

Irish Neo-Gothic: Mary Morrissy's *Mother of Pearl*

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Irish Novels in the 1990s

The 1990s saw a flowering of Irish novels, which is often associated with the social changes Ireland saw in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Jennifer M. Jeffers charts such changes back to the 1970s, when Ireland joined the European Community, which meant its departure from being a “economically depressed, isolated, agrarian, and rural culture” (14). Since then, Ireland became rapidly modernised and urbanised, embracing and being incorporated into the global economy and media network. “Celtic Tiger”, the unprecedented economic boost Ireland experienced in the 1990s, can be seen as the accumulation as well as the apogee of such changes.¹

The boom of Irish novels of the 1990s can be seen as a response to such social changes, as the Irish needed to account for their new social situation. The main discourse for Ireland had tended to be fixed in an inward-looking nationalist ideology, which formed Irish identity in opposition to British imperialism as rural, Catholic and familial. Roy Foster shows some of the contemporary frustration towards such fixity of Irish self-image when he says, “a best selling author, born in the Republic in 1955, can still claim in 2000 that his youthful difficulties with women should be blamed on growing up in ‘a small country, trying to find its own identity in the face of British oppression’” (xv).² Such a fixed view of Ireland became unfeasible for a changing Ireland, and the novels of the 1990s seek alternative narratives as “the Republic of Ireland’s postmodern place in the Eurocommunity becomes more important than its postcoloniality” (Jeffers 1).

Gerry Smyth has coined the term “Robinsonian” for the novels of the 1990s, after the first female President of the Republic, Mary Robinson, elected in 1990. Her presidency marked a distinctive departure from a single, masculinist, rural and Catholic discourse. Robinson herself says in her inaugural speech, “I want Áras an Uachtaráin [the President’s Official Residence] to be a place where people can tell diverse stories” (quoted in Smyth, 6). Indeed, the Irish novels in the 1990s tell stories that question, challenge and deviate from any fixed identity of Ireland, re-examining its society and its values, and bringing out any silenced discourses.

Mary Morrissy’s first novel, *Mother of Pearl* (1996), is such a novel. It questions the problems of female subjectivity, particularly in relation to motherhood, in the Irish society. The idea of femininity was deeply ingrained in the nationalist agenda, as they envisioned Ireland as a female figure (as a mother or a maiden) in need of protection such as Erin and Cathleen Ni Houlihan. The image of Ireland as female figure was combined with the Catholic worship of Virgin Mary. C. L. Innes points out, “By the late nineteenth century, two female images had

become potent social, political and moral forces of Catholic Ireland—the images of Mother Ireland or Erin, and the Mother of God, often linked through iconography of Mother Church” (41). Such ideology was legally stipulated in the Constitution in 1937:

- 1 1° The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law. [. . .]
- 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.
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.

(Bunreacht na hÉireann / Constitution of Ireland, Article 41)

While privileging and protecting womanhood and motherhood, the Irish policy at the same time has confined women within the domestic ideology. *Mother of Pearl* reviews such idealisation and institutionalisation in Irish society, poignantly depicting how they strained women. As Morrissy herself states, “After over 70 years of independence we are only now coming to terms with the fact that those in authority are not the oppressor of old, but ourselves” (“Interview” 240).

Mother of Pearl can be described as a neo-gothic fiction. As recent studies on gothic fiction have shown, it has become a popular form again in the fictions of the late twentieth century. Allan Lloyd Smith’s study shows postmodern literature’s affinity with the gothic, in such features as the sense of indeterminacy, self-reflexiveness and hyperbole; “postmodernists seem to have borrowed certain particular qualities of the Gothic to pursue their own agendas” (15). David Punter explains the popularity of the gothic form in the postmodern period by pointing out our anxiety about the radical social change which can be likened to the changes the late eighteenth-century society underwent with the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution: “it may be that the absolute necessity, under late capitalism, for antisocial behaviour, the necessity of inserting a ‘foreign body’ into the apparently immaculate surface of international corporate technology, is what originates the flow and growth of horror culture itself” (187). In addition to postmodern social anxiety, Susanne Becker draws our attention to the gothic as feminine and feminist form: the gothic exposes, interrogates and attempts to exceed the established images of femininity and the narrative form dominated by any single discourse. Becker suggests the surge of neo-gothic reflects “a lack of orientation especially relating to everyday life, as the traditional separation of spheres of production and reproduction along gender-line is radically shaken” (3).

In terms of Irish literary history, the gothic fiction plays an important part in it with works of figures such as Charles Maturin, Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker. Tracing its tradition back to Edmund Burke, Siobhán Kilfeather shows Ireland as “one of the original sites of the gothic”, which articulates the colonial unease (37). W. J. McCormack points out that one of the characteristics of Irish gothic fiction is that “frequently [its] excursions to the past are quickly sidetracked into distinctly contemporary concerns” (*The Field Day Anthology* Vol 2, 832). As a genre that manifests the Anglo-Irish sense of guilt and alienation, “in the gothic vision, any hope

of social change in the present is belied by the persistence of the sins of the past” (Smyth 52). These features of the Anglo-Irish gothic tradition are self-consciously exploited by modern Irish novelists such as John Banville, and the gothic remains an important aspect of contemporary Irish novels.

Morrissy seems to make the full use of these various aspects of the gothic genre in *Mother of Pearl*. Employing these devices, *Mother of Pearl*, as an Irish novel in the postmodern age, questions the problems of identity and motherhood. In what follows, I would like to examine the novel as neo-gothic fiction; I shall look not only at its thematic treatment of motherhood and female identity but also at its odd references to Irish history, its narrative structure and use of gothic motifs.

Female Identity and Motherhood

Mother of Pearl consists of three parts (and a brief epilogue as Part IV). Part I tells the story of Irene Rivers, a former TB patient, who invents a fantasy child she names Pearl, and kidnaps a real baby from a hospital to fill its place. Part II traces the story of the baby’s mother Rita Spain, née Golden, from her unwanted pregnancy and shot-gun wedding, the kidnapping of her baby, to the return of the child with whom she finds it hard to relate. Part III is the narrative of Pearl, now Hazel Mary, who is haunted by an imaginary sister Jewel, who is in fact the substitute of her suppressed childhood memory. Each of these three parts can be read as a separate gothic story in its own right, but their relation to one another enhances the gothic sense and suggests the deep-rootedness of the protagonists’ problems of identity, which are closely associated with the domestic ideology of motherhood.

Part I opens with Irene Rivers’s transportation to the TB sanatorium, Granitefield. Tuberculosis has a strong association with Victorian fiction, as the boom of vampire gothic stories reflects the contemporary anxieties about the epidemic; it also reminds us of the Victorian iconography of consumptive young girls purified by death. Linden Peach points out that “TB is associated with moral and spiritual failings in the individual, and, in the physical wasting and exhaustion that it causes, with the obverse of capitalist values” (157). Irene’s mother who considers her illness “[has] disgraced the household” decides to cut her off (4). Thus, TB deprives Irene not only of her four ribs (which leaves her with the eternal sense of bodily defect), but also her family and her eighteen years’ life. By becoming an inmate of Granitefield, she loses her identity except as a TB patient: “Irene realised, it did not much matter what you had once been” (9).

When Irene leaves the sanatorium, “rescued” by the marriage with Stanley Godwin, she emerges as a paradoxical figure of a woman with and without a past; besides the history of the TB treatment, which indeed is a stigmatising “past”, she is cut off from all previous personal history. On Jericho Street on the north side of the city, where Irene is installed, she becomes “an unknown quantity” in the neighbourhood, and its watchfulness oppresses her:

She would always be a stranger here; the very street seemed to exhale disapproval. [...] She knew what they wanted from her—information, some means of placing her. A

family name they could trace, a townland however distant they could ascribe to her. She was an unknown quantity among them and she knew the only way she could counter that was to bear a child whom they could claim as one of their own (40).

As a woman cut off from her past, Irene fails to find her place within the society, and to establish a new identity for herself.

Because of the social pressure to create her identity, Irene starts to invent the fantasy child, Pearl. Once she has created it, she feeds the fantasy on until it becomes so real to her that she has to snatch a baby from the hospital. She imagines this child to be “the fruit of Eve’s ribs” (55), by which, as Anne Fogarty points out, she “appropriates the patriarchal myth of parthenogenesis, and uses it as a vehicle for a maternal longing that defies the laws of nature and offsets her sense of physical dispossession” (“Uncanny Families” 68). Part I of *Mother of Pearl* shows the selfhood of a woman who can compensate for her sense of loss only by forcing herself into motherhood—however, that motherhood is the result of a morbid fantasy and a criminal action.

In contrast, in the case of the biological mother, Rita Spain, who lives on the south side of the city, it is the pregnancy and marriage that have destabilised her sense of self. Her young womanhood suddenly terminates with unexpected pregnancy, and she feels, “Rita Golden was lost. [. . .] She no longer knew herself, a married woman, a mother-to-be” (103). Even after the birth of the baby and the calamity of its kidnapping, Rita yearns for “Rita Golden days” and tries to relive them. To her, the “absolute fecundity” becomes her “curse” (146), which forces her into the domestic roles of wife and mother.

Rita cannot relate to her child. During her pregnancy, she finds it “something separate and wilful”, and as a prematurely born baby she can only consider it “a stick-like being”, a failure (104, 115). Rita’s disaffection exposes motherly love as a social enforcement with which a woman may not feel comfortable. At the same time, she feels that she is rebuked for not adjusting to the role of affectionate mother—and the kidnapping is the punishment for it: “But no matter how far back Rita went, she could not gainsay the terrible truth; that someone had wanted her baby more than she had” (126). To reconcile her sense of guilt, she begins to romanticise the kidnapped baby as “an angel baby, a child of flight, gifted in wisdom and foresight” (144). It is only when she builds up a “happy family” with her husband and her second child, Stella (who is actually the child of her one-night stand), that she begins to feel the sense of self-fulfilment. So when the kidnapped child is restored to her, she finds it hard to acknowledge the child:

Rita would never believe that this child and the lost baby were the same. Something had been lost in between. Her own innocence. And in its place a shame, the shame of a mother who, in her heart, had given up her first-born as dead. How could that baby be anything other than lost, lost permanently? As she stretched out to touch the child’s hand, Rita became the mother of three—the lost one, Stella, and now, this one, her third [. . .]. (160)

The return of the child is the past revisiting which she thought she had settled, and Rita has yet again to face her strained motherhood. Instead of acknowledging the child as her lost one, she

fabricates another child to come to terms with the reality and to sustain her self-image as a "good" mother. Rita's narrative reveals the sense of guilt a woman feels in failing to assimilate with the ideal of affectionate mother, and calls the naturalness of maternal love into question.

Thus, as female subject caught up in the social expectations of motherhood, both Irene and Rita create their fantasy children. Irene and Rita are different sides of the same coin, just as their location in the city indicates, and both become "monstrous mothers" who cannot conform to the conventional norm of "good" mother: one, because she excessively clings to motherhood as the grounds of her identity, the other because she finds motherhood a hindrance to her selfhood. Adalgisa Giorgio points out that the mother has always been in the object position of the child's desire in Western discourse (22). The mother in the subject position unleashes the elements the patriarchal society has refused to acknowledge, and thus, the mother's narrative enters into the realm of the gothic.

The novel's critique of the conventional notion of motherhood is emphasised by the insertion of two famous episodes of motherhood from the Bible. One is the episode of King Solomon and two women who claim to be the mother of the one and same child, and the other is the episode of baby Moses, saved and adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter. The episode from Exodus is embedded in the Rita's story, which, at the level of the plot, suggests the fate of the lost child, found and adopted by a woman from the opposite side of the city, and thus links back to Part I. At the same time it exposes the ideology that puts the woman as mother on a pedestal. Moses owes his life to the motherly instinct of Pharaoh's daughter which overcomes the enmity against the Jews, and perhaps more importantly, to the self-abnegation of the real mother that gives up her child to save him. The same patriarchal ideology is at work in the episode of King Solomon, which is juxtaposed with Irene's kidnapping. In order to find out the real mother, Solomon threatens the life of the child, depending on the idea of self-sacrificial maternal love. Elaine Tuttle Hansen further notices that the passage of the Bible is not concerned with the individuality of the two women and renders them indistinguishable (23). Morrissy's story of the two mothers, then, reverses the Biblical episodes by bringing out the subjectivity of the mother, which has been dismissed and erased in the patriarchal discourse.

In Part III, the sense of Mary's identity is very much confused as the result of the two mothers' fabrications. Mary's narrative shows numerous binary relationships that she can be in: with her half-sister Stella, with her mothers, with her childhood diminutive Moll (which is one of the strategies Rita uses to displace Mary as the rightful first-born), with the dead "first-born" baby Rita has created, and with her erased childhood as Pearl. Mary's position is always relative, and can only exist as a fragmented half of these doubles. It is in the effort to restore the whole picture of her that young Mary creates Jewel in lieu of her "lost" sister, her blank childhood as Baby Moll and her suppressed memory as Pearl. As Jeffers suggests, we are seeing "the repetition of the 'invention' from mother to daughter" which is the attempt "to make meaning or to make sense out of a senseless situation" (130).

Mary's selfhood is disoriented again when she finds herself pregnant and the fantasy of Jewel (which she thought to have outgrown) returns. As a child who has been displaced by the fantasy of the two mothers and who had to mother herself in inventing Jewel, she cannot properly place herself in the relationship with her own foetus:

The baby within was but a pulse beating, a mollusc of flesh, lightly embedded on the ocean floor amidst cities of pebbles driven by the swell and tangles of swollen-podded seaweed, ochre and brown. But Jewel, Jewel was fully formed, a child who was part of me whom I had nurtured and loved and thought I had lost. She lived and breathed, she stalked my dreams, she begged for my attention. I could not turn my back on her. She was my first born, my only child. No other baby could be allowed to take her place. (215)

Jewel's demand for her, which is the projection of Mary's distorted mother-daughter relationship and lack of her childhood memory, is so intense that she has no room for her baby inside her, and she most drastically and tragically displaces her foetus for her fantasy child—by deliberately aborting her baby.

In a way, *Mother of Pearl* could be read as a story of monstrous mothers creating monstrous daughter. The mothers, whose identities are caught up within the patriarchal notion of motherhood, fabricate their fantasy children, which in turn leaves the daughter in a fantasy world where her own sense of selfhood is so disoriented that she ends up acting monstrously herself. In this sense, *Mother of Pearl* could be related to “the madwoman stories” of gothic literature, which exposes the brutal effect of patriarchal ideology on female subjectivity.

Yet, in the end, *Mother of Pearl* seems to open up to something more positive than pathetic fantasies of morbid female subjectivity or of the tragic mother-daughter relationship within the patriarchal society. Through abortion, Mary somehow seems to come to terms with herself and to be ready to start afresh: “I am a *tabula rasa*, born again, with my history excised, cut out of me. Vacant and bleakly empty, only now am I ready to begin my life” (216). She is able to bury her fantasy child Jewel, and she almost willingly embraces her criminality, her position as “the skeleton in the cupboard”, “a child of Eve” (218), going beyond the patriarchal realm and its notion of womanhood, in which her two mothers have been caught up. Similarly in the brief Part IV, when we go back to Irene at Granitefield after her prison sentence, we are shown an alternative interpretation of the female fantasy that goes beyond the patriarchal understanding as “a totally brazen lie” (53):

“Is this your baby?” Clare, the kitchen maid, asked, coming across Irene alone with her treasures on one such afternoon. [. . .] “Yes, but she’s a big girl now,” Irene told her, “Fully grown.”

“And do you see her often?”

“Oh yes,” Irene tells her and for once it is not altogether a lie. She sees her every day, in fact, a child skipping ahead of her on a dusty street, arms spread wide greeting the future, a future Irene has relinquished. [. . .] The knowledge that she lives and breathes is enough to sustain Irene. Pearl is out in the world and as long as Irene lives, she is not lost but merely waiting to be found again. (223)

Fantasy can be a positive force that transcends the claustrophobic reality that is imposed upon

women, a force that imaginatively connects one woman to another. As Fogarty suggests, “The fantasmatic inner space of her characters also provides leeway for the reenactment of primal fears about maternal omnipotence and neglect and the destructiveness of the devouring daughter” (“The Horror of the Unlived Life” 111).

In *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions*, Becker points out that mother-daughter story has always been a “mirror-text” in female gothic fictions that “obfuscate[s] the ideology of romantic love and modern marriage” and “suggests the construction of an alternate world” (54). In *Mother of Pearl*, such a “mirror-text” becomes the main text, where the stories of two mothers and a daughter are peculiarly connected, forming a compelling collage of female subjectivity.

Gothic Motifs and Narrative Structure

As a neo-gothic novel that probes into the unacknowledged realm of female subjectivity, *Mother of Pearl* self-consciously engages with such motifs as the haunted houses, the omen of the tinker woman, Faustian dealing with God, the theme of doubles and the return of the suppressed past. The haunted mansions of the gothic appear as hospitals in *Mother of Pearl*. Tellingly the ward of the sanatorium is known as the Manor (11). I have already mentioned TB’s association with vampire stories, and thus the patients of Granitefield become the monstrous Other confined in the haunted mansion. Within the sanatorium, Irene undergoes the medical or scientific scrutiny of the fatherly figure of Dr Clemens, as well as the sexual gaze of male patients like Charlie Piper. The erotic and the scientific gaze merge, and Granitefield becomes a gothic castle that puts women under male surveillance. In Part II, the maternity hospital becomes the gothic mansion for Rita, where macabre secrets are concealed. It is not an accident that hospital becomes the site of the gothic, as the ambivalence toward scientific knowledge has always been a strand of gothic tradition.

The domestic sphere is another haunted space in *Mother of Pearl*. Irene is threatened by her new home on Jericho Street, which seems haunted by the late Mrs Godwin, Stanley’s mother: “It was as if Mrs Godwin was an absentee landlady who had made the place ready for new tenants but had not relinquished her hold” (37). Number 24, Jericho Street becomes a repressive space for Irene, where the dominance of the dead mother-in-law inhibits Irene from establishing her identity as Stanley Godwin’s wife. Rita finds her Mecklenburgh Street house unfriendly and unfamiliar after her pregnancy and childbirth: “The staircase was narrower and more forbidding than she remembered; the kitchen seemed to be sulking” (121). As often mentioned, home has always been a forbidding place in the gothic tradition, often disguised as the gothic castle. *Mother of Pearl* follows the gothic tradition of the haunted houses but without disguise—the domesticity of an ordinary home is menacingly claustrophobic and obsesses the female protagonists.

Some of the gothic motifs constitute indispensable parts of the plot and are closely related to the novel’s questioning of motherhood and female subjectivity—as in the motifs of doubling and the return of the past. But, on other occasions, the employment of gothic motifs could be quite tongue-in-cheek. To take two examples: Rita’s belief that her misfortune started with her letting the tinker woman touch her, and the fulfilment of her impulsive bargain to allow God to take Mel

(her husband) if she gets her baby back, are so self-consciously gothic that the episodes in some ways become a parody of the genre. The gothic itself is a parodic mode, which, through mixing of various genres and deliberate use of exaggeration and stridency, questions realist aesthetics (Punter 181-183). In the neo-gothic *Mother of Pearl*, the self-conscious employment of the gothic elements becomes itself a hyperbole that exposes the existence of the “more-gothic-than-the-gothic” reality for women.

In terms of narrative style, Part I and II are distinct from Part III in that they adopt the third person narrative while Part III is related in the first person. Though basically told from the point of view of the protagonists, Irene and Rita, the narrator adopts other characters’ viewpoints and uses prolepsis, thus claiming his/her position as an omniscient narrator. In some ways, Part I and II of *Mother of Pearl* resemble non-fictional reportage of a criminal case. The narrator’s vantage point and his/her gesture of objectivity put the narrative and the subjectivity of Irene and Rita in perspective, providing them with a sense of social and personal reality.

However, the sense of reality in *Mother of Pearl* deviates from a single objective reality. As the narrator introduces various subplots, it becomes clear the reality we can perceive is at best a cluster of limited, fragmented and biased points of view. The stories told from other characters’ viewpoints focus on their sense of marginality: Stanley Godwin’s story is that of a middle-aged man who is tethered to his mother, sexually impotent, and who cannot understand his wife; the former TB patient Charlie Piper has to realise he is the spectre of the unwelcome past for Irene; Mel Spain tries to run away from his familial responsibility, and only repeats the story of his father who had vanished into the thin air; Rita’s Italian dancing teacher Giuseppe Forte feels estranged in the Irish city. This makes *Mother of Pearl* a site of diverse fragmentary and marginal narratives that do not create a single, normative, objective worldview.

Of such subplots, the most bizarre would be that of Michael Carpenter, who dies by accidentally hanging himself during masturbation. The episode is a grotesque black comedy that questions the existence of the “normal” world as such. It is worth noting that Michael Carpenter is a doubly marginal figure not only socially because of his homosexuality, but also in terms of the narrative, as his character has nothing to do with the main plot. Still, this very marginal byplot interrupts the main narrative at the crucial moment when Irene is about to kidnap the baby from the hospital. In a way, it relativises the criminality and monstrosity of the main action—Irene’s kidnapping. If the perspectives of the female protagonists are out of frame, the subsidiary plots that surround them suggest that theirs are not the only ones that are distorted. The gothicism of *Mother of Pearl* is not simply caused by the protagonists’ deviation from the “normal” world—the subplots suggest that “normal” world itself is a series of bizarre, distorted narratives.

If the gothicism of Part I and II are enhanced by the reportage-like third person narrative that allows perspectives beyond the protagonists’, in Part III, it, by contrast, comes from a first person narrative strictly limited to Mary’s point of view. As we have already seen, because Mary lacks knowledge of her past, and is force-fed memories fabricated by Rita, her selfhood is disoriented. It is out of her groping efforts to come to terms with herself that she creates Jewel. Like other doubles that appear in gothic fictions, Jewel is “both her double and her Other, reflecting like a gothic mirror the ‘monstrous’ state of the heroine and playing the roles of ally

and agent” (Becker 61). By choosing the first person narrative, Part III refuses to provide a counterpoint to Mary’s narrative and persists in the psychology in which the fictional double becomes more real than the reality. In Part III, Mary’s psychology itself, which lacks the point of reference, becomes the gothic.

At the same time, the uncanniness of Mary’s disoriented psychology derives from the fact that we have knowledge that is denied to Mary herself. Because we have been through Part I and II, we can fill the gap and make connections Mary cannot. We know, for example, that Mary has stumbled on the truth, when she says “I always felt—and still do—that she [Stella] was in on things that I had, somehow, missed, as if I were absent for a time, here only in spirit” (183). We know that tuberculosis, which Mary attributes to her alter ego Jewel, connects her to the other mother, Irene. We know that Pearl lived “in a small, dark house on the other side of the city” with a father called Stanley, just as Mary imagines for Jewel (186). All the “casual” remarks Mary makes resonate the previous sections, indicating to the reader the cruel disorientation she is going through.

It may be said that *Mother of Pearl* is reversing the usual formula of the Radcliffean suspense where the terrifying mystery is answered and explained in the very end. In other words, for the reader (as well as for the characters), gothic novels move from the state of lack of knowledge to acquisition of knowledge, resolving the suspense and terror. However, as I have mentioned above, the gothic sense of Part III comes from the gap of the knowledge between the reader and the protagonist that can never be filled; we know the “facts” that Mary is trying to grope for but she will never be able to grasp them however close she may come. Mary’s final self-revelation as “a vessel of guilt, carrier of original sin, a child of Eve” is a “truth” that is beyond the factual knowledge (218). Becker suggests “the postmodern deferral of answers and any sense of knowledge or truth gives way to the sense of an answer—but from the gothic, unreal, excessive world” (257).

Mother of Pearl engages in the tropes of gothic tradition. The imagery of the haunted house, the doubles and the return of the past are important motifs in the novel that deals with the subjectivity and motherhood of the three female protagonists. True to the gothic style that incorporates various literary styles and genres, *Mother of Pearl* uses reportage-like third person narratives and autobiographical first person narrative, and introduces various subplots. At the same time, it playfully parodies the gothic hyperbole and twists the gothic convention of suspense. As a neo-gothic novel, *Mother of Pearl* self-consciously avails itself of the gothic tradition and adapts it freely to go beyond the fixed worldview and representation of female subjectivity.

Spectre of Irish Past

Lastly, I would like to look at the setting of *Mother of Pearl* briefly. Though it is not specified we can fairly easily work out from clothes descriptions and reference to the Troubles that it is set sometime between the 1950s and the 1970s.³ This is an era before Ireland underwent the drastic economic and social change, when Ireland could identify itself as rural, Catholic nation, upholding the notion of family as its mainstay. It is precisely this national consensus

which defines women as domestic beings and first and foremost as mothers that *Mother of Pearl* questions.

However, when it comes to the place the novel is set, it turns out to be confusing. The city, where the two mothers live and the kidnapping takes place, is merely referred to as “the capital”. The geography of the city which is divided into north and south by a river is that of Dublin. The street names of the city are old Dublin street names. However, the landscape which describes a city of shipbuilding industry and sectarian conflict suggests Belfast. The novel’s frequent allusions to the *Queen Bea*, the cruise liner that goes down, are an obvious reference to the *Titanic*, which was built in Belfast. Thus *Mother of Pearl* makes obvious allusions to the two existing cities, but evades identification with any of them, by deliberately mixing up their geography and disarranging them.⁴ This may be a tantalising neo-gothic flirtation with realism, which frustrates and disorients the reader’s cognition of the city.

The deliberate play with the geography emphasises the fictionality of the setting, while indicating it to be specifically an Irish city. Peach suggests, it may suffice to know that it is “‘somewhere’ in Ireland”: “The novel is not so much concerned with an identifiable, geographical environment, but a larger ideological environment” (156). The specific mixture of two capitals, of the Republic and the North, however, seems to be an explicit allegory for the Irish nation—something a little more than “‘somewhere’ in Ireland”.⁵

What this allegorical Irish “capital” seems to point to is the nation’s legacy of colonialism. Morrissy deliberately chooses the old British, imperialist street names as opposed to current names that commemorate Ireland’s independence; Great Britain Street is chosen over Parnell Street, Great Brunswick Street over Pearse Street, Rutland Street over Sean O’Casey Avenue, Mecklenburgh Street over Railway Street (for its vicinity to Connolly Station).⁶ The sectarian conflict of the North that the novel describes as its environmental setting is a long-standing problem inherited from the Irish colonial past. In this context, it seems no accident that the street names on the north side of the city should be “Babylon, Macedonia, Jericho”—the names that reminds us of the ancient empires and their expansionism (210). The novel also makes some odd references to the Famine: Irene’s mother comes from the village deserted by “famine and emigration” (5), and Granitefield was “a poorhouse in famine times” (11). Though *Mother of Pearl* apparently does not deal with Ireland’s past, the reference to its colonial history is clearly there.

How do these oblique references to Ireland’s past relate to the main narrative? One possibility is that it overlaps with Mary’s relationship with her own past in Part III. Mary’s memory is manipulated by Rita, giving the false memory of her babyhood, while suppressing the memory as Pearl. Though Mary’s distorted childhood memory is immediately caused by Rita, it is the result of both these two mother’s act of fabricating their own “truth”. These mothers’ invention of the stories that affect Mary brings us back to the notion of history as a narrative construct. In his recent *The Irish Story*, Roy Foster specifically asks questions in relation to Irish history: “What stories do people tell each other in Ireland, and why? What stories do they tell themselves? How therapeutic are the uses of inventions?” (xi). *Mother of Pearl*’s tangential reference to Irish colonial past seems to reflect the contemporary Irish questioning of how they perceive history, how they recount it, and how it affects them.

Mother of Pearl looks into the problems of female subjectivity, especially motherhood, in a neo-gothic style that freely engages with the gothic tradition. This, however, has its drawbacks. Gerry Smyth complains that it “takes too much upon itself and is finally overcome by the weight of all the discourses it attempts to represent” (92). For example, the mixing of Dublin and Belfast and its allusion to Irish colonial past is a considerable gamble which runs the risk of not cohering. The heavy use of symbolism in *Mother of Pearl*—recurring images of ship and sea, allegorical nomenclature (the name Pearl/Mary is crammed with connotations), frequent references to the Bible—at times seems to overload the novel. However, its excess of symbolism can be regarded as a neo-gothic hyperbole, and through such neo-gothic excess, *Mother of Pearl* achieves the narratives of strained motherhood and female subjectivity—issues that are being re-examined in the contemporary Irish society. As Smyth concludes, *Mother of Pearl* “is part of the process whereby modern Ireland is attempting to come to terms with itself, identifying the ideological roots out of which the nation has grown and measuring the distance it has come” (93).

Notes

¹ For a more detailed account of social changes in Ireland, see Jeffers (9-18).

² The “best selling author” Foster refers to is Patrick McCabe, and the quotation is from McCabe’s interview with *Irish Times*, 10 June 2000.

³ The novel acknowledges its indebtedness to Noël Browne’s autobiography for an overview of the TB epidemic. Dr Browne was Minister of Health, 1948-51 (Peach 156).

⁴ Morrissy takes care that streets in the novel do not correspond to the actual location of the streets in Dublin; for example, Mecklenburgh Street is on the south side of the city in *Mother of Pearl*, while the real Mecklenburgh Street (now Railway Street) is on the north side of Dublin.

⁵ In this context, it is worth noting that the name of the hostel where Irene stays on the eve of kidnapping is called The Four Provinces.

⁶ Mecklenburgh Street derives from Charlotte Sophia Mecklenburgh-Sterlitz, the queen consort of George III, Great Brunswick Street, from the family name of Queen Caroline, consort of George IV, and Rutland Street from Duke of Rutland, Lord Lieutenant, 1784-87. For the details of Dublin street names see Clerkin’s and M’Cready’s works.

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