melissa Sihra, *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 1

[2] Eamon De Valera; quoted in J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 334.

[3] Bunreacht na hÉireann (Constitution of Ireland) (1937); quoted in Melissa Sihra**,** "Nature Noble or Ignoble": Woman, Family, and Home in the Theatre of Marina Carr', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies,* 11:2 (2005), pp. 135-6.

[4] Lady Augusta Gregory, 'Grania', in *Selected Plays of Lady Gregory*, ed. By Mary Fitzgerald (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltds., 1983), p. 182.

[5] Maureen Waters, 'Lady Gregory's "Grania": A Feminist Voice', *Irish University Review,* 25 (1995), 11-24 (p. 17).

However, Grania moves into the public sphere by refusing Diarmuid's desire to keep their relationship a fantasy and secret because 'I have not yet had the full of my life, for it is scared and hiding I have spent the best of my years that are past.'[6] She wants 'their happiness to be seen', but Diarmuid can only promise that 'maybe some that are beyond the world will come to keep us company'.[7] In Grania's recognition that they must be present in society to sustain their relationship, Gregory rejects the confining notion of the home as belonging to women.

Carr also deconstructs the home in order to challenge the 'constitutionally enshrined unit' of the family that de Valera promotes, and the damaging impact it can have it in defining 'strictly codified gender roles.'[8] Physical homes are no good for mothers, and Hester rebels against idealisation by having an association with unfixed spaces. The house cannot contain her, and society will not allow her to stay there, having 'no home anymore for [Carthage] decided to take it from me.'[9] Hester embraces her displacement and spends her time 'walkin' the bog', desiring a liminal space outside the home, like Grania.[10] Private and public spheres have a long history in drama, and the play's parallels to the Greek Tragedy *Medea* tie it to the 'regular association of women with the inside and the dangers associated with women when they go outside' in fifth-century Athenian drama, as Goldhill explains.[11] Because of this, in going outside Hester 'persistently interrogates the rhetoric of authority and demonstrates how the written law possesses no hold over her', refusing to be controlled.[12] Mrs Kilbride also cannot be contained in the home. Her son, Carthage, tells her to 'g'wan home', but she has no function there; 'And do what? Talk to the range? Growl at God?'.[13] The home becomes a redundant symbolic structure, with only anger left inside it. This embodies the wrath that Carr sees as inherent to women; 'the rage in women is terrifying' arising from 'being said no to just one time too many, where you should have been said yes to', and 'that rejection has to go somewhere', turning 'dark, and it erupts.'[14] For Carr, 'male rage has a different quality. It's less self-destructive', whilst 'women's rage turns inward most of the time.'[15]

Instead of romanticising women, Carr foregrounds female rage, seen when Hester burns 'the bloody house to the ground' after being denied a marriage to and home with Carthage.[16] Applying Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the *objet petit a,* an unattainable 'fantasy that functions as the cause of desire', Hester's unachievable desire is the ideal family, ironically denied to her by society.[17] She cannot live with Caroline having her fantasy, telling Xavier Cassidy, 'Did ya really think I was goin' to have your daughter livin' there?', the effect of her

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[6] Gregory, *Grania*, p. 195.
[7] Gregory, *Grania*, p. 195.
[8] Sihra, 'Nature Noble', p. 134.
[9] Marina Carr, *By the Bog of Cats,* in *Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama,* ed. By John P. Harrington (2nd edn) (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2009), p. 380.
[10] Carr, *Cats*, p. 367.
[11] Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p. 15.
[12] Melissa Sihra, 'A Cautionary Tale: Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats'*, in ed. Eamonn Jordan, *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2009), p. 262.
[13] Carr, *Cats*, p. 362.
[14] Marina Carr, quoted in Ian Maleney, "Marina Carr: 'How wonderful to burn down the whole world'", *Irish Times,* (2015).
[15] Carr, in Maleney.
[16] Carr, *Cats*, p. 388.
[17] Lewis Kirshner, 'Rethinking desire: the objet petit a in Lacanian theory', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 53 (2005), 83–102 (p. 83).

desire being to set the 'sheds ablaze.'[18] Hester's 'phantasy is the support of desire', as Lacan says, but because this desire aims for something outside the realm of reality, Hester is driven into mania.[19] She uncontrollably boasts to Carthage; 'Ya hear that sound? Them's your cattle howlin'. Ya smell that smell? That's your forty calves roastin'', verging on self-destruction by desperately asking 'will somewan not come and save me before I go and do worse.' [20] Evident here in Carr's work 'is the symbiotic nature of loss and desire' in burning down the house, used to challenge the constitutional idealisation of women.[21] By presenting rage in mothers, Carr also contests nationalist feminized portrayals of the nation as Mother Ireland. C.L. Innes notes how 'as a nation also, both in English and Irish writing and representation, Ireland is frequently allegorized as a woman', embodied in Yeats and Gregory's Cathleen ni Houhlihan because Ireland could not, historically, be named on the stage.[22]

Furthermore, Gregory criticises the antithesis between real and ideal woman in Ireland through Grania's progression from archetypal wife to autonomous woman, a realisation of how the 'dual image of woman split the symbolic function of the female from the representation of situations and issues affecting real women in the contemporary world, outside the theatre' at the time.[23] At first, Grania is an object of beauty in Finn's eyes, 'so delicate and so cherished', an emblem of femininity and a mythical woman ready for marriage.[24] Here she is a fantasy object, the term used by Murphy 'in the sense' of 'the *objet petit a'*, his object cause of desire.[25] However, 'within a short space of time Grania goes through a rapid desublimation' in Finn's eyes.[26] Grania becomes 'some woman of the camp' and a 'pitiful hag with the hair matted to her knees' when she expresses her desire for Diarmuid.[27] Murphy argues that this moment of desublimation occurs when Grania 'exercises agency in terms of desiring another lover' and tries to rearticulate her subjectivity, and so her 'status as either sublime or desublimated object is intimately linked to the performance of her sexual and political desire.'[28] Once she exercises this agency, Finn does not see her as 'physical woman', but 'what she represents as the object cause of [his] desire', something to be stolen back.[29] Lacan's concept of *jouissance* posits that what we most desire is painfully pleasurable, going '*beyond* the pleasure principle' of Freud and eventually driving us insane.[30] So, because Grania is a fantasy to Finn and outside the realm of reality, he verges on mania and goes 'as if crazed, ransacking the whole country after her', turning 'wasted and … pale.'[31] In Finn and Diarmuid's objectification of Grania, Gregory stages 'the ongoing representational issues of women's autonomy as thinking and desiring subjects, on patriarchal stages where they are sinned against, but sinners only in a symbolic

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[18] Carr, *Cats*, p. 382.

[19] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis,* (Reading: Penguin, 1986), p. 185.

[20] Carr, *Cats*, p. 382.

[21] Sihra, 'A Cautionary Tale' in Jordan, p. 258.

[22] C.L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935,* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), p. 10.

[23] Cathy Leeney, 'The New Woman in a New Ireland?: *Grania* After Naturalism', *Irish University Review,* 34 (2004), 157-170 (p. 158).

[24] Gregory, *Grania*, p. 182.

[25] Paul Murphy, *Hegemony and Fantasy in Irish Drama, 1899-1949* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 12.

[26] Paul Murphy, 'Woman as Fantasy Object in Lady Gregory's Historical Tragedies', in *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation*, ed. By Melissa Sihra, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 38

[27] Gregory, *Grania*, pp. 189-190.

[28] Murphy in Sihra, 'Fantasy Object' pp. 38-9.

[29] Murphy in Sihra, 'Fantasy Object', p. 37

[30] Lacan, *Four Fundamentals,* p. 281.

[31] Gregory, *Grania*, p. 200.

sense.'[32] In her oscillating status as sublime and desublimated object, Grania represents the conflicting reality and expectations of women.

The antithesis to the romanticised notions of Grania as object of desire and sinner is Gregory's portrayal of her subjective determination to walk out as Finn's wife. Whilst Finn mourns for Diarmuid, Grania knows that she will have to work against the structural confines of her society, and so 'begins fastening up her hair as if preparing for a journey.'[33] She then states with the declarative, 'it is not with Diarmuid I am going out', rejecting the traditional Irish ritual of keening.[34] Finn urges her to 'wait till the months of mourning are at an end, and till your big passion is cold' but she refuses.[35] Waters argues that in 'refusing to keen, Grania rejects a traditional responsibility of women as mediators between the supernatural world and this one', and also 'consigns his ghost to the margins of history', as women have been historically disavowed.[36] Seeing Diarmuid banish her 'from his thoughts', Grania asks herself 'why would I fret after him that so soon forgot his wife, and left her in a wretched way?' and puts her subjectivity above commitment to tradition.[37] She must then face the Fianna's mockery at her decision to go with Finn 'to Almhuin' as his wife, commanding him to 'open the door for me now!'.[38] At first, she 'falls back and crouches down' at their laughter, a symbol of the punishment she faces from society for transgressing from her role as widow and exhibiting desire. Innes explains how 'it is her rejection of that ideal and of the role of woman as loyal wife only, that brings the mockery of Finn's all-male army.'[39] However, when 'she opens the door for herself' the laughter 'stops suddenly as she goes out', reinserting herself into society.[40] In Grania's exit off stage with a new husband and the 'enactment of … polyvalent sexual identities', as Leeney explains, Gregory challenges the 'patriarchal order' and the constitutional expectation for women to marry.[41] Significantly, because of her actions Grania has the most power at the end of the play by manipulating the men's desire of her, and so Gregory 'in a classic feminist sense, re-figures history as 'herstory''.[42] I would argue that this is reflective of Gregory's choice of the Diarmuid and Grania myth, talking of how she 'turned to Grania because so many have written about sad, lovely Deirdre … Grania had more power of will, and for good or evil twice took the shaping of her life into her own hands.'[43]

Furthermore, Hester escapes the jouissance of being and desiring a mother through suicide. In accordance with Lacan, Carr's character destroys herself and the world around her because the desire to belong and have a mother is so strong, but they are out of reach because of her lack of memory. Hester's memory 'doesn't add up', wanting to know 'everythin'' about big Josie Swane, but the stories told about her are unsatisfactory.[44] For example, it is painfully pleasurable to be told by Xavier Cassidy that she was 'loose and lazy and aisy, a five shillin' hoor', although for Hester his 'five shillin' hoor stories will' never

[32] Leeney, 'Naturalism', p. 161.
[33] Gregory, *Grania,* p. 211.
[34] Gregory, *Grania,* p. 211.
[35] Gregory, *Grania,* p. 213.
[36] Waters, 'Feminist Voice', p. 22.
[37] Gregory, *Grania,* p. 212.
[38] Gregory, *Grania,* pp. 211/214.
[39] Innes, *Woman and Nation,* pp. 156-8.
[40] Gregory, *Grania,* p. 214.
[41] Leeney, 'Naturalism', p. 166.
[42] Leeney, 'Naturalism', p. 161.
[43] Lady Gregory, quoted in 'Notes and Music', in *The Collected Plays II,* ed. by Ann Saddlemyer (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1971), p. 283.
[44] Carr, *Cats,* p. 358.

'change me opinion of her.'[45] However, she admits to her brother, Joseph, that 'if it wasn't for this auld caravan I'd swear I only dreamt her', highlighting Hester's attachment to the landscape, her memory inextricably linked to the bog.[46] If she leaves, then her only connection to her mother is destroyed, as 'everythin' I'm connected to is here' with no place to belong, an outsider.[47] Memory and identity are interdependent, Sihra commenting on how 'Carr dramatizes how Hester's need to remember is so vital in her effort to construct an identity'.[48] Identity becomes subjective, Carr portraying how it 'can be created upon myth or illusion, rendering it a conditional, performative or fabricated state', in line with Butler's theory of gender performativity.[49] If 'gender is a performance' of the individual, albeit 'with clearly punitive consequences', then the female experience is rearticulated by Hester's own decisions and not dependent on the state or religion.[50] By questioning the very existence of big Josie through a lack of memory, Carr creates an absent mother who challenges the feminized concept of Mother Ireland. She questions the centrality of the family to Ireland and the 'larger hierarchy of orderly definition, superiority and inferiority, in which every element has a determinate place', which marginalised people such as illegitimate children.[51]

Additionally, because Hester's jouissance is the act of remembering, her yearning for satisfaction enacts itself in violence on her daughter, Josie, in a tragic cycle. She does not want Josie to 'be hopin' and waitin' and prayin' for ya to return' in the same way Hester did for her own mother.[52] Lacan hypothesises that we will destroy the things which we desire the most but are a fantasy; '*I love you, but, because inexplicably I love you in something more than you – the* objet petit a *– I mutilate you.*'[53] Therefore, whilst Hester's murder of Josie could be interpreted as being an act of love, freeing her, I would argue that she does it out of an unfulfilled love for her own mother. Her desire for a family becomes 'a deadly enjoyment',[54] hysterically walking 'around demented with Josie', comparable to Finn's state over Grania.[55] It is this murder that parallels the play with *Medea,* highlighting how Carr works to dispel the historical myth of femininity, and locates it in the history 'of women swayed by uncontrollable emotions' on the stage, key in classical Greek drama where 'women were seen to be prone to exceptional emotions which could be very destructive, either for themselves or others.'[56] Hester, therefore, cannot have her fantasy because of what she has done to herself, culminating in her suicide. The Ghost Fancier 'cut her heart out', dramatizing the potential of desire to turn 'self-destructive'.[57] Hester's last words, 'mam-mam-' highlight how desperate her desire for her mother was, crushing the self to find out what is real. In creating defective mothers, Carr destroys the idealism of motherhood because she was 'tired of the sentimental portrayal of mothers', challenging its purity; 'we have this blessed Virgin myth embedded in us, and there is some huge arrogance about carrying life and all the importance of it.'[58]

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[45] Carr, *Cats,* p. 389.
[46] Carr, *Cats,* p. 383.
[47] Carr, *Cats,* p. 357.
[48] Sihra, 'A Cautionary Tale', in Jordan, p. 258.
[49] Sihra, 'A Cautionary Tale', in Jordan, p. 259.
[50] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble,* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 214.
[51] Michael Bristol, 'Carnival and Theatre', in *Performance Analysis: A Coursebook*, ed. by Laurie Wolf and Colin Counsell (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 212.
[52] Carr, *Cats,* p. 394.
[53] Lacan, *Fundamentals,* p. 268.
[54] Kirshner, 'Rethinking desire', p. 83.
[55] Carr, *Cats,* p. 395.
[56] Riana O'Dwyer, 'The Imagination of Women's Reality: Christina Reid and Marina Carr, in *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre,* ed. by Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Craysfort Press, 2009), pp. 245-6.
[57] Carr, *Cats,* pp. 396/363.
[58] Marina Carr; quoted in Sihra, 'Nature Noble', p. 137.

In comparison to Hester's suicide, Diarmuid escapes the jouissance of desire through death, destroyed by the *objet petit a.* Diarmuid idealises Grania as an extension of himself as his wife, not understanding why she is not happy to stay in isolation; 'if I am content here, why would you not be content?'[59] It is this desire and objectification that makes her unattainable as a fantasy object; he thus causes his own fate, self-destructive in the same way as Hester. However, he also desire's Finn's approval and loyalty, perhaps to an even greater extent. On his death bed Diarmuid ignores Grania, 'not noticing her' and addressing only Finn, his 'master'.[60] To Finn, Diarmuid also means 'more to me than any of my comrades or my friends.'[61] Grania is able to see this, and how Diarmuid's 'desire was all the time with [Finn] and Almhuin', and that their relationship 'was but letting on.'[62] Consequently, at some point each character is a sexual rival of the other, desire circulating 'equally between the three characters, marking out this play as a radical exploration of the effect of same-sex passion on heterosexual relationships.'[63] Leeney is also careful to name Finn and Diarmuid's relationship specifically as 'same-sex passion' because the 'categories through which we understand gender and relations between the genders are historically determined' and labels 'are products of a social-political-cultural context, and may distort representations of relationships which grew out of different sets of meanings.'[64] In exploring the effect of hetero and homosexual desire on women, Gregory questions 'what it means to be a woman or a man, of what we would currently call the politics of gender,' destabilising ideas about men and women.[65] Finn, therefore, also becomes the object cause of desire in the love triangle, Diarmuid's jealousy and desire of both him and Grania eventually enacting itself in violence. In murdering the King of Foreign Diarmuid kills himself, as Lacan dictates that we mutilate what we cannot have out of loss, Gregory demonstrating the 'link between male violence and desire' and the impact that this has on women's lives.[66]

To conclude, both Carr and Gregory foreground women's subjectivity, presenting women as flawed and angry to juxtapose women's historical disavowal through the constitution. Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* is the antithesis of de Valera's vision of the ideal Ireland, because for her 'the family is central to the drama and it is from this microcosm that implications for culture and nation are cited', scrutinising hegemonic beliefs and the naturalisation of the nuclear family.[67] In highlighting the duality of Grania, Gregory emphasises the contradiction between woman as symbol and the realities of patriarchal confinement, her character development showing her 'interest in redefining the role of women.'[68] Lacan's theory illustrates how women are desiring beings; at the very moment that Grania expresses her agency and desire, rearticulating her own experience of life, she becomes desublimated as a fantasy object in the eyes of the men, and Hester's rejection of traditional motherhood positions her as outsider and even further away from what she desires the most.

[59] Gregory, *Grania,* p. 195.
[60] Gregory, *Grania,* p. 209.
[61] Gregory, *Grania,* p. 188.
[62] Gregory, *Grania,* p. 211.
[63] Leeney, 'Naturalism', p. 163.
[64] Leeney, 'Naturalism', p. 165.
[65] Leeney, 'Naturalism', p. 165.
[66] Leeney, 'Naturalism', p. 163.
[67] Sihra, 'A Cautionary Tale' in Jordan, p. 257.
[68] Waters, 'Feminist Voice', p. 17.

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