
Challenges to and Distortions of Parental Love in Contemporary Irish Women's Theatre

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Abstract: The point of departure of this essay is Eric Fromm's theories of love and its different forms. For the exploration of literary representations of parental love contemporary plays by Irish women offer a fruitful terrain as family issues are usually problematized in them. The plays examined in this essay were written between 1994 and 2011, a period which saw the advent and rise of the Celtic Tiger and also its demise, changing relations within many families. In the three texts the theme of parental love, challenged, compromised or even suffering from distortions, is represented as they reflect on certain critical problems of the Irish society which form their context: the heritage of postcolonial deprivation and gender inequity in Marina Carr's *The Mai* (1994), post-Troubles alienation in Northern Ireland in Lucy Caldwell's *Leaves* (2007), and post-Celtic Tiger social fragmentation in Nancy Harris's *No Romance* (1911). What the plays share is a flawed relationship between parents and children, which can be described as the failure to achieve "intersubjectivity" as, among others, Jessica Benjamin's feminist psychology uses it alongside the key-term "recognition." Recognizing the other as subject and not object is a pre-condition of mature love, partly or completely missing from the parents in the plays the present essay addresses.

Key words: Eric Fromm' concept of love, Irish theatre by women, flawed family relations, modernist dramaturgies, feminist psychology

One of Arthur Miller's last plays, *Mr. Peters' Connections* (1998) focuses on an old man, a retired pilot; its action is internal, comprising his mental roamings in his memories, both real and fictional. Throughout the drama, he is searching for the "answer" to the sometimes just half formed questions tormenting him about his connections to the world outside, family members and friends. The play ends on Peters' daughter, Rose calling him Papa and asking him to stay because she loves him. He answers, which are the last words of the play: I'm trying as hard as I can. I love you, darling. I wonder ... could that be the subject!" (Miller 56). Intriguingly, this chimes with Eric Fromm's notion in *The Art of Loving* that "Man—of all ages and cultures—is

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confronted with the solution of one and the same question: the question of how to overcome separatedness, how to achieve union, how to transcend one's own individual life and find at-onement" (9). During the history of humankind, a great variety of answers were given to this question depending on the social and geographical circumstances, Fromm continues, but "they are only partial answers to the problem of existence. The full answer lies in the achievement of interpersonal union, of fusion with another person, in *love*" (18). There are different forms of love as indicated by the chapter titles in Fromm's book, a seminal one of them being the love of parents for their children, which largely determines the children's capacity of loving later in their adult life.

Beginning his chapter on the disintegration of love in contemporary western societies, Fromm states that "If love is a capacity of the mature, productive character it follows that the capacity to love in an individual living in any given culture depends on the influence this culture has on the character of the average person" (83). Thus parental love is also determined, at least to a large degree, by the social context, the communal norms, and expectations in which the mothers and fathers live and raise their families. Theatre, as it is well known, is a form of cultural practice which has always readily thematized human relations. A scholar of theatre, Peta Tait reminds us that "Drama communicates the emotions through words and language and draws on a long history within which particular emotions have remained recognizable" (5). Parental love is undoubtedly such an emotion, also underscored by Tait's analysis of Euripides's *Medea* and the eponymous character's feelings of abandonment and vengeful jealousy, which motivate her to kill her sons. Tait stresses that the play "offers explanations of her emotions behind her actions," yet her horrific deeds "have been considered monstrous throughout history because they contravene the basic belief that mother's love is naturally protective" (Tait 28-29), which has remained the ideal for centuries. Recently, feminist critics have re-addressed *Medea*'s character and its several different stage adaptations against the realities of an imprisoning patriarchal milieu in which the protagonist refuses to conform to the ideal and becomes a bad mother, even a child-killer. In this paper I am going to examine three contemporary Irish plays by women authors, focusing on the distortions of motherly and fatherly love while seeking also for the explanations of these emotional problems and their consequences regarding the children in the relevant socio-historical and cultural contexts.

***The Mai* (1994) by Marina Carr: women's idealization of romantic love and neglect of their children²**

The scenes of the drama are set in 1979, represented through the memories of Millie, a young woman of thirty, who recalls and comments on the events making up the plot over a decade later. The recollected stories involve four generations of women living in the West of Ireland, labeled as the "Connemara click." Among the women, Grandma Fraochlán is the oldest, just one hundred years old, and has experienced all the changes of the twentieth century. Her daughters, Julie and Agnes are seventy-five and sixty-one, respectively, and Ellen, the long-dead daughter of hers would be aged between the two living sisters. The forty-year-old Mai is Ellen's daughter, whose sisters are Beck (thirty-seven) and Connie (thirty-eight), all of them granddaughters to Grandma Fraochlán. Narrator Millie places her mother, The Mai's story in the centre, herself being sixteen at the time of her mother's death and younger in some other recollected scenes. As Melissa Sihra contends, here Carr deploys the technique of weaving personal stories together to "highlight[s] the transitions which women have negotiated throughout the last century" ("The House of Woman" 208). In the modern history of the country massively influential political changes took place, regaining independence from Britain and joining the European Union among them primarily. However, in day-to-day social life the restructuring and revaluation of family and gender roles made a much slower progress with several people sticking to outdated notions and unaware of the sometimes harmful legacies of the past.

It is possible to connect the female representatives of each of the four generations to the historical periods they evoke through the way they speak about their life and relationships. The one hundred year-old Grandma Fraochlán, Mary Trotter contends, "functions as an emblem of the imaginative, passionate world of the turn-of-the-century Gaeltacht[,]" whose colourful, imaginary tales reflect a "robust sexuality" (170). At that time, during the Irish cultural revival lasting approximately from the 1890s to the birth of the Irish Free State (1922) the West of Ireland, the Gaeltacht was considered as the repository of national traditions and the region where Irish Gaelic had remained the

2 *The Mai* is the first play in Carr's so called Midlands trilogy. The other two works, *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) also show female characters with unmotherly or deeply troubled motherly feelings. In fact, the heroine of *By the Bog of Cats*, Hester Swane is a Medea figure, which has been pointed out and elaborated on by several critical works so far, therefore I have chosen *The Mai* for the purposes of this essay, in which the distortions of motherly love is not so overstudied yet.

mother tongue of most people. The Mai's aunts, Julie and Agnes, "represent[s] a more repressed period for women in Irish history, the deeply moralistic years of the Free State in the 1920s and 1930s" when they were born and grew up (Trotter 170). As the third generation, Trotter continues, The Mai and her sisters, Connie and Beck are "trapped between their desires for autonomy and fulfilment and the mores and expectations of the previous generation," while Millie, belonging to the fourth generation, could have a good chance "to be truly independent" (171-72). The dramatic text and the recollected scenes demonstrate that these women characters, Millie included, have experienced various tensions rooted in their respective contradictory positions in the Irish society, which impacted their relationship with their children negatively. Besides, in Emily Pine's opinion, each of Carr's female characters "is so haunted by the past that she is unable to conceive of, let alone create, a future for herself," which is probably connected with the search for identity and continuity with family and national history (768, 763). However, the memories prove to be too troubling and generate insoluble psychic problems and, thus, disallow the women to become the emotionally mature and productive subjectivities Fromm regards as capable of adult love, referenced in the above quotation.

Grandma Fraochlán was born on an island after which she got her surname, because her father left her spinster mother in the morning following the passionate night of her conception. I "was the on'y bastard an Fraochlán in livin' memory" (60) she quotes her unmarried mother, "The Duchess," as she wanted to be called, speaking about her dreams that the girl's father, "the Sultan of Spain" will "come in a yach' an' take us away to his palace" (59). These improbable romantic fictions had such an impact on Grandma that even at one hundred, she says, "every summer I expect somethin' momentous to happen" (60). She was raised to believe in miracles and not familiarized with the realities of life. When she fell in love with an Irish-speaking fisherman and they got married, she doted on her husband who was capable of swimming miles to arrive in their home while she was in labour, "his skin a livid purple from tha freezin' sea" (69), and lost one of his fingers as a result of that effort. Her relationship with this unique man fulfilled the dreams her mother had fed her with and when his curragh sank and he got drowned in the sea, she could not cope with the reality of loss and felt devastated. The passion between herself and her husband was all-consuming and diminishing their parental feelings as she says to her daughters and granddaughters: "Mebbe parents as is lovers is noh parents ah all, noh enough love left over" (39). Indeed, the

continuous pining after her husband made Grandma inattentive and even insensitive to her seven children. Julie, her first-born recalls the time after their father's death bitterly: "Several nights I dragged her from the cliffs, goin' to throw herself in, howlin' she couldn't live without the nine-fingered fisherman, opiumed to the eyeball. She was so unhappy, Mai, and she made our life hell" (40).

On a remote island of colonized Ireland in the circumstances of deprivation and social marginalization, Grandma Fraochlán grew up not having the security a family which a pair of caring and loving parents can provide, so she, like her mother, turned away from reality and lived for the dream of gaining something extraordinary, which became fulfilled for her temporarily during her short-lived marriage. Yearning for romantic love and something mythical and exotic beyond the drabness of the given is portrayed by Carr as a kind of matrilineal heritage passed on from the Duchess. In contrast with Grandma, her daughters, Julie and Agnes, aunts to The Mai and her sisters, Beck and Connie, grew up in a conservative, post-independence Ireland and are shown as confirmed supporters of the strict Catholic rules controlling morality. Even Grandma changed with that tide. When her third daughter, Ellen conceived The Mai during her short career as a student from an ordinary workman whom she met at a party by chance and was not in love with, Grandma saw to it that he marry her, which entailed the young woman's unhappiness and early death. In the present of the drama Grandma confesses that she had to take the rigorous judgments of the world around into account: "whin Ellen got pregnant I would noh have tha scandal. I seen whah ih done ta The Duchess" (60).

The unreconcilable dichotomies of the double influences, romantic dreams on the one hand and the instinctive readiness to conform to the expectations of the patriarchal system on the other, proved too much to transcend and left The Mai and her generation confused and vulnerable rather than enabling their self-construction and strengthening their autonomy. In her recollections, The Mai joins the two strands and says that Grandma's stories "made us long for something extraordinary to happen in our lives. I wanted my life to be huge and heroic and pure as in the days of yore, my prince at my side, and together we'd leave our mark on it" (55). "The Mai holds a good job yet feels devastated when, shattering her dream world of monogamous love forever, her husband leaves her and their four children for years. In the meantime, she works hard to have a dream house built at the side of Owl Lake to allure him back, which succeeds for a brief period of passionate reconciliation only to end with his demonstrated infidelity at a public event on The Mai's fortieth birthday. Stephanie

Pocock Boeninger's comment reads like a conclusion about her endeavors: "Romantic nostalgia, applied to the future, becomes an impossible life plan" (168). Having lost her prince, the action implies that she completes what Grandma Fraochlán used to struggle to do: she does not want to go on without him and throws herself in the lake and drowns there.

As Melissa Sihra claims, a "thread of abandonment keeps on spinning" in the drama (*Marina Carr, Pastures* 86), down to the thirty-year-old narrator Millie, who is raising her little son without a father. In the patriarchal society of even the last quarter of the twentieth century women got their legal rights yet subtle forms of binding tied them to the home and required them to be responsible for domestic duties and child rearing. Men, in contrast, had the chance to pursue their career more or less free from such obligations and opt out of attachments if they lost interest. In Carr's drama *The Mai*, an energetic and talented woman fully embraces the role of home-maker according to patriarchal expectations in the blind hope that she can restore the marital relationship through hard work and its result, the wonderful house as her objectified feelings for her husband. What she achieves is humiliation by the man she made herself too much dependent on emotionally.

Millie's narratives reconstruct her own crucial memories and the observation that "[t]he point of view which recurs in [Carr's] plays is that of the wronged child" (Ní Dhuibhne 68) proves true in her case. She recalls one summer vacation when *The Mai* left for England to earn extra money there by manual work for the expenses of building the spacious house on the side of Owl Lake. After coming back she spoke about a little Arab princess she had met in London "longingly," which Millie reports about with deeply felt bitterness: "A lick of jealousy would curl through me whenever *The Mai* mentioned her. I wanted to compete but I was out of my league and I knew it" (46). The story confirms *The Mai*'s attraction to the exotic, different and free from her restricted world, embodied here by a child and the games she could have with her. The context of Millie's recollection of these experiences is important. Millie starts her narration when *The Mai* says, in reply to her sister who thinks that Robert might still love her in spite of his philandering: "Love! If there was less talk about love in this house and more demonstration of it we might begin to learn the meaning of the word" (45). The irony of her disillusioned remark is that *The Mai* wants to be loved while she herself does not show much love for her children whom she left for several weeks in the care of a woman with a large family, obviously unable to give Millie and her siblings the attention

and comfort they would have needed.

Beginning with the Duchess, patriarchal circumstances disallow mothers onstage and offstage in the drama to really grow up and become autonomous persons, indicated by their unhappy longings for the elsewhere and the mysterious. With Ellen's death and her father's rare visits The Mai and her sisters did not get any love from emotionally mature parents. Sihra emphasizes that "Fatherhood is also presented as troubled and erratic, [...] Robert returns after five years but shows no urgency to see his children and, embarrassingly, does not recognize his daughter": in fact he mixes Millie up with Orla, another child (*Marina Carr. Pastures* 84). "Parents are often shown to be self-absorbed in Carr's plays," Sihra continues, and her example is the early scene in which Robert has just arrived home and when "Millie asks if she can join Robert and The Mai for dinner in town, after not seeing her father for five years," she is told that it cannot happen now (84-85). At this point, the detached behavior of the parents to Millie, as she remembers, replicates what Grandma tells about the Christmas celebrations of herself and her husband: they went to bed with a bottle of spirits, paying little attention to their children even on that very day. Testified by many studies of developmental psychology, being loved in childhood has a crucial importance for becoming an emotionally balanced adult. Millie complains that the parents' problematic attachment to their children, if not neglecting them, had a troubling outcome: "None of The Mai and Robert's children are very strong. We teeter along the fringe of the world with halting gait, reeking of Owl Lake at every turn. [...] Images rush past me from that childhood landscape" (70). Owl Lake, as known from her narratives, is associated with a sad legend about a woman who, mourning the loss of her lover to the dark witch cried a lake of tears and got drowned in it – prefiguring The Mai's similarly tragic fate.

***Leaves* (2007) by Lucy Caldwell: Distorted family attachments in post-conflict Northern Ireland**

This play is set in Belfast and focuses on a family called Murdoch. David, the father is a scholar of Irish place name lore, Phyllis, the mother is a housewife and they have three daughters: eleven year-old Poppy, fifteen year-old Clover and nineteen year-old Lori. The relationships of the family members are shown, directly or indirectly, influenced by their long-lasting experiences and memories of the Troubles in Northern Ireland (1969-1998). In the first scene the parents and the two younger girls are sitting over dinner, expecting Lori, the oldest girl to be driven home from the clinic the next day. Lori,

whose full name, Dolores is associated with melancholy and sadness, had attempted suicide for unknown reasons half way through her first term at a London university and, for the time being cannot continue her studies. The action consists of the family members' conversations and dialogues, revolving around Lori or talking with her, whose plight is stirring the family's relatively peaceful life and would demand special attention.

According to the playwright, "Northern Ireland has one of the highest teen suicide rates in the world, [...] this is the post-ceasefire generation. So I started wondering whether it had something to do with having grown up in a heightened political atmosphere" (qtd. in Wallace). In her book about women's contribution to recent Northern Irish Theatre, Fiona Coleman Coffey approaches this very serious issue with a view of middle-aged people and reports that there is a disturbing increase in suicide that the North has recently experienced. Conterintuitively, the suicide rate in the North has almost doubled since the signing of the Agreement. The group most affected by this trend is made up of those who were children during the worst years of the Troubles, roughly 1968-1978. Reserachers have attributed the increase in suicide to social and psychological factors, including "the growth in social isolation, poor mental health arising from the experience of conflict, and the greater political stability of the past decade." (206)

The Murdoch parents grew up in that worst period of the sectarian conflicts and, although they did not become suicidal, the sense of social isolation and helplessness stemming from confronting events of loss and destruction have weakened their capacity to give their child suffering from depression full emotional support at this crucial time. From the hospital Lori is released to the care of her parents and it depends largely on their love and empathy that the girl could overcome her depression and regain her psychic balance. Their parental love for all the three girls is unquestionable, they have been devoted parents as Pyllis says to Lori halfway through the play: "We fed, and clothed, we loved you – Christ we loved you – *love* you – love all of you [...] were happy as long as you were happy – were happy *whenever* you were happy. You were everything to us" (63).

However, their parental love is now put to the test and proves unstable, largely due to the many forms of stress and potential danger they have been exposed to and carry in themselves even if unawares. Regarding their response to Lori's post-suicidal situation both of them, in their own respective ways, seem to be concerned, inadvertently, with its effect on themselves, their reactions and self-perception and less on what demons the girl is battling with inside. In "Motherhood in

Northern Ireland” Margaret Ward writes that: “Of course, for mothers increased disturbances meant greater confinement within the home for themselves as well as their children. The mental cost of their experiences has still to be considered” (271). Phyllis is, apparently, an over-anxious type of parent, who sticks to the rules of everyday life providing some sustaining force amidst chaos, while she still considers her daughters babies which, Fromm suggests, might prevent the child from growing up into a healthy adult (43). On the eve of Lori’s arrival home, Phyllis is already high-strung and nervous. Clover, the middle daughter has had an important audition that day and she forgets to ask the girl about it. To make up for her lack of attention she wishes to give the girl a cuddle as if the fifteen-year-old Clover were still a small child, which is just what she as a typical teenager abhors: “Mu-um. Just -- leave it, okay?” (14). Instead, Clover offers her help in tidying up Lori’s room but Phyllis reminds her that it is late and she should rather go to bed.

After Lori’s arrival home the next day, the two younger girls are back from school, “*breathless and excited*” and want to talk to their sister. Phyllis enters, “*She has been crying and is trying to hide it*” (38) – yet she does not want to share her feelings with Clover and Poppy. The girls notice that their mother is very upset by having seen Lori in a state very different from what she was like three months ago when she left for London. Clover wants to make her comfortable but Phyllis refuses to accept the care offered by the girl:

CLOVER. You sit down, Mum. I’ll bring it (the tea) in here.

Phyllis does not move and Clover tries to manoeuvre her into a seat.
Go on, sit down, put your feet up.

PHYLLIS. (*sharply, shaking herself free*) Clover, I appreciate this, but you don’t need to – I mean I’m not –

Beat.

CLOVER. (*brittle*) Right. Come on, Pops.

POPPY. Mum, Clover was only trying to / be nice

CLOVER. Leave it Pops, come on.

The girls leave the room. (43)

Indeed, Phyllis is probably concerned that she, as an authority, should not be seen as weak and vulnerable. The scene underlines that Phyllis’s motherly love of the girls is compromised by not talking to them as her equals, although only equality can be the basis of healthy and loving mother-child relations (see Fromm 65). In another scene Poppy, the youngest daughter, reminds her that mutual attention is the condition

of love: “Why should I care what you say? You don’t care what I say. You just treat me like I don’t count” (50).

“Many families have coped with the burden of living through war through a denial of the reality of what was occurring beyond the safety of the home” Ward notes and later adds that “The urge of parents to protect the innocence of childhood soon comes into conflict with the reality that innocence is not possible in Northern Irish society” (270, 273). When Phyllis asks herself questions about the possible causes of Lori’s suicidal turn, searching for a clue in the family past, she refers to the ways in which they did everything to protect the children from traumatic experiences: “Whatever it was, it wasn’t us! Because we did our best. [...] We kept the worse of it at bay as best we could – sang songs when they couldn’t sleep for the helicopters –” (33). However, the parents were not able to bar the reality from their children and it is the noise of helicopters surveying the movements in the city during the Troubles, which seems to have made a lasting impression on Lori and led her to think of the persistence of violence in the world:

LORI. Did you hear the helicopter last night?

PHYLLIS. What? I don’t -- I don’t think so ...

LORI. I always think, you know – When you see pictures of ... Iraq or Kabul or wherever – Places where there is real fighting going on – Helicopters overhead – And remember the times when we were little and we couldn’t sleep because of the helicopters? (98)

The actual reason why Lori wanted to finish her life by swallowing a bottle of pills is never revealed, yet the symptoms of depression are characteristic of her speech: “Mum -- when I think of – of my grandparents, and their grandparents, and back and back and back, and what – really, did they live and die and struggle and fight for? For the hope that things would get better?” (101). As a conscientious mother, Phyllis studies healthcare books, hoping to cure Lori of depression by a changed diet, and decides to make *shiitake* mushrooms for dinner because they will be good for her. Poppy warns her that neither Lori nor she like mushrooms, which Phyllis does not consider and replies as an authority who knows best: “Well, she’s just going to have to get used to them then, isn’t she?” (47).

The quarrels between Phyllis and the girls usually end with the verbal and sometimes physical expression of love by touching and hugging, but the inclusion of a piece of intertext in the drama pushes the reader or audience to ponder about the real function of these expressions for the sustainability of loving relationships in the family. In school Poppy’s class

reads *The Chrysalids* (1955) by John Wyndham, a science fiction novel with a teenage boy protagonist. Working on an essay thematically related to the novel Poppy asks her mother about the meaning of “abeyance” in the following sentence: “hostilities had been in a state of abeyance for several months and so a confrontation was inevitable and imminent” (47). After Phyllis’s uncertain response, the word and its context is eventually understood by Poppy as “things have been okay for a while but it [hostilities] hasn’t gone away” [?] (48). Earlier Phyllis spoke about their efforts to keep the worst of the Troubles at bay from the girls (33), but its effects remained and after a while caused Lori’s psychic breakdown. There is a notable similarity between what Phyllis says about attempting to keep the experience of danger away (but unsuccessfully as Lori’s case demonstrates) and the sentence from *The Chrysalids* about repressed hostilities being dormant only for a while: they imply the public and private consequences of repressed tensions potentially erupting from under the surface of the Northern Irish society. Poppy is also interested in the gift of telepathy the protagonist and a small group share in the novel and wonders about the possibility of having an insight into the thoughts and psychic life of other people. To her remark about it Phyllis responds: “And don’t you think, Poppy, that if we knew *exactly* how someone else was feeling, the, the – the weight of it – we’d – Lose all capacity to carry on our normal, everyday lives?” (49). The intertextual layer in the drama reveals Phyllis as an overprotective, inward-looking mother, who concentrates on keeping certain realities, both physical and psychic at bay and is not aware that this is the kind of attitude which shuts her from understanding Lori’s plight and the tensions within the whole family.

It was David who took the task of collecting Lori at the clinic and drive her to their Belfast home all the way from London. Interestingly, he claims that he felt very close to his child when he found her helpless like a baby whom he could soothe through the physical expression of his love for her. He elaborates on this reunion between himself as dedicated parent and Lori as endangered child to his wife:

I just hugged her, and I picked her up and carried her to the car and – and I strapped her in and – And driving back all through England, and Scotland, and then the ferry – And neither of us saying anything because – because – there is nothing to say – And such – peace, the whole time, so – peaceful – And it was as if – as if – In that moment, Phyllis, *in that moment*, I was closer to her than ever, and because we’d been so close,

-- We were closer than we'd ever be again. Than we ever could be again. As if that was the price to pay. And that was when, Phyllis – That was when I realised –
Silence (95)

What he realized during the journey home is not divulged and Phyllis is apparently in the dark about what he wants to say and, rather than trying to understand him, is afraid to hear the rest of the possibly even more disturbing content of his confession. Becoming aware that Phyllis is not able to or not willing to follow the implications of his speech, David breaks off and the couple just “*stare at each other*” without moving and saying another word (96).

The fact that in the morning of Lori's first full day at home David leaves to work in the peaceful detachment of the Linen Hall Library continuing his research on the history of Irish place names in Northern Ireland suggests that he tries to escape from confronting the grave family problem as well as his wife's reactions. The “Conclusion” of the edited collection *Love Around Us* emphasizes that spouses' good relationship is the best possible basis for them to become loving parents who are able to give their children the emotional support they need (196). David and Phyllis may have been this kind of couple earlier but now they seem to be good parents only on the surface, some uneasy feelings if not secret hostilities can be sensed being “in a state of abeyance” between them, to re-use the words quoted from the novel *The Chrysalids*. The play ends with a flashback scene showing the family three months earlier on the eve of Lori's setting off to London. They look like a happy family, giving various presents to Lori which she will need and can put to good use in her new life as a university student. However, the last lines convey a sense of clashing views: Lori wants the whole family to stay outside in the garden a bit more, while Phyllis stresses that dinner is ready and they should go inside. Finally she gives in to her eldest daughter as a good mother and sits down at the table in the garden but with a sigh, which betrays that some tension and the germs of conflicts had been present in the life of the family even before Lori's suicide attempt and return home changed their relations profoundly as the previous scenes of the play demonstrate.

***No Romance* (2011) by Nancy Harris: Emotionally Disturbed and Authoritarian Fathers in Post-Boom Ireland**

The very title of this play suggests that the waning or lack of love is a central subject in it, appearing on several levels. *No Romance* has a unique structure: it consists of three distinct parts and through its discontinuous form the play underscores the fragmentation of Irish

society during the post-Celtic Tiger economic recession. All three parts dramatize troubled close relationships involving couples, families, and generations, which are portrayed as isolated from each other but also connected by the dominant presence of digital culture in the characters' life. Harris's work foregrounds problems as a result of the recession, branching out from the reappearance of traditionalist views on and ambivalent attitudes to mainly parent-child relationships in the context of the postmodern world. The author probes into the application of questionable strategies that not a few people employ to counteract their loss of certainties and values, such as equality and personal agency as well as to battle with the financial constraints of post-Celtic Tiger years. *No Romance* highlights that the communication of those who are closest to each other often fails through misunderstandings, pretensions and lies because individuals strive to pursue their own agenda and implement their own ideas in the interest of survival.

It is in the second and third parts of the play that male characters, Joe and Michael take central position and their fatherly attitudes are problematized. Both of them have become unemployed as a result of the fast changes brought about by the economic recession, which had a negative effect on their relations with family members, including their respective children. In an article Diane Negra maintains that "Across a wide rhetorical spectrum, the notion of men particularly and singularly impacted by the global recession has become culturally commonsensical and affectively potent" (24). Taking this as a point of departure, Negra turns to the situation of the jobless Irish male during the aftermath of the boom and says that "men's falling status and positionality in the recession is recuperated by their symbolic mastery of women. This is part of a broader pattern in which recession-beset masculinity is stabilized through the invocation of his social 'inferiors'" (26) and, Negra adds later, "the beset, recession-impacted man, whose anxieties are done away with via his transformation into the re-masculinized man" (31). In the case of fathers, the compensatory intentions of "re-masculinization" and invocation of "inferiors" such as their children involved the men's use of an authoritarian tone in the home instead of a loving one based on equality.

The only characters on stage in the second part of the play are Carmel, who holds a good job and her unemployed husband, Joe. The action begins *in medias res* with the couple standing in a funeral parlour where Joe's mother is laid out; they "*face the coffin solemnly*" (42). Joe speaks first: "This is a desperate business altogether" (42). One would think he is commenting on some kind of fault in the

preparations for the funeral. However, it soon turns out that he is upset by their daughter Emer's posting a picture of herself on internet, which shows her in a wet T-shirt. In his book *Acting the Man* Cormac O'Brien offers a detailed comparative analysis of Joe, a character embodying jobless middle-aged men's crisis, by extension the crisis of patriarchy itself, during the recession.³ O'Brien contends that Joe performs the "angst-ridden masculinity" (4) of men who share his experience of being no longer the bread-winner in the family and "all aspects of their crises are undergirded by a lack of emotional maturity and an inability to articulate, and thus comprehend and move beyond the affects of their anxieties" (29). Given his inability to face his situation objectively, Joe projects his anger at the world unto his daughter, whom he considers an inferior he can freely chastise—especially when she is not present to defend herself. His male identity significantly challenged, Joe attempts to compensate for his weakened state by acting the authoritative judge of women, his wife, his daughter and even his dead mother. He calls Emer "an internet trollop" (45), while Carmel is not at all shocked by the girl's uploading the picture of herself, she is even proud of her experimentation and nice figure. Joe's vehement reaction to Carmel's point reminds one of the worst years of patriarchal rule, defying any close, let alone loving relation with their daughter: "Are you out of your mind? Here's me trying to discipline the wretch and you're there saying you're proud of her" (49).

Her husband's shockingly unloving attitude to Emer and his displaying it right before his mother's funeral Carmel finds the time and place no longer inappropriate to humiliate him: "Being angry at Emer, I think you are a complete and utter hypocrite. And I think you know you're a hypocrite too. Which is why you're so angry" (57). Joe pretends to be ignorant of what she is talking about but Carmel shows a pair of stockings and a dirty letter Joe received by post from a person who had offered her used intimate items for sale online. Carmel has evidence that Joe ordered the stockings in question and paid for it by his credit card to which she regularly sends money from her salary. Irretrievably, it comes to light that Joe called his daughter names for internet pornography which he was practising on a much larger scale. "Harris's characterization of Joe in *No Romance*" O'Brien concludes,

3 For another detailed treatment of the male characters in *No Romance* see my essay: Mária Kurdi, "Post-Celtic Tiger Crisis Genderized and the Escape to Virtual Realities in Nancy Harris's *No Romance*" In: Hedwig Schwall (ed.) *Boundaries, Passages, Transitions : Essays in Irish Literature, Culture and Politics in Honour of Werner Huber*, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, (2018) pp. 113-125.

“is making deliberate interventions into patriarchy” (33), offering also a criticism of authoritarian paternal behavior energized by the intention to re-establish masculine strength (or the semblance of it) at whatever cost.

In the third part of the drama the father character, Michael has just bought a wheel-chair for his eighty-year-old mother, Peg. The reason for buying it was not her inability to move but his intention to sell her the country cottage where she has been living for decades and place Peg in a nursing home in Dublin. Due to the recession Michael has financial problems therefore he hopes to secure his situation by this action. He is a divorced man and a weekend father to his twelve-year-old son, Johnny, who is the third character on the scene beside Michael and Peg with the cottage as setting. Ireland made legal divorce possible only after the referendum of 1995 and, as a journalist wrote in 2014, “women almost always get custody of the children, they get to live in the family home, and the father has to pay maintenance which can sometimes push him below the poverty line” (Quinn). At the time of economic recession, this arrangement could have been really hard for several divorced fathers. Michael shows dissatisfaction with both his ex-wife and Johnny: “he got his head stuck in fucking computer games twenty-four-seven, and his mother’s a nutcase. It’s her that’s the problem. Her” (86). Michael sees himself a victim deprived of authority over her: “She wants him home tonight [...] despite the fact it’s my weekend with him [...] I’m done arguing with her. Like all women, she always gets what she wants in the end” (89). Like Joe in part two, Michael also tries to gain compensation for his loss by exercising dominance over the weaker family members, his elderly mother, and his teenage son.

Michael’s unloving and hypocritical treatment of Johnny also resembles Joe’s harangues against his daughter’s adventures on the internet. He uses Johnny to do the job of moving and packing up things to vacate the house before they are all off to Dublin in the morning. However, after the child has talked with his mother on the phone, Michael reprimands him for not describing his stay in the country with his father in enthusiastic terms:

You should’ve said we were having a nice time together – you should have said that we’d had a nice drive and I’d bought you a good lunch and you were enjoying your dad – and your grandmother’s company. You should have told her that (86-87).

Also, Michael treats Johnny as a small kid when he tells him to avert his eyes not to see that a group of hippies nearby are taking off their

clothes.

Peg's multivalent roles in the drama include her narration about her unhappy life at the side of a husband who was in love with his best friend but had to keep that in secret because of the rigorous morality of the postcolonial decades. Her husband beat her several times and in her humiliated and harassed state she was hardly able to give enough love to her children, Michael among them. Thus the man's impatient nature and incapacity of loving can be said to have its roots in the gender inequity and hypocritical prudery still haunting the Irish society of his childhood. What Peg and her children experienced subordinate to an unhappy *pater familias* turned aggressive might work as a cautionary tale in the context of the post-boom crisis culminating in an "intense economic austerity as an overriding imperative that nullifies the interests of gender equity" (Negra 24), which may lead to the reappearance of old patterns and attitudes. As she is largely ignored by her son, it is to Johnny that Peg narrates most of this about her life; she has become insensitive to the fact that a developing child should not be fed stories that he does not understand but make him even more silent and alienated from his father and grandmother.

Conclusion

The three plays by Irish women authors were written in the postmodern era but, like many other works for the Irish stage in the period, bear connections with the dramaturgies of experimental modernism. Marina Carr's *The Mai*, with its use of a narrator character who is part of the family on stage, recalls *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) by Tennessee Williams. *Leaves* by Lucy Caldwell can be looked upon as a version of the "homecoming" drama, nodding to Harold Pinter's *Homecoming* (1964) primarily, in which so far buried family problems surface and the communication has several halts and breakdowns, interlaced with unfinished sentences, one-word responses as well as emotionally charged pauses. The form *No Romance* by Nancy Harris shows parallels with Martin Crimp's *Fewer Emergencies* (2005), a postmodern drama also consisting of three separate parts. However, the notable difference between the two is that in Crimp the characters have numbers instead of names and they appear to be detached from the violence-ridden stories they narrate on stage, while Harris's characters are individualized and involved in the three plots. Also, *No Romance* is distinguished by a special kind of humor, which verges on the grotesque mode.

In the three plays the theme of parental love, challenged, compromised or even suffering from distortions, is represented as

reflecting on certain crucial problems of the Irish society which form their context: postcolonial deprivation and gender inequity, post-Troubles alienation in Northern Ireland and post-Celtic Tiger social fragmentation. Despite these different concerns what the plays share is a flawed relationship between parents and children, which can be described as the failure to achieve “intersubjectivity” which, alongside the key-term “recognition” has become central to, for instance, Jessica Benjamin’s feminist psychology. Benjamin claims that “mutual recognition [is] the basis for intersubjectivity” because the essential point of recognition is the “reciprocal response to each other’s minds, regardless of its specific form – the awareness of the other as subject rather than object” (10). Mature people’s love as Fromm understands it is impossible without the above awareness which is so often missing from people who, impacted by various conditions, have become too self-centered and self-absorbed to recognize the needs of those closest to them, their children and other family members.

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