Unmotherly Figures in the Drama of Marina Carr

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Abstract:

This thesis will offer an analysis of the roles played by the mothers The Mai and Hester in Marina Carr's *The Mai* and *By the Bog of Cats….*, two of three plays in Carr's Midlands trilogy. Firstly, the play *The Mai* will be analysed with the focus on the maternal experiences of the women in The Mai's family. Through generations, the women form certain behaviour patterns that are being passed down through the stories they retell each other as they shape the way their perceive their role as a mother, making children secondary. These stories are built upon myths and legends that eventually become real as the women (sub)consciously succumb to its fables. Secondly, the focus will be put on the play *By the Bog of Cats…* as to examine the longing for the absent mother that Hester is experiencing. Having no parental guidance affected her perception of her motherly identity and eventually propped her to commit filicide. This play also features mythical elements that are used to emphasise repetition of behaviour patterns, as well as predestiny and inevitable fate.

Key words: Marina Carr, Midlands trilogy, *The Mai*, *By the Bog of Cats…*, motherhood, unmotherly figures, storytelling, mythmaking, Greek drama, Irish mythology

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1. Introduction

Marina Carr (1964 -) is one of the most productive playwrights working in Ireland today. She has written over thirty plays and won numerous awards. In her plays, Carr puts forward women voices, accounting for their feelings and experiences within the domestic and public sphere. Her first plays *Low in the Dark* (1989)*, The Deer's Surrender* (1990), *Ullaloo* (1991) and *This Love Thing* (1991) are "influenced by the theatre of the absurd and contain a strong feminist orthodoxy" (Murphy 389) as she engages with the Beckettian style of writing. In the Midlands trilogy, *The Mai* (1994), *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *By the Bog of Cats…* (1998), Carr detours from the absurdism and offers her audience a re-reading of the conventional maternal role as she goes against the traditional representation of Irish women and mothers.

This thesis will offer an analysis of Marina Carr's mothers in two of the plays that constitute the Midlands trilogy: *The Mai* and *By the Bog of Cats…*. The analysis will focus on the understanding of the mother identity, especially regarding the influence matrilineal lineage has over its formation. Both plays are set in the Midlands, a rural part of Ireland known for its isolation and inwardness. It is a part of Ireland that, in Carr's works, seems far removed from the economic boom and cultural changes brought on by the Celtic Tiger; rather it is an Ireland inhabited by myths, ghosts, and storytelling. It is "wedged in the interstices of realism and fantasy, ancient and modern, local and global." (Murphy 394) Therefore, the analysis will focus on two major themes that are crucial for the construction of Irish identity: mythmaking and storytelling, and thus have a significant impact on how maternal roles are perceived.

The next chapter will focus on the analysis of the play *The Mai*. It will demonstrate how the main heroine, The Mai, views her identity as a mother and what influences her life choices. The relationship between her and her female relatives will be shown as it is crucial in the understanding how the mother identity is constructed. It will be shown that storytelling plays a key role in the perception of motherhood held by the women in the play. Myths are also passed down through the act of storytelling, as Carr combines ancient Greek myths with traditional Irish legends to demonstrate the inescapability of the hereditary curse affecting the female characters. The play *By the Bog of Cats…* will be dealt with in the next chapter. Again, it will focus on the perception of motherhood by the main heroine Hester. It will analyse how Carr incorporated the Greek tragedy *Medea* in a traditional Irish context as to

present the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship. Furthermore, it will examine the absence of the mother and the way it affects the perception of motherhood.

2. *The Mai*: Unmotherly Generations

The Mai was first produced by the Abbey Theatre on 5 October 1994 and won the Dublin Theatre Festival Best New Irish Play award, while enjoying wide critical acclaim. The play is divided into two acts, and it focuses on four generations of seven Connemara women starting with 100-year-old Grandma Fraochlán, her daughters Julie, Agnes and deceased Ellen, her granddaughters The Mai, Connie and Beck and ending with The Mai's daughter, the 16 (and 30)-year-old Millie. As Funahashi (346) indicates, the play could be described as a patchwork quilt since it is formed of several parts of stories and dialogues which are stitched together by Millie's storytelling. The first act starts with the return of Robert who was absent for five years. He left The Mai and their children to purse his career as a cellist. The Mai was devastated by his departure and devoted all her time and energy creating a space where he could return. Slowly, the rest of The Mai's family is being introduced and it can be seen that they do not approve of Robert's reappearance. The female relatives are seen engaging in conversations in which they discuss their life choices, romantic relationships, and motherhood. The act ends with Millie's narration of The Mai's slow self-destruction and ends with the preparation for The Mai's burial. Millie, as the narrator, stays on the stage for the duration of the play and recounts her mother's tragic story, while further expanding upon the action that unfolds. The second act takes place a year later and The Mai is still alive, but her marriage is dying. Robert lost interest, and he even openly cheats on her while The Mai tries to stay close with him but remains disappointed by his indifference. This act also portrays how dysfunctional Robert and The Mai are as parents: they purposely neglect their children's needs as they are too much involved into their emotional problems. Lastly, The Mai and Millie are shown, as Millie tries to encourage The Mai to leave Robert. The Mai confesses she is incapable of doing so and cannot go on without him by her side. She declares that Robert is hers and once Millie goes to bed, her death is signalled by the sound of swans and geese that are taking flight.

All seven women of the Connemara family share similar elements of loss and abandonment. The Mai's story is constructed by appropriating classical forms and themes, such as Homer's *Odyssey* and Sophocles' *Electra.* Carr uses elements of Greek drama to introduce issues concerning history repeating itself and longing for the unattainable. Even though the play is set in the present, the characters seem to be removed from the contemporary Ireland, displaying a certain fixation with the past. The Mai's character can be related to *The*

Odyssey's Penelope as they are both waiting for their husbands to return. Like Penelope and Odysseus, the water is the main point that divides The Mai and Robert, but also reunites them later. Therefore, the house on Owl Lake becomes central to the play as it transfers the "ancient Greek myth into a seemingly traditionally Irish context" (Scherer 9) and it serves as the foretelling of the future. What is important to note is the legend surrounding the Owl Lake as it tells the tragic story of Coillte and Bláth. As Millie explains, the legend features Coillte and Bláth who fell in love and lived happily through the spring and summer. When autumn approached, Bláth told Coillte that he must flee from her to live with the witch, but that he would return in the spring. After he was gone, Coillte found him entrapped in the witch's lair, unaware of her presence. Heartbroken by his apparent rejection, Coillte laid down outside the witch's lair and cried a lake of tears. After she seized the opportunity, the witch pushed Coillte in the lake drowning her. When spring returned, Bláth was released from the spell and tried to reach Coillte, only to find she has dissolved in her own tears. (Carr 149)

In the dreams The Mai and Robert recount to each other, water plays the main role. As The Mai says:

> I dreamt it was the end of the world (…) At the bend in the river I see you coming towards me whistling through two leaves of grass – you're a child too – and as you come nearer I smile and wave, so happy to see you, and you pass me saying, 'Not yet, not yet, not for thousands and thousands of years.' And I turn to look after you and you're gone and the river is gone and away in the distance I see a black cavern and I know it leads to nowhere and I start walking that way because I know I'll find you there. (131)

In her dream, the water functions as the place where The Mai and Robert cannot be reunited. The tragic love story that surrounds Owl Lake is assigned to The Mai and Robert whose destiny and tragic end is predestined and foretold from the very beginning. As Scherer (5) suggests, with this dream, Carr draws a parallel with the *Odyssey* as she depicts the underworld where Hades resides, and the cavern represents the land below surface where living beings will end up eventually. Whereas The Mai dreams of the impossibility of their reunion, Robert's dream foretells her death:

> I dreamt that you were dead and my cello case was your coffin and a carriage drawn by two black swans takes you away from me over a dark expanse of water and I ran after this strange hearse shouting, 'Mai, Mai' (130)

Therefore, from early on the audience is informed about the tragedy that will happen later in the play. Another important thing to note is the symbolic representation of swans. Swans hold an important place in Irish mythology and are mentioned in several Irish myths such as *Children of Lir*, the tale of *Cú Chulainn* or the story of Aengus and Caer. They are usually connected to real people, i.e., most of the time a person is put under a spell and transformed into a swan. "Throughout The Mai, the swan is increasingly conceptualised as a symbol for an aggressive and enforcing destiny which cannot not be evaded." (Scherer 11) In the play, Millie points out that "when the geese are restless or the swans suddenly take flight, it's because they hear Bláth's pipes among the reeds, still playing for Coillte" (Carr 149) as if their ghosts are still present in the lake. The swans mark their presence one more time at the end of the play as to note another ghost has entered Owl Lake, this time The Mai. By creating the legend of Owl Lake, Carr was able to adapt Greek elements into Irish mythology and familiarise it with the history and social background that are specific for the Irish society.

The Mai is not the only women in her family who deals with tragic love stories. As Wallace points out "it is Grandma Fraochlán's name which emerges as the master key to the family's intricate and unfortunate history of (self) deception." ("Tragic Destiny" 441) She was born as an illegitimate child of "brief tryst between an ageing island spinster and a Spanish or Moroccan sailor." (Carr 121) Faced with the stigma of being husbandless, The Duchess invented a fairy-tale about a Sultan of Spain who "hid The Duchess and meself on Fraochlán because we were too beautiful for the world." (168) The story gave a sense of belonging and helped the two women fight the humiliation. Even though Grandma's name evokes the stigma of illegitimacy, it also "encodes a history which mars the future generations of women in the play (and that) The Mai's destiny is to be found in the name which marks her grandmother's identity." (Wallace, "Tragic Destiny" 441)

Grandma Fraochlán continues to live in a fairy-tale of her own when she marries the nine-fingered fisherman. As she recounts, they were madly in love, unaware of the world around them. This made them neglectful parents, as they would drink and smoke, completely shutting out their children. As Grandma Fraochlán admits: "Maybe parents as is lovers is not parents at all, not enough love left over." (Carr 146) When he dies, she is once again left

"yearning for all that was exotic and unattainable." (122) Her husband was the centre of her world, her fixation, and as she explains: "I would gladly have hurled all seven of ye down the slopes of hell for one night more with the nine-fingered fisherman and may I rot eternally for such unmotherly feelin'." (180) As Julie describes it, his death turned her into

> a madwoman (. . .) She spent one half of the day in the back room pullin' on an opium pipe, a relic from her unknown father, and the other half rantin' and ravin' at us or starin' out the window at the sea. (. . .) She was so unhappy, Mai, and she made our lives hell. (148-149)

To survive the tragedy, Grandma Fraochlán turned to drinking and smoking, depriving her children of their only parental figure. She catered only to her own emotional needs, not her children's, which inevitably affected their emotional development. Also, through the stories about the Sultan and the nine-fingered fisherman, Grandma Fraochlán emphasised the significance of having a partner in one's life as it was the only way she knew how to act, and this affected the way her daughters (and eventually granddaughters) view men and relationships.

Her influence is best seen in the case of her daughter Ellen's pregnancy. Grandma Fraochlán wanted to protect her from the same humiliation she experienced by making her give up her studies and marry the man who got her pregnant. The marriage and subsequent pregnancies made Ellen miserable and eventually killed her spirit and body. Even more toxically, Grandma Fraochlán:

> filled the girl's head with all sorts of impossible hope, always talkin' about the time she was in college, and how brilliant she was, and maybe in a few years she'd go back and study. (…) Ellen adored her and looked up to her and believed everything she said, and that's what killed her, not childbirth, no, her spirit was broken. (Carr 148)

As a result, her daughters are deprived of the maternal figure and presented with their mother's "idealization of sexual carnality and passion over maternal love," (Wallace, "Tragic Destiny" 442) which had a great impact on Agnes and Julies who are depicted as hypocritical and conservative characters. On one occasion, when Julie admonishes Beck for her promiscuous behaviour, Grandma Fraochlán responds: "Maybe a bit of hoorin' around would've done yourself no harm; might take that self-righteous straois off your puss!" (Carr, 144) displaying a much more feminist and liberal stance. Agnes and Julie were moulded by "De Valera's repressive Catholic nationalist ethos, which was enshrined in the 1937

Constitution of Ireland" (Sihra, *Marina Carr* 81) and their misogynistic and anti-feminist behaviour is shown through their remarks about Beck' marriage and possible pregnancy. As Millie explains: "Births, marriages and deaths were their forte and by Christ, if they had anything to do with it, Beck would stay married even if it was a tree." (Carr 138) They are used to show the perpetuating of the traditional gender roles women had to uptake, while presenting the absurdity of the conservative laws Ireland tried to restrict women under.

Even though Ellen's children, The Mai, Beck and Connie were freer to pick their own destinies, the fact that they were raised by Grandma Fraochlán remains, and they are "trapped between their desires for autonomy and fulfilment and the mores and expectations of the previous generation." (Trotter 171) As all three sisters admit, they were blinded by Grandma Fraochlán's stories. They dreamt about different princes who would take them far away and lavish them with love and appreciation. They admit that Grandma Fraochlán "didn't prepare [them] at all" (163) leaving them waiting for a perfect life that does not arrive. As The Mai observes:

> She filled us with hope – too much hope maybe – in things to come. And her 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. I wanted to march through the world up and up, my prince at my side, and together we'd leave our mark on it. (163)

Fairy-tales are short stories filled with magical elements that have a long oral and written tradition. As Grace (162) argues, the author Max Lüthi in 1985 referred to fairy-tales as "a representation of man which transcends the individual story", suggesting it is a male-dominated and male-centred field. In the stories, "Women were depicted as dependent upon men as figures of rescue and salvation in all dimensions of life; while [they] also highlighted rivalries and hostilities between women." (Grace 162) In second wave feminism the urgency to re-write and re-vision these fairy-tales emerged as "to reformulate women's diverse and individualised roles in society—not as a defined, universalised or normative expectation." (163) In both *The Mai* and *By the Bog of Cats…*, Carr offers a re-writing of female identity, by depicting destructiveness and violence in their agency, something that is usually overlooked when women (and mothers) are being portrayed. Simultaneously, she rejects the male perspective where women are being described as submissive and affectionate mothers who stay within the domestic sphere, having little or no control over their life choices. The history of literature views women through male eyes, creating an inharmonious image of

mothers and motherhood. In the Midlands plays, Carr portrays the devastating effect of patriarchal customs and shows a "tenacious refusal to romanticize the legacy of patriarchal confinement in this country (…) [while opening] a new dialogue of recalcitrance to female abjection in Irish theatre, culture, and history." (Sihra, "Nature Noble" 145)

In The Mai's case, she displays the same fixation over Robert as Grandma Fraochlán did over the nine-fingered fisherman. Even though Robert abandoned her and their children to pursue his career, The Mai welcomes him back with open arms. During his absence, she built a house on Owl Lake to create a home where Robert could return. Then, she would "sat in front of this big window here, her chin moonward, a frown on her forehead, (…) her lips forming two words noiselessly. Come home – come home" (117) patiently summoning Robert. In a sense, she embodied Penelope who is left waiting for her Odysseus to return. She even echoes her weaving when she sent Millie to buy a needle and a thread "that would stich us together." (117) Just like Penelope, the women in The Mai's family are forced to live in a state of immobilization which stems from the inability to learn from their ancestors' mistakes. This inability creates a cycle of repetition where the women relive the same destines their ancestors did.

Just like Coillte, The Mai engages in a desperate pursuit of Robert's attention and cannot accept his rejection. Therefore, the house on the lake becomes a focal point of the play as it juxtaposes the dreams and illusions of hers and Robert's life with the disappointment and eventual death as it becomes a "dark, formless (…) the kind of house you build when you've nowhere left to go" (Carr 158) once she realizes Robert will not change. As Vural (75) claims, he is the epitome of patriarchal society who confined The Mai to the domestic sphere making her lonely and miserable. In one of their fights, she argues that "When you met me I was cellist in the college orchestra! I had a B.A. under my belt and I was halfway through my Masters! You lower me, all the time you lower me." (Carr 156) However, even though The Mai is aware of Robert's flaws and the impossibility of having a happy life with him, she chooses to stay by his side. As Funahashi (338) claims, The Mai faces difficulties with the identification as a woman and mother after being subdued to the patriarchal tradition where women were solely associated with the domestic sphere, and Grandma Fraochlán's stories play an important part in her perception of this role. Since she had to give up on her studies and subsequent success to marry Robert, she envisioned a dream of an epic love story with him, just like Grandma Fraochlán did with her nine-fingered fisherman. However, Robert

does not live up to the expectations as he resembles Grandma Fraochlán's father, the missing Sultan of Spain.

The inability to live a harmonious life with Robert affects The Mai's motherly role as well. Even though The Mai actively cares for, and caters to, her children, she is still emotionally attached to Robert. "As the main caregiver, she is physically in the life of her children, but she is emotionally and psychologically remote from them." (Vural 64). The Mai's whole identity is built around her longing over Robert; therefore, he becomes the object of desire for The Mai. As Wallace ("Tragic Destiny" 445-446) states, in his absence, she happily performs all her marital duties, patiently waiting for him to return. When he does, it disrupts the image she created of him as she is unable to possess and control him. Before drowning herself, she told Millie: "I don't think anyone will ever understand, not you, not my family, not even Robert, no one will ever understand how completely and utterly Robert is mine and I am his." (Carr 183)

As for The Mai's children, their insignificance is best seen through the fact that none of them (besides Millie) is seen on stage. Millie serves as the narrator and "remains onstage throughout the play." (Carr 114) "Millie's seven monologues, ranging from dramatic exposition to lyrical folklore, move the story forward offering reflective counterpoints to the onstage action." (Sihra, *Marina Carr* 74). Therefore, she becomes the equivalent to the ancient Greek chorus providing commentary on the action that is unfolding before the audience. Just like Grandma, she engages in the tradition of storytelling as she provides commentary and expands the information other women provide on stage. As Funahashi (342) states, with her opening remark, Millie arouses interest in the reader/spectator as she provokes shock and disbelief. She slowly builds tension and uncertainty in the audience's mind by gradually adding important information. It can be said that Millie inherited Grandma's talent for storytelling. Even though she is aware of the destructive cycle that runs in the family, Millie still opts for fairy-tales as she tells fantastic stories to her five-year-old son Joseph about his father. She tells him about the good times they had in New York, dancing on the roof of a Brooklyn building while being drunk and high. Still, she does not admit that she tricked him into conceiving a child, confessing she thought it was "possible to have something for [herself] that didn't stink of Owl Lake." (Carr 165) Even though she tried to contact him later, the man never acknowledged his paternity. Although The Mai hoped her children would not repeat her destiny, it is evident that the curse lingers over Millie as well. Millie knows that "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." (Carr 181) The trauma of her mother committing suicide haunts her, and she says: "I have not yet emerged triumphant from those lakes of the night. Sometimes I think I wear Owl Lake like a caul around my chest to protect me from all that is good and hopeful and worth pursuing." (181) Grandma Fraochlán's statement "we repeat and we repeat, the orchestration may be different but the tune is always the same" (128) can be seen to dictate Millie's life choices as well.

3. *By the Bog of Cats…*: Missing Mothers

By the Bog of Cats… premiered in October 1998 at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and won the Irish Theatre Award for the Best Play. It is a three-act play which features the story of Hester Swane, a forty-year-old Irish tinker who lives by the Bog of Cats. The story unfolds over the course of one day and Carr invokes the Aristotelian notions of tragedy by upholding the unity of time, place, and action. The first act begins with the apparition of Ghost Fancier who comes to take Hester's life as she is about to bury Black Wing, a black swan that she has known for her whole life. The Ghost Fancier realises he mistook the dusk for dawn and promises to come later for her, but Hester hysterically shouts back that she cannot die as she has a daughter that she needs to take care of. After that, the characters Monica and Catwoman are introduced, who advise Hester to leave the bog and remind her of the curse her mother Big Josie put on her. Catwoman, the prophet of the bog, warns Hester that there will be a disaster if she does not leave the bog. Moreover, Hester's daughter Josie and ex-lover Carthage are introduced. He is about to marry Caroline Cassidy and wants to get Hester out of her house. Hester is enraged by his betrayal and promises never to leave the bog. In the second act, another ghost appears, this time it is Hester's dead brother, whom she killed years ago. Since Catwoman is the only one who can see him, she guides him to Hester. Simultaneously, Carthage's and Caroline's wedding takes place, but Caroline is not happy and hopes everything will end well as she is aware her father and Carthage enraged Hester trying to force her out from the bog. Mrs. Kilbride, Carthage's mother, enters dressed in white as if she was the bride, followed by Hester, who also arrives in her wedding dress, openly opposing Carthage and Xavier's plans. In the third act of the play, Hester is shown burning down Carthage's house and cattle, while the ghost of Hester's brother appears. It is learned that she killed him because she was envious that he was able to spend time with their mother after she abandoned Hester when she was seven years old. Hester was waiting her whole life for Big Josie, hoping she would return. Lastly, prompted by her own experience with her mother, Hester identifies the despair in Josie and decides she cannot experience the same fate as her, and kills her by cutting her throat. The play ends with Hester killing herself, and the Ghost Fancier coming for her.

The plotline of *By the Bog of Cats…* is a re-writing of the play *Medea.* Carr decided to place her story by the bog which she sees as "a bitter stretch of the Irish midlands, (…) a sunken and frozen place, stalked by ghosts, grotesques and vengeful characters steeped in myth."

("The Irish Times") This allows her to control the setting and to adapt the story "to her familiar idiom with archetypal Irish characters such as peasantry, a priest, Travellers and a big farmer as well as more enigmatic figures such as a 'Catwoman', a ghost and a Ghost Fancier." (Sihra, *Marina Carr* 119) Just like Medea had to follow Jason to Corinth, Hester was forced to settle by the Bog to start a new life with her lover Carthage. After fourteen years, he abandons Hester to marry young Caroline Cassidy, daughter of the powerful landowner Xavier Cassidy. As Arkins (72) states, this marriage will bring Carthage power and money, which he cannot obtain by staying with Hester, even though it was her "who told him he could do no better. It was my money that bought him his first five acres." (Carr 277). His name evokes the downfall of the ancient Phoenician city Carthage and foretells the tragedy that will happen to his family. Still, Hester does not seek revenge on Caroline since she is aware of Xavier's malicious influence. Also, Medea seeks revenge on Jason by poisoning their children, while in *By the Bog of Cats…* poisoning is attributed to Xavier who kills his son. Lastly, the play also features infanticide, but the emphasis is put on the complexity of mother-daughter relationship. Hester loves her daughter and because of her own traumatic experience of having an absent mother, kills Josie as an act of mercy and love.

Moreover, just like in *The Mai*, this play also features the destructive longing for, and fixation on the unattainable. However, the focus here is on the mother who left Hester when she was seven years old. Hester is uncertain about her cultural identity and that can be attributed to different cultural backgrounds her parents passed down. On one hand, her father belongs to settled people, while her mother is part of the Traveller group, i.e., a group of nomadic indigenous people that suffer discrimination and xenophobia among the rest of the Irish population. Hester is no exception to that as she faces severe judgement from the rest of the Bog and is not welcomed in the community. For example, Mrs. Kilbride, the mother of Carthage, remarks: "I've had the measure of you this long time, the lazy shiftless blood in ya, that savage tinker eye ya turn on people to frighten them" (Carr 302) displaying hatred and animosity towards Hester. Moreover, "Travellers also played a role as 'bearers of culture'. [They] brought songs and stories from parish to parish and developed unique styles of singing, playing music and storytelling." ("Pavee Point Factsheet") This is seen through the depiction of Big Josie, who is regarded as "the greatest song stitcher ever to have passed through [the bog]." (Carr 268) Hester never met her father: "Jack Swane of Bergit's Island, I never knew him – but I had a father. I'm as settled as any of yees." (288) She lived her whole life in the bog and feels adapted to the life in that community. On the other hand, she

describes herself as a tinker as well. She tells Carthage: “As for me tinker’s blood, I’m proud of it, gives me an edge over all of yees, allows me to see yees for the inbred, underbred, bog brained shower yees are.” (283) Therefore, Hester experiences cultural exclusion since she does not belong to either social group, which leaves her anxious and insecure in the community she resides. It also points out that her status throughout the play is always in-between. Since her death is foretold from the very beginning, it can be said that she is partly present in the real world. Indeed, her connection with the otherworld is confirmed with her ability to see and communicate with ghosts.

At first it may seem that Hester is preoccupied with the frustration her ex-lover Carthage provoked when he decided he would marry the young Caroline Cassidy. In fact, the main reason she wants to hold onto him is because he represents a substitute for her missing mother. Hester admits there is “a longin’ in me for her that won’t quell the whole time” (Carr 268) making her mother the central obsession of the play. She holds a romantic idealisation of her mother, stitching up stories that fill in for the missing memories. Indeed, she does not remember any specific events, but rather creates an idolized persona out of her “which indicates Hester’s failure to mourn successfully the loss of her mother.” (Liechs 57) Her mother’s abandonment provokes agitation in Hester to which she responds by roaming freely through the bog.

The bog is a place where the boundaries between the real and the mythical and life and death are blurred. Therefore, there are several ghost apparitions that emphasise the mythical part of the bog. At the beginning of the play Ghost Fancier emerges. He serves as a messenger as the audience is informed about his mission to take away Hester. Still, he mistakes the dusk for dawn and in the humorous exchange between him and Hester her destiny is revealed. Just like in *The Mai,* in *By the Bog of Cats…* Hester’s destiny is foretold from the very beginning, amplifying the inevitability of the hereditary curse that is cast on the female characters. She is also cursed by her own mother who has decided “That child, (…) will live as long as this black swan, not a day more, not a day less.” (Carr 268) As already stated, swans are important figures in Irish mythology and in the play, there are several indications that connect Hester with them. Her surname Swane is the first connection, but also Ghost Fancier’s remark: “What’re you doin’ draggin’ the corpse of a swan behind ya like it was your shadow?” (Carr, 258) shows their bond and implicitly says her existence is intertwined with the being of the black swan. When he dies, death inevitably awaits Hester as well and the curse along with the apparition of Ghost Fancier reinforce the idea of predestination and

inevitability set on her destiny, but also resembles the storyline fairy-tales often uptake. Still, their lives are not fairy-tales, and as Catwoman emphasises, “There’s ways round curses. Curses only have the power ya allow them.” (269)

Moreover, Big Josie could be regarded as the ghostly presence that haunts the bog as well. Even though she is not physically present – neither as a live or dead character -- her ever-glooming presence lingers over Hester, and the rest of the bog as well. As Monica points out, she was hard to figure out as she was reserved and indifferent, but when she sang everybody would fall in love with her. (312) However, although often “There was a time round here when no celebration was complete without Josie Swane. She’d be invited everywhere to sing,” (312) it was mostly because the people were afraid of not having her there. Big Josie’s song *By the Bog of Cats…* which explores themes of loss and abandonment, has been Hester’s way of connecting with her mother since she believes the song was especially written for her. In a way, she lives the verses:

> By the Bog of Cats I'll stay no more a-rueing.
> To the Bog of Cats I one day will return-
> In mortal form or in ghostly form (Carr 255)

which imply “that [Hester] will continue to haunt the bog after her death.” (Scherer 18) Hester herself explains how “for a long time now I been thinkin' I'm already a ghost” (Carr 310) and her daughter Josie, who also can be heard singing the song, is bounded to continue inhabit the valleys of the bog. Their transition to ghostly characters shows that “the notion of heredity as destiny which is foregrounded by the testimonies of different generations of characters” (Wallace, *Suspect Cultures* 442) applies to this play as well.

Just like The Mai, Hester has built her identity in relation to her absent mother and throughout the play, Hester’s memory is slowly being dismantled by the rest of the community. As Xavier points out, he used to bring them money and food so they would not starve, and Monica sheltered her when Josie would leave her out in the cold. This difference in the recollection of who Big Josie Swane was is “the source of the protagonist’s and the community’s main conflict, since Hester’s few memories of her mother are strictly connected to what that community dismissed the most.” (Dall'Bello 130) Big Josie refused to perform her maternal role, leaving Hester alone and traumatised, all the time longing for a maternal figure who does not arrive. From birth, the child seeks its mother who is there to satisfy all its needs. Mother becomes the main caregiver, and the possibility of separation causes anxiety,

pain, and rage in the child. Therefore, the relationship between the child and the mother is the foundation for the development of the child's behaviour. So, when Hester is deprived of the only parental figure, she actively seeks her. She tells Monica:

> I made a promise, Monica, a promise to meself a long while back. All them years I was in the Industrial School I swore to meself that wan day I'm comin' back to the Bog of Cats to wait for her there and I'm never lavin' again. (Carr 313)

Big Josie's absence provokes violent behaviour in Hester. When the image of her mother she created is being disturbed, she turns to violence to overcome the anxiety. For instance, she turned into a murderer when she discovered her mother had another son. As Vural (113-114) argues, she killed her brother because she believed he played a part in Big Josie's abandonment and prevented her from returning to Hester. The realization turned her into an envious and raging figure who could not stand her mother being shared with another person:

> If ya hadn't been such an arrogant git I may have left ya alone but ya just wouldn't shut up talkin' about her as if she wasn't my mother at all. The big smug neck of ya! It was axin' to be cut. And she even called ya after her. And calls me Hester. What sourt of a name is Hester? Hester's after no wan. And she saves her own name for you – Didn't she ever tell ya about me? (309)

Hester transforms the pain and longing for her mother into aggressive attacks over people who dare to challenge the depiction of her mother's persona. Again, this can be observed in the confrontation between her and Xavier. In the third act he "comes up behind [Hester] from the shadows, demonic, red-faced, drink taken, carries a gun" (Carr 316) trying to assert superiority and power over Hester. He can be described as patriarchist who favours land over his own children: "Children! If they were calves we'd have them fattened and sould in three weeks." (296) He goes on trying to humiliate Big Josie by calling her "a loose wan, loose and lazy and aisy, a five-shillin' hoor," (Carr 318) following by attempted rape which prompts Hester to fight back: "Ya think I'm afraid of you and your auld gun. (Puts her mouth over the barrel.) G'wan shoot! Blow me away! Save me the bother meself. (Goes for the trigger.) Ya want me to do it for ya?" (319) The way Xavier regards Hester (and Big Josie) in highly sexual terms only demonstrates his need to dominate over the female body and autonomy. Therefore, no matter how ruthless other members of bog may be, Hester answers with the same energy, defending the image of her mother and her position in the bog. Lastly, before committing suicide, she burns down Carthage's house and cattle as a response to his urgings

for her to leave the bog. She believed when Big Josie would return, she "would see me life was complete, [having] Carthage and Josie and me own house. I so much wanted her to see that I had flourished without her and maybe then I could forgive her." (324) With Carthage and her house gone she realizes "the futility of hoping to mend (…) the inaugural loss that laid the foundation of [her] being, the separation from her mother." (Wallace, "Tragic Destiny" 448)

Carr rewrites Euripides' *Medea* by putting the emphasis on the relationship between a mother and her child. But unlike Medea, who had two sons, Hester has a daughter. "In *Medea*, the two kids represented the continuity of Jason's line, the masculine desire. In contrast, Carr moved the attention to the daughter, a feminine perspective." (Sobhi Salama 156). Therefore, Carr wanted to accentuate the strong bond between a mother and a daughter. Unlike Big Josie, Hester performed motherly duties on her daughter. She is making sure that Josie is well fed and that she behaves herself properly. Also, it can be argued that Hester kills her daughter as an act of love. Prompted by her own experience with Big Josie, Hester understands the importance of having a mother in one's life. Therefore, when she decides to kill Josie at the end of the play she realizes about her daughter: "she's mine and I wouldn't have her waste her life dreamin' about me and yees thwartin' her with black stories against me." (Carr 326) She knows how Big Josie's abandonment left Hester yearning and waiting for the absent mother. Just like in *The Mai,* Carr once again introduced the notion of repetition. Little details like Josie having Big Josie's eyes, or wearing her communion dress like Hester on the day of her abandonment contribute to "the textual correlatives (…) in which repetition is underscored by narrative memory." (Liesch 59) Also, just like Hester, Josie is seven years old when she loses her mother, and her words "I want to go with me Mam" (Carr 305) echo the yearning Hester experienced on the day of her mother's abandonment. In the moment of their death, they both utter the same words of longing for their mothers. Through the act of repetition, Carr' accentuates the emotional trauma the female characters are experiencing which influences their inability to escape from it even in their final moments of living. Therefore, by opting for the violent, death-driven option, Hester allowed the curse her mother put on her to become reality. Even though she was aware of the consequences, the predetermined outcome greatly impacted her perception and showed her inability to create "an identity independent from her destructive history." (Liesch 60)

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the aim of this thesis was to analyse the depiction of mothers in the plays *The Mai* and *By the Bog of Cats…* Carr detours from the patriarchal representation of maternal roles as she rewrites elements from ancient Greek tragedies using parts of Irish mythology. This allows her to create a fairy-tale of her own, depicting heroines The Mai and Hester as the unmothers. As Splendore (185) argues, women's narratives have often been focused on the relationships and emotional connections between the women themselves: mothers, daughters, sisters, and grandmothers, while the male figures have always remained out of this narrative. The fairy-tales they have been retelling each other impact the way they view relationships and motherhood. Hasse (37) explained that is hard to pinpoint the significance fairy-tales play in a woman's life, but there are some indications that they do cause problems of identity as they introduce romantic myths that are often unattainable in the real life. These stories shape and stimulate certain behaviour patterns that are being repeated, especially concerning the understanding of the mother role.

Furthermore, the representation of women in fairy-tales often ties them to the domestic sphere, associating womanhood solely with motherhood. This often leads to the presupposition that women are supposed to devote their lives to children and that the identity of a woman equates to the identity of a mother. It is unsurprising that the patriarchal society "associate maternal instinct with motherhood." (Vural 16). Therefore, "the maternal instinct is supposed to be so wired into mothers that motherhood is not some role they perform; they just are mothers." (Douglas and Michaels 186). To conform to the idealised notion of maternity, a mother must put aside all her wishes and desires to perform the role the society expects her to. When she does not, she becomes the unmotherly figure, a woman that has failed her natural duty. Both The Mai and Hester can be viewed as mothers who have failed their children as they chose death instead of fighting. They are more focused on the object of their desire than concerned with their children wellbeing. Still, it is important to note their choices to end their lives were not completely theirs. Their destinies were foretold from the very beginning, making them spectators of their own life. Fairy-tales and myths passed down from one generation to another seem to dictate one's path making it impossible to break the hereditary curse.

Therefore, I would argue that neither The Mai nor Hester can be completely regarded as unmotherly figures. Carr used Greek tragedies to form a fairy-tale of her own, focusing on

the destructive effects patriarchal customs have over individual freedom. As already stated, the power of fairy-tales is immense as they involuntary promote conformed behaviour patterns. They are in line with "the monological nationalist, masculinist, colonial, and postcolonial issues of identity and history that have tended to dominate Irish dramatic narratives over the last century," (Sihra, "Nature Noble" 134) and presented mothers as holy figures, constrained to the house and children. Yet the changes Irish society experienced at the turn of the century provoked deep instabilities in the perception of the motherly role. Depicting violence and trauma, Carr managed to subvert the idealized notion of maternity and hyperbolise the deviant and often unspoken parts of familial life. Through the characterization of both The Mai and Hester, she exposed the vulnerability of the mother identity that for centuries was perceived as a solid construction, simultaneously allowing women's realities to be heard, whether they are perceived as tragic or not and terminating years of discriminatory practices concerning women and their identities.

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