IS THE MOTHER RE-VISIONED IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH WOMEN’S LITERARY FICTION?

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Dedicated to my own family,
and to my mother,
who
“neither drank nor smoked nor painted her face”.
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ABSTRACT

Is the Mother Re-visioned in Contemporary Irish Women’s Literary Fiction?

Bridget (Noeline) Hogan

This thesis discovers signs of positive change in maternal representation in contemporary Irish women’s literary fiction. It is undertaken in the context of recent social change in Ireland encompassing heightened feminist consciousness and an upsurge in publication of Irish women’s writings. The rationale for the thesis is my belief that literary representations are important in shaping social life and that, in the wake of national traditions of symbolization and stereotyping of the maternal, of literary traditions of maternal idealization and demonization, and of a history of neglect in Irish literary criticism, a study on the re-visioning of the mother in Irish women’s fiction is opportune. As part of the Introduction to this thesis a brief review of feminist literary critiques of Irish women’s writings by Anne Fogarty, Ann Owens Weekes, Aine McCarthy and Heather Ingman is provided. Chapter One provides historical, literary and feminist frameworks for the discussions of the contemporary fictions analysed in the chapters which follow. The following three chapters apply close textual analysis to six contemporary novels, grouped in twos, in the light, predominantly, of feminist theories. Chapter Two covers Clare Boylan’s Room for a Single Lady and Mother of Pearl by Mary Morrissy, where the focus is on mothers who struggle against male ideologies of maternity. In Chapter Three, One by One in the Darkness by Deirdre Madden and Two Moons by Jennifer Johnston centre on older mothers who choose to live within patriarchal norms. Chapter Four features Kate O’Riordan’s The Memory Stones and Nothing Simple by Lia Mills where new feminocentric plots are provided for non-traditional, migrant mothers. Throughout all of these writings, the mother/daughter plot is a major pre-occupation. In conclusion, the thesis raises some issues concerning the reconfiguration of family figures that arise in the context of the re-visioning of the mother.
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work, and does not contain material previously published by any other author, except where due reference or acknowledgement has been made. Furthermore, I declare that it has not previously been submitted for any other academic award.

Bridget (Noeline) Hogan
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INTRODUCTION

The decades surrounding the turn of the millennium were years of profound political, economic, social and cultural change in Ireland, giving rise to rigorous reappraisal in the media and in cultural life generally of the institutions and mores of Irish society. On the literary front, Anne Fogarty wrote of ‘a fundamental transition in culture and politics’ (Fogarty 2000:59-60) when pointing to what seemed to be difficulties being experienced by male anthologists and commentators in ‘constructing reliable guides to the protean unwieldiness and ever-mutating phenomenon of contemporary Irish fiction’ (Fogarty: 2000:59). Christine St. Peter referred to the ‘contradictoriness’ and the ‘almost dizzying sense of the simultaneous interplay of the forces’ (St. Peter 2004:4) that were at work in reshaping Irish life. Women’s fictional creativity was deemed to have been re-energised, with the upsurge in literary creativity, including diversity in themes and form, incorporating not just new writers, but also taking into account new works and new directions by well-established writers. Fogarty registers ‘social flux’ as having ‘generated and licensed an explosive creativity’ (Fogarty 2000:59), and adverts especially to the invention of the term ‘Robinsonian’ by commentator, Gerry Smyth: this term, it seems, was inspired by the altered and expansive vision deemed to be embodied in Ireland’s first woman president, Mary Robinson (elected 1990). The term was used to facilitate the categorisation of the emergent writers of the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties, as well as their new themes and perspectives, and it worked towards registering the difference of view that feminism had brought to Irish cultural and social life. The foregrounding of women’s writings by male anthologists and commentators, in contrast to previous customary neglect, was also pointed up by Fogarty as a new departure, and indicative of social and cultural change (Fogarty 2000:60).
Times of change offer opportunities for comparison between past and present, and for identifying future developments in a given field, and the conjunction of social upheaval, increasing consciousness of feminism, and a renewed blossoming in Irish women’s literary fiction suggested a new field of feminist study for me: to establish if the mother is re-visioned in contemporary Irish women’s literary fiction. The impetus for this study came from a desire to extend investigations on the representation of the Irish Catholic mother in a number of Irish plays first produced in the nineteen-fifties (a time, also, of significant social transition), which I undertook while completing my final dissertation for a masters degree. My choice of women’s fiction for this study rather than drama or poetry arose out the upsurge in publication of new works of fiction by women writers, and from the consideration that literary fiction stands as one of the primary narrative art forms in contemporary society, and as one of the most accessible to women both as writers and as readers.

The objective of my new study was to examine the representation of the mother in a selection of contemporary literary novels by women in order to determine if it could be said that the recent social and cultural changes had led to the introduction of fresh perspectives on the mother, or had facilitated the presentation of a ‘new’ or ‘different mother’ in the novels of the times. My aim was to discover if the openness of vision, the changed social conditions, and the raised awareness of feminism deemed to be abroad in contemporary Ireland encompassed the mother in literary fiction, and if, in the less homogeneous society of what had come to be known as ‘Celtic Tiger Ireland’ in the years surrounding the turn of the millennium, fiction writers were constructing mother characters in altered terms, or had a new vision for the place and role of the mother in their literary works.
Rationale for my Thesis

It may be asked, what is so important about the representation of the mother in contemporary Irish women’s fiction that warrants a special study; and why the quest for a re-visioning of the mother? In the first instance, I believe that literary representations are important in that they shape our understanding of life and of society, and that they colour societal attitudes to most aspects of social life, including motherhood. A second reason is that despite the facts that Irish constitutional law projects the family as the central unit of society, and that Ireland sells itself internationally on its literary achievements, the mother in Irish fiction has attracted relatively little attention: Ann Owens Weekes makes the point that

Nowhere in early twentieth-century Irish literature do we find mother characters of comparable complexity as, say Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway or Mrs. Ramsay (Owens Weekes 2000:105).

Áine McCarthy comments that the mother in Irish fiction has received ‘markedly little critical attention’ (McCarthy 2004:95), and it is the case that in many critiques of Irish women’s literary works the figure of the mother receives scant or no attention. In recent years, redress has been made in studies by Owens Weekes (2000), Anne Fogarty (2000) and (2002), Áine McCarthy (2004), and in two works by Heather Ingman (2007), where the mother is brought into focus. Fogarty’s study, ‘Uncanny Families: Neo-Gothic Motifs and the Theme of Social Change in Contemporary Irish Women’s Fiction’ directs attention to ‘maternal histories, or narratives told from the perspective of the guardian or carer’ (Fogarty 2000:64. However, it is noticeable that, in general, where feminist attention is directed towards the mother in fiction, it is usually in the context of the mother/daughter relationship, with the preponderance of attention focused on the daughter. My study differs from
this practice by re-directing the focus onto the mother while, at the same time, necessarily acknowledging that contemporary fictional mothers feature most prominently in mother/daughter and other inter-generational female relationships: as Owens Weekes explains, ‘the mother/daughter relationship is examined because this is generally the site from which the mother is figured’ (Owen Weekes 2000:123; n31). The views of these and other feminist critics on earlier representations of the mother in Irish women’s literary fiction form part of my discussions further on in my thesis and help, I believe, to provide justification for my belief in the need for a re-visioning in the representation of the mother in contemporary Irish women’s literary fiction.

The basic argument of my thesis is that historic appropriation of images of the maternal for patriarchal purposes, and the predominance of male thinking in Irish culture and society have resulted in continued distortion in the representation of the mother and the themes of motherhood in Irish literature. My study seeks to discover if, in view of the acceleration in social change observable around the turn of the millennium (which, as already noted, included an increased consciousness of feminism, and a notable upsurge in Irish women’s literary creativity), Irish women writers were presenting the mother in a new light, or had a new vision for the mother as a social being in a changing society. What I wished to establish in this study was if, in the less homogenous society emerging from the ‘Celtic Tiger’ years of twenty/twenty-first century Ireland, a ‘different mother’ was finding representation in the literary works of contemporary Irish women writers.

In defining the ‘different mother’ that my thesis seeks, I am conscious of the fact that creative fiction inevitably has multiple goals, and is not embarked upon in
order to produce new plots and new scenarios for the mother; this fact makes it
difficult to prescribe criteria as to what sort of mother would constitute a re-visioning
of the mother. Looking to the past reveals that the mother in Irish literature has been
represented in symbolic and stereotypical terms: has been sentimentalised, idealised,
demonised, or constantly imagined as passive and suffering, as someone whose life is
lived wholly for someone or something outside herself. Criteria for evidence of a
‘different mother’ lie initially in locating fictional mothers who are not solely
represented in the terms outlined above; in discovering fictional mother characters
who have been freed from the shackles of symbolisation or stereotyping; who are
shown to take a commanding role in shaping their own lives. In addition, the figure of
the mother is frequently used to act as a foil or background for the main characters,
with her role in the novel confined to advancing the plot: a re-visioning of the mother
in the terms of my thesis sees the mother character with a history and context of her
own, and a role in the plot that grants her agency and the ability to change. Above all,
the mother in Irish literature has been written: she is rarely featured in own her
subjectivity. The ‘new improved mother’ might be seen to command an audience as
she tells her own story, or as she mediates the stories of others. Finally, since mothers
are frequently and legitimately, in literary terms, embedded in the sub-plot, small
advances and complexities in characterisation may be regarded as progress in the
representation of the mother, and be said to contribute to the re-visioning of the
mother in the contemporary works of Irish women writers. What I hope to achieve in
this thesis is to add to the body of feminist work on the mother and on motherhood in
Irish literature created earlier on in the poetry and writings of Eavan Boland and, more
recently, in the commentaries of critics such as Owens Weekes, Fogarty, McCarthy,
and Ingman, and in the confessional writings of Anne Enright.
Positioning Myself

My interest in undertaking this work grew out of my personal circumstances: I came to the project as a widow, as the mother of four sons, as a grandmother, as a mature student, and as a late and somewhat insecure convert to feminist studies. The occupation and pre-occupations of motherhood have absorbed, and continue to absorb more years of my life than any other endeavour. Over the course of many years, motherhood has brought a sense of purpose to my life; it has afforded me consolation in times of sorrow, and compensations in times of loss. The activities of mothering have always been fraught, sometimes with frustration or fear, sometimes with fun and fulfillment. Engagement in the activities demanded by my style of motherhood closed off career choices, and personal opportunities, but it also opened up emotional and intellectual worlds that might otherwise have been closed to me. If, as Skeggs points out, citing Scott 1992, ‘it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience’ (Skeggs 1995:15), then it is the experience of motherhood that has most constituted me. My experiences permit me to understand what motherhood means to me; my thesis aims at gaining an understanding of the meanings given to the mother and to motherhood in the novels of the contemporary Irish women literary writers examined here.

Definitions
Re-vision and Representation

In coming to a definition of what I mean by ‘re-visioned’ I turned to Adrienne Rich’s essay, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1971); Rich defines ‘Re-vision’ as ‘the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction’ (Rich 2001:11). My intention, however, was not to define ‘Re-visioned’ simply as a looking back, but rather as a way of looking at the
present, at contemporary texts, with fresh eyes, with new vision, and from new perspectives. It was my hope that an investigation into contemporary literary novels would establish if a ‘new, improved’ mother was finding a place in fictional life; if the mother was envisioned in fresh and open terms; if, set free from the traditional symbolisation, stereotyping and idealisation attaching to the mother in the Irish imagination, a new fictional mother would emerge and be shown, as stated earlier, to take charge in shaping her own life, to tell her own story, or to mediate the stories of others. Owens Weekes writes

Traditionally … the value of motherhood in Irish culture has been viewed in essentially private terms, based largely on familial affection and social respect. It is a value unreflected in the public sphere, but one we might justly expect to find in imaginative literature, particularly in literature by women (Owens Weekes 2000:100).

It was in hopes akin to those of Owens Weeks that I undertook this thesis.

In using the term ‘representation’, I had not in mind the mirror traditionally held up to nature in the literary canon in order to reflect reality: nor the Irish canonical looking-glasses, of either the ‘cracked’ or ‘nicely polished’ Joycean variety, (Joyce 1998:7); (Gilbert 1957:63-64). My understanding of fictional representations is that as literary constructs they do not reflect reality; they stand in for it. Literature, like other social products, is freighted with social and cultural baggage, and there is no figure in literature and no interpretation of such figures that is free of this either: all representations carry meanings. Beverly Skeggs, citing Angus and Jhally (1989), reminds us that ‘all representations occur within a political economy which is social and cultural but to which they cannot be reduced’ (Skeggs 1995:6); Janice Radway, in her essay ‘Reading Reading the Romance’, cites the claims of Angela McRobbie that
… representations are interpretations. … and can never be pure mirror images of some objective reality, but exist always as a result of a whole set of selective devices such as highlighting, editing, cutting, transcribing and inflecting. (c.Radway 1998:296).

Christine St. Peter also rejects the looking-glass image, and writes of representation:

I am intending that form of representation within which, and by means of which, women are being constituted as new kinds of subjects: artistic work that enables women to discover or create places from which to speak (St. Peter 2000:3).

This last definition of the terms for representation of women applies equally well to the fictional representation of the mother, and applies especially in those works where the subjectivity of the mother is brought into focus.

**Defining ‘mother’**

Until relatively recent times, arriving at a definition of ‘mother’ posed no great difficulty. An OED dictionary definition gives the prime definition of the word as ‘a female parent’; ‘a woman who has given birth to a child’. Elaine Tuttle Hansen’s book, *Mother without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood* (1997) points out that in the light of feminist debate and in times of accelerating change, a definition such as this requires expansion in order to facilitate diversities in meaning and new understandings and practices that the word ‘mother’ may evoke. It is clear that developments in both obstetrics and technology in recent years have destabilised the concept: it is now possible to categorise, biologically, the genetic mother, the gestational mother, the surrogate mother, the donor mother; and the possibilities extend to the future existence of the ‘model’ mother from whose tissue
cloned human beings will be fashioned. A case brought in the Irish courts initiated a
debate on the ‘ownership’ of fertilised embryos that the ‘mother’ sought to have
implanted in her womb, and that the ‘father’ wished to have destroyed, illustrating the
kinds of complexities that now attach to reproduction and motherhood and, indeed, to
the lives of the human children being produced in such diverse ways.

Historically and culturally, the term ‘mother’ has been stretched beyond
strictly biological, physiological or relational definitions; on the other hand, to state
that an individual has ‘fathered’ a child usually carries a precise meaning – in its most
reductive form, he has provided the seed. Over the years, society has extended the
term ‘mother’ to adoptive mothers, foster mothers and stepmothers; it has
denominated as ‘little mothers’ female siblings and other young girls who act in a
caring fashion towards younger children; the term ‘motherly’ is applied to activities of
caring and nurturing, and not just to the activities of women who have given birth, or
have taken on the care of a child. In such a profusion of meanings, the elemental work
of physically producing a child comes to be overlooked, and the important and
demanding types of work entailed in bearing, nurturing and rearing children are
naturalised and taken very much for granted, and very often trivialised. My own
preferred definition of the word ‘mother’ has been, in the first instance, ‘a woman
who has produced a child’. This definition pays honour to the woman, to the physical
process of gestation, and to the activities of giving birth. It also carries with it the
notion of irreversibility: one may cede or be deprived of the activities of mothering
for a variety of reasons, but pregnancy and childbirth are landmark female activities.
Adrienne Rich writes that
Even the woman who gives up her child for adoption at birth has undergone irreversible physiological changes in the process of carrying it to term and bearing it (Rich: 1995:167).

I had believed that my preferred definition provided an element of fixity to an area where conceptual or semantic fluidity has served to diffuse the profound nature of the activities of bearing and giving birth to children. However, many feminists are unhappy with emphasising the biological connection, and many adoptive parents and children might have difficulties with the idea that their relationship could be subject to some sort of derogation in the parent/child relationship charts, a notion to which I would not wish to lend support. My concern for precise definition was based on the belief that extending the notion of ‘mothering’ diffuses its meaning, and carries the danger of diluting one of the few areas of authority permitted to women in patriarchal society, and probably the only one where female activity cannot be considered as an add-on, or as imitating male behaviour. Although the interventions of African American feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, and of feminists of other ethnicities, bring alternative, problematic dimensions to defining ‘the mother’, mothering in the western tradition has traditionally brought with it ideas of nourishing, nurture and good care provided by women to children who need it and, indeed, to adults who desire it, when it seems certain that actual mothers probably had very little input into the concept that their ‘mothering’ should be available to all and sundry: frequently this type of ‘mothering’ indicates unpaid activity; we speak of ‘carers’ and ‘child-minders’ when money changes hands.¹

¹ Steph Lawler points to an analysis (Adkins and Lury 1992) of women’s paid work which finds that nurturing work is a requirement of many of the jobs women do in paid employment, but that through processes of the labour market, women come to be positioned as naturally caring, and so the skills and labour which go into caring work are, again, naturalised, and classified as ‘non-work’, like the unpaid work that women have traditionally engaged in when rearing children and running a home. (Lawler 1996:157)
While wishing to retain a consciousness of the physical, child-bearing mother, whatever part she plays in her child’s nurture or rearing, as I believe do many surrogate, adoptive or foster parents, I accept that the notion of ‘mother’ should be open to re-thinking in order to accommodate the diversities in relationships, and the breaches in relationships, that are a feature of both contemporary reproductive activities, and of contemporary representation of the maternal. Indeed, the semantic shift involved in moving between the notions of the physical ‘mother’ and ‘the maternal’ – that is, to ‘qualities associated with motherhood’ – presents a challenge to fixed ideas of biological parenting, and makes room for an expansion of the definitions and the understandings of the meanings that may be attached to motherhood; what is lost in specificity may result in enhancing women’s preferences in choosing how to define themselves in maternal terms. Tuttle Hansen’s study, with its emphasis on the ‘Mother Without Child’, and her introduction of the notion of the ‘Mock Mother’ is of relevance to the texts chosen for my thesis which, along with other themes, treat of the loss, or threatened loss of a child; of substitute mothers, of aberrant and marginalised mothers; of mothers who take unconventional routes to motherhood, and of mothers whose narratives demand representation in ways that accommodate the diversities and complexities of relationships in contemporary concepts of the mother and of mothering.

**Locating the Mother in Irish literature**

The two truly universalising events that characterise human experience are birth and death. Historically, Irish literature has been fixated on the final event: sagas, epics, legends and histories have recounted and rehearsed stories of death, of premature death and of dealers of death. Neither childbirth, nor mothers, the
deliverers of life, have figured prominently in male-dominated forms of Irish literature. This latter point was put to a gathering of obstetricians and gynaecologists in Belfast in June 2010 by Anne Enright (The Dublin Review) when she raised the question as to why

in a country obsessed by reproduction, obsessed for decades with the ownership of female fertility – a country, moreover with more decent writers per acre than any other piece of land in the world – there are so few accounts of labour and birth in Irish literature (“Enright, 2010”)

Enright’s suggested answers range beyond my discussions here, but on the subject of the representation of mothers and of childbirth in Irish literature, she makes the case for its possibilities:

No Irish writer has tackled the subject, merged female suffering with national suffering, with the verve of Toni Morrison in Beloved, in a remarkable scene where a runaway slave gives birth on ‘the bloody side’ of the Ohio River (“Enright, 2010”)

Mothers were also left out of the Irish literary scene when, instead of war and death, love and sexual passion came to be substituted as the great universal themes of literature; it is difficult to think of a mother as heroine and lover in male Irish literary fiction. No maternal character on the lines of ‘Mme Bovary’, ‘Anna Karenina’ or ‘Hester Prynne’ has been created and there is no maternal figure that has gained iconic stature in male-authored Irish fiction.

Enright notes that George Moore’s novel, Esther Waters (1894) does treat of childbirth, without flinching from the physical details, but the setting for delivery is a London hospital and the heroine is an English servant girl; the novel is ‘not about poor suffering Ireland … but the suffering of English serving classes in the industrial age’.

Ellis Ni Dhuibhne’s Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow (2007) took Anna Karenina as its inspiration, but notions of marital infidelity and clandestine love no longer hold resonances in liberalised and scandal-wrecked Irish society.
To state that the mother and the theme of motherhood have been scant of true or sufficient representation until recent years is not to say that the mother has never been figured in Irish writing: she has been a constant figure. But because traditionally and historically, male rule has enjoyed uninterrupted sway in Ireland, all aspects of the feminine in Irish culture have been processed through the male imagination. This tradition led to unremitting male appropriation of the feminine and the maternal for symbolic purposes rather than to any exploration of the experiences of motherhood; actual mothers suffered marginalisation and silencing. Writing of the tradition of male appropriation of the feminine, Ailbhe Smyth commented that women have been contorted into contours other than our own, imaged by the image. Constructed by the construct. Invaded, occupied, inhabited, squatted (Smyth 1989:15).

Gerardine Meaney has pointed out that ‘the Irish woman reading Irish writing finds in it only a profound silence, her own silence’ (Meaney 1993:239).

Male artists and commentators demonstrate how difficult it seems to be for society at large to relinquish the figurative appropriation and idealisation of the mother even in modern, secular times: in his contribution to Literature and the

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4 From time to time there are suggestions of a pre-historic matriarchal society in Ireland, but this possibility is generally discounted, although archaeology, mythology and feminised natural features and place names all point to a tradition of mother-deities. Writing on pre-Christian Ireland, Maire Cruise-O’Brien outlines how kingship was ratified through symbolic marriage of the Chieftain with the primeval mother-goddess identified as ‘the Sovereignty’: ‘The king was legitimised only by marriage with the goddess who, by an extension of her function as Mother Earth – is at once tribe and territory’ (Cruise-O’Brien 1983:25). Historian, Margaret MacCurtain points out that ‘Politically, the woman who in literature is closely associated with the sovereignty myth did not inherit power, nor did she govern as an independent sovereign’ (MacCurtain 1985:39). The maternal deity, although endowed with symbolic importance, held no political power. Folklorist, Daithí Ó hÓgáin, writes – ‘Since the goddess represented the land, the forces of nature and life in general, the king as her mate, imposed social order on these things (Ó hÓgáin 1991:244).
Supernatural: Essays for the Maynooth Bicentenary (1995), Joe Cleary writes that ‘the haunting figure of the ‘Great Mother’ continues to make her presence felt in the ostensibly secularised world of Irish mass culture’ (Cleary 1995:150); this ‘haunting figure’ was materialising in a variety of cultural forms in the late twentieth century under the guise of a mythical, mystical white horse. Cleary seems unmindful of the fact that such ‘haunting’ manifestations of the supernatural ‘Great Mother’ have long worked to deprive the living mother of the opportunity to locate herself in society and culture, or to define herself in her own terms. In the nineteen-eighties, Eavan Boland, followed by other women writers, rejected the appropriation of women and of the mother for national symbolic and literary purposes, and worked to counter the practices. Anne Enright’s Making Babies: Stumbling Into Motherhood (2004) recuperates the mother and motherhood with unmatched frankness and wit in Irish writing; the views of Boland and Enright inform part of my discussions in Chapter One.

**Feminist Critiques of Irish Women’s Writings**

With the upsurge in Irish women’s literary fiction came an increase in feminist critique on the mother or the role of motherhood in Irish women’s fictional work. The feminist contributions discussed here have been of particular use to me in my own investigations.

reading, with the aim of examining how these texts respond to the rapid changes taking place in Ireland in the last years of the century. She finds that the novels under scrutiny ‘both echo and imaginatively restage the moral and ethical debates’ (Fogarty 2000:64) generated by radical social and sexual change in Ireland, and by the revelations of scandals, corruption and, more damagingly, of neglect, cruelty, and sexual, physical and emotional abuse of children and vulnerable adults who had been placed over many decades in state and church care. Revelations of direct female implication in egregious neglect and abuse created the necessity to expunge long-cherished national images of caring Irish femininity and caring Irish communal life.

Fogarty claims that maternal ‘histories’ and stories told from the perspective of the ‘guardian or carer’ (Fogarty 2000:64) such as provided in the novels examined here facilitate the uncovering of conditions that had previously resisted representation or narration in Irish fiction. She believes, also, that Gothic narratives, like those occurring in the novels, facilitate investigations of taboo subjects and expose underlying anxieties in a culture. In the Irish context, she sees such anxieties expressed in the ‘numerous spectres of monstrous maternity projected in the texts’ (Fogarty 2000:81). Cultural anxieties are seen to be registered also in the complex plots provided, and in the self-divided femininity that is portrayed; and to reside in feminist insistence on women’s need for a life beyond the confines of family and marital ties. All of the novels are said to demonstrate that the vaunted dreams of limitless progress and innovation projected by a [supposedly] prosperous Celtic Tiger society are turned to nightmare when figured in the fictions of the day.
The figure of the mother, and the mother/daughter story also gained new prominence in the decade following the turn of the millennium, which saw publication of Fogarty’s ““The Horror of the Unlived Life”: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Contemporary Irish Women’s Fiction’ (2002); Ann Owens Weekes’s essay, ‘Figuring the Mother in Contemporary Irish Fiction (2000); and Aine McCarthy’s “O Mother Where Art Thou?” Irish Mothers and Irish Fiction in the Twentieth Century’ (2004). Heather Ingman’s chapter ‘Reclaiming the Mother in the Mother-Daughter Story’ in her book, Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender (2007) expands on her contribution, ‘The Evolution of the Mother-Daughter Story in Three Novels by Irish Women: From Abject to Artist’ in Women’s Writing in Western Europe (2007). Ingman introduces Kristevan readings to her analyses on a number of grounds: the usefulness of Kristevan theory in the destabilization of binary oppositions within Irish cultures; Kristeva’s belief in the therapeutic and redemptive capacities of art, and her views on the nation state, on politics and on the individual in society. All are regarded by Ingman as providing a space from which the clash between the individual and society may be explored.

Fogarty’s chapter, ““The Horror of the Unlived Life””: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Contemporary Irish Women’s Fiction’ (2002) examines eight novels in terms of the mother/daughter relationship, with publication dates spanning more than half a century; theoretical insights from Freud, Jung, Olivier, Irigaray and Kristeva are applied. The findings on the representation of the mother are somewhat dismaying: early in the piece, the mother as portrayed in these texts is seen to be akin to the sovreignty Goddess of Celtic mythology, ‘at once associated with destruction and sorrow as well as fertility and plenitude’ (Fogarty 2002:89). Later, Fogarty writes
of ‘insurmountable prejudices about the malign force of maternal power’ (Fogarty 2002:115) apparent in texts by writers such as Mary Lavin, Julia O Faolain, Molly Keane, and Edna O’Brien, with all deemed to be haunted by matrophobia. An exception is the novel by Lia Mills, Another Alice (1996), which is said to project more positive hopes of repaired mother/daughter relationships.

Fogarty points to conflictual mother/daughter and other female relationships in the works of Deirdre Madden, Julia O’Faolain, Maeve Kelly and Mary Morrissy. However, a ‘shift in consciousness’ (Fogarty 2002:115) is detected in works produced in the late nineteen-eighties and nineties which are found to depart from realist representation, and to foreground feminocentric plots aimed at recuperating the mother and the mother/daughter relationship. Nevertheless, in these texts, in Fogarty’s view, ‘The mother remains … an ominous and disturbing figure even in these fables of reconciliation’ (Fogarty 2002:116). In terms of cultural context for these novels the roles of the Catholic Church and the 1937 National Constitution in conflating the concept of womanhood and motherhood are held to have inhibited the progress of women in any sphere other than the domestic.

Owens Weekes puts forward the view that sexual repression was not confined to the Catholic Church; she connects it, instead with class, with consolidation of farms, and with efforts at upward mobility rather than with religion. On the other hand, Fogarty claims that women were made poorer by the limits placed on their working lives. Further, she sees it as no coincidence that the most virulent legal and moral battles of nineteen-nineties Ireland were concerned with women’s desire to
establish their human and domestic rights, as well as issues of sexuality and fertility control.

McCarthy faults Irish fiction writers for their failures to move beyond ‘the national question’, and claims that they allowed fictional ‘Irish Mammy’ stereotypes full reign, but reneged on writing about the ‘underbelly of muted maternal reality – forced adoptions, illegal abortions, infanticides, incarcerations in Magdalene Laundries or lunatic asylums’ (McCarthy 2004:100). Using Rich’s concept of the ‘institution’ of motherhood, McCarthy claims that reading the fiction of twentieth-century Ireland, provides an insight into the ways patriarchy intersects with individual life, and the ways in which patriarchal institutional control remains fully operational even as it may change shape over time:

Mothers find themselves similarly portrayed across centuries, cultures and classes because their representation is the function of a trans-historical, trans-cultural social phenomenon: what Adrienne Rich has dubbed the institution of motherhood (McCarthy 2004:98).

McCarthy maintains that it is not necessary to be a mother to write convincingly about maternal experience, nor even necessary to be female, citing Roddy Doyle’s book, The Woman Who Walked Into Doors (1996). What was necessary, she considers, were the years of public feminist debate that preceded it and the changed social climate that that debate brought about; she laments that writers and critics have failed to give attention to contemporary maternal powerlessness. My own belief is that it would be more advantageous that some powerful mothers be realised
in Irish fiction. In recent years, mothers in Ireland have taken on the vested interests of the major institutions of church and state, of law, medicine and big business; they have also achieved success in many different fields. An ‘Irish Times’ article by Fintan O’Toole, ‘Never underestimate the power of the Irish Mammy’ celebrates the cultural contribution of the mothers of three male Irish writers who suffered from the disabilities of cerebral palsy, and who would never have achieved artistic expression and acclaim without the support of their mothers: Christy Brown, Christopher Nolan and Davoren Hanna. O’Toole’s article refuses sentimentalisation of these mothers, and points to the ‘bitter physical labour’, the ‘ferocity to face battles’ and the ‘almost cruel insistence’ that were required for these ‘midwives of one of the truly great achievements of Irish culture’ in breaking ‘a silence that had lasted for millennia’ (“n.p O’Toole”).

Ingman’s chapter, ‘The Evolution of the Mother-Daughter Story in Three Novels by Irish Women: From Abject to Artist’ in Women’s Writing in Western Europe: Gender, Generation and Legacy (2007) examines three novels, Edna O’Brien’s Down by the River (1996), Jennifer Johnston’s The Invisible Worm (1991) and Clairr O’Connor’s Belongings (1991) in the light of Kristevan and other French feminist theories. Ingman expresses quite positive views on mother/daughter relationships in these fictions, stating that as the rigid boundaries on which nationalistic Irish society was founded begin to dissolve, the mother’s story is to be heard; and that despite their silencing in their cultures, mothers in these fictions succeed in passing on to daughters legacies of strength and inspiration. In her full-length study Twentieth Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender (2007), Ingman takes up Fogarty’s detection of a move from mainly matrophobic sentiments
in the earlier writings of Julia O Faolain, Deirdre Madden and Edna O’Brien to more feminocentric stories in later writings; she finds in Kate Cruise O’Brien’s novel, *The Homesick Garden* (1981), and in other late-twentieth century women’s fictions, sufficient evidence of progress as to herald the possibilities of a new era in mother/daughter stories. However, neither the mother/daughter story nor, indeed, the story of the mother as recuperated by the daughter necessarily constitute the mother’s story, or provide for a re-visioning of the mother, and it is factors such as these that leave open a space for my study.

**Choice of Texts**

This thesis consists of four chapters: Chapter One is divided into three sections with the first section setting out some aspects of the historical, political, cultural and social forces that have operated in the formation of the mother and of mothering practices in modern Ireland. It also records some of the changes brought about in institutional processes across a variety of fields that have led to new evaluations and acceptances of the rights and roles of the mother in Irish society. The second section looks back to earlier fictional representations of the mother provided by Irish women writers in order to provide context or contrast against which a ‘new improved’ fictional mother may be registered. In the third section I provide an overview of (mostly American) feminist studies of maternal subjectivity since the nineteen-seventies, and include a short piece in the context of Irish women’s literary writings. The following three chapters consist of textual analyses, all aimed at discovering if, and by what means, a re-visioning of the mother may be identified.
Chapter Two, ‘Maternal Lies, Secrets and Silences’ is based on Clare Boylan’s *Room for a Single Lady* and Mary Morrissy’s *Mother of Pearl*: my reason for grouping these novels together is that although very different in tone and treatment, both open in the nineteen-fifties, which in Ireland were years when the orthodoxies of motherhood imposed in patriarchal society stifled the identities and opportunities available to women, especially mothers, and frequently drove women who found themselves at odds with traditional mores into lives of subterfuge and deception or despair. A wide variety of mother figures in these novels may be seen to resist, negotiate or subvert the mythologies and gendered oppressions attaching to motherhood in pursuit of a fulfilling or simply a viable life.

Chapter Three, ‘Choosing the Unlived Life:’ focuses on Deirdre Madden’s *One by One in the Darkness* and Jennifer Johnston’s *Two Moons*. Both works feature older ‘complicit’ mother characters who have chosen to live within the norms of patriarchy, but whose lives are, nevertheless, disrupted and damaged by its every-day workings or by patriarchally-instigated violence. Johnston’s novel also provides a mother who tries to live her life outside of patriarchal regulation, but whose life is inevitably marked by its demands.

Chapter Four, ‘Migrant Mothers’, examines Kate O’Riordan’s *The Memory Stones* and *Nothing Simple* by Lia Mills, both of which feature non-traditional mother figures who step aside from patriarchy as far as circumstances allow, and who work to carve out their own positions in society. Migration, the loss, or threatened loss of a

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5 *Mother of Pearl* continues into later decades.
child, the recuperation of mother/daughter relationships and issues of personal life choices are major themes in both novels.

My choice of texts brings together novels that cross many of the binary divisions that are used to characterise Irish life: north/south, rural/urban; Protestant/Catholic; working class/middle class; traditional/non-traditional; young/old. Recurring themes weave through all of the novels: patriarchal social constraints faced by mothers and by women generally; mother/daughter relationships; the loss or threatened loss of a daughter; loss of religious faith; emigration. Perhaps because all of the novels were published within a decade of each other, it is difficult to pinpoint any moment of ‘shift’ in the representation or re-visioning of the mother in these works. Nor is it possible to tie in the authors of the novels to any particular moment or movement in their writings. Just like the fictional mothers they create, the writers of the texts chosen resist easy categorisation: in *Two Moons*, in contrast to most of her earlier maternal representations Jennifer Johnston, at the age of sixty-eight, produced two most original and sympathetic portrayals of motherhood; but in some of her later work, she turned back to portraying the mother as cold and cruelly destructive. Mary Morrissy and Lia Mills who were born in the same year, portray vastly differing versions of motherhood in very differing fictional forms. A detectable increase in the degrees of subjectivity granted to the maternal characters over the three textual chapters may, I believe, be attributed to my organisation for purposes of study rather than to a trend in the fictional representation of the mother.

What I consider to be a genuine shift may be discerned in the novels examined in Chapter Four and this change, I believe, may be attributed, in the first instance, to
the portrayal of mothers as women who have actively participated in the social change brought to women’s lives in the second part of the twentieth century and, secondly, to the provision of newer plots that do not sideline the mother, as in the traditional heterosexual plot, but that recognise other aspects of maternal life such as the cyclical nature of the mother/daughter relationship, or the desire of the mother to carve out her own space without creating hostility or necessarily abandoning her family. The Conclusion raises a number of issues concerning the reconfiguration of family figures that arise in the context of the re-visioning of the mother in the contemporary Irish women’s fiction examined.
CHAPTER ONE

Historical Background and Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This chapter provides a framework for my discussions of the contemporary fictions chosen for analysis in the following chapters. It is divided into three sections: Section One, ‘Constructing the Modern Mother in Ireland’, sets out some aspects of the historical, political, cultural and social forces that have operated in the formation of the mother and of mothering practices in modern Ireland. Following the practice of ‘doing history’ recommended by Inglis (1998:97), rather than concentrating on great historical events, I chart changes in institutional relations that most impinged on the mother and the role of the mother in Irish society. Under the heading ‘Eighteenth Century Ireland: ‘Mother Ireland’, I provide a brief account of how the symbolic ‘Mother Ireland’ was brought into Irish consciousness; and under a further heading ‘Nineteenth Century: The Modern Catholic Mother’, I provide a more expansive account of the impact of the Devotional Revolution, the collapse of home industry, and the Great Famine, and the enhanced influence of the Catholic Church in the life of the Catholic mother. Under the sub-heading ‘1880s to 1920s’, I outline the fervid political and cultural environment of those years, and the struggles that culminated in the setting up of the Irish Free State; and under the sub-heading ‘1920s to 1960s’, I discuss the disappointing political and legal constraints introduced into the lives of women and mothers in the newly independent state. Under the sub-heading, ‘1960s-2000’, I record some of the changes brought about in institutional processes across a variety of fields that led to new evaluations and acceptances of the rights and roles of the mother in Irish society, much of it due to the newly-awakened feminist
consciousness and the Women’s Movement. Section One concludes with a brief discussion of the Protestant minority in the partitioned state under the heading ‘The Protestant Tradition’.

Section Two, ‘Literary Foremothers: Reproducing the Dead Mother’ looks back to earlier fictional representations of the mother provided by Irish women writers in order to provide context or contrast against which a ‘new improved’ fictional mother may be registered. Following brief references to the role of the mother in a number of earlier novels, I provide a more focused analysis of four novels written by established women writers: *The Ante-Room* (1934) by Kate O’Brien; *Mary O’Grady* (1950) by Mary Lavin; *The Christmas Tree* (1981) by Jennifer Johnston and *The Irish Signorina* (1984) by Julia O’Faolain. Section Three, ‘Maternal Subjectivity’, provides an overview of (mostly American) feminist studies of maternal subjectivity since the nineteen-seventies, and concludes with a short piece under the heading ‘Maternal Subjectivity in the Irish Context’.

**Section One:**

**Constructing the Mother in Modern Ireland**

This part of my thesis sets out aspects of the historical, political, cultural and social background underpinning the formation of the mother and the practices of motherhood in modern Ireland. My aim here is to provide context for the fictional mothers in the contemporary novels examined in order to lead towards a more complete appreciation of the maternal characters, and of motherhood, as created in them. I rely on a number of historical, sociological and cultural studies as well as an
eclectic mix of other sources to demonstrate how mothers and concepts of the maternal have been constructed and used in Irish patriarchal society to reinforce prevailing social codes and to regulate the practices of motherhood. Since, historically, the majority population in Ireland identified with Catholicism, by far the greater part of this piece relates to the Catholic mother: at the end of the piece, I register briefly some of the social and cultural circumstances surrounding the formation of mothers and motherhood in the Protestant tradition.

**Eighteenth Century Ireland**

‘Mother Ireland’

Following the fall of the ancient Gaelic order to English rule in the eighteenth-century, the long-enduring symbolic mother figure, ‘Mother Ireland’ was brought into Irish consciousness. This fall, a watershed in Irish history, represented a particular catastrophe for the Gaelic poets since it deprived them of their high status – the poet ranked second only to the Chieftain in Gaelic society. Redundant, and derided by the new ruling elite, the poets developed a new poetic form, the *Aisling*, or vision poem, a move that brought enduring political and cultural consequences for resistance to English domination. With political poems forbidden under English law, the new poem turned to allegory, figuring a speaker who falls asleep and encounters a beautiful female from a dream world; she announces herself as the mythical *Erin* (Ireland) – a mother dispossessed of her lands and her sons, yearning for their return to right the wrongs of her dispossession. It was in these poems, where the male sense of loss and the need for redress was displaced onto the mother, that the connection between the sorrowing mother and the anticipation of the necessary bloodshed of her sons in the cause of Ireland was firmly established. Since these poems also represented a
subversive protest against the English regime they became central to the Irish political consciousness. Throughout subsequent generations and ‘Long after it was necessary’, according to poet, Eavan Boland (1996:137), the suffering mother became emblematic of the struggle for Irish nationhood. Boland points out that cultural constructs of idealized motherhood were employed to keep alive the dream of Irish nationhood, while the realities of women’s lives, the ‘human truths of survival and humiliation’ (Boland 1996:137), were distorted or suppressed.

**Nineteenth Century**

**The Modern Catholic Mother**

The modern Catholic Irish mother evolved in the context of related reform movements and social change in the nineteenth-century. Following on from Catholic Emancipation (achieved under the political leadership of Daniel O’Connell in 1829), came the reform and institutionalization of the Irish Catholic Church, and the ‘Devotional Revolution’ of the middle years of the century. Catholic churches, convents, and schools were built, serving the community, dominating the Irish landscape and proclaiming the presence of the Catholic Church in permanent and concrete form – all working to reflect and promote the causes of pride and identity in the embattled majority population. (Inglis 1998). Another symbolic mother was placed before the people as devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, was used as a prime instrument in the institutional reformation of the Irish Church (O’Dwyer 1988:261). At this stage, according to Inglis, the living mother in the family, although without political power, also became crucial to the processes of social reform:

It was the mother who became the organizational link between the newly institutionalised power of the Roman Catholic Church and the individual farming family (Inglis 1998:100; 184).
The moral empowerment of the mother was achieved by means of home visits by religious sisters and priests who schooled her in the ordering of her home and family: the domestic virtues for the mother were cleanliness and industriousness; the moral virtues, chastity and modesty. Inglis argues that ‘It was in and through the control of sex that the modern Irish mother and family were first established’ (Inglis 1998:188).

Recognition on the part of the political authorities in London that efforts at centralized state regulation in Ireland had failed (Penal laws, Protestantism and state schools introduced by the English over the years had all been rejected by the people), led to acceptance that the Catholic Church in Ireland was in a position to train the Irish in civility and morality and the civilizing mission was handed over to the Church. This hand-over included control of Catholic education, an arrangement that was to open up Irish society, and especially the role and rights of the Catholic mother, to Church influences that would extend far beyond the realms of the education of Irish catholic youth. Religious-run Catholic primary schools led to Catholic secondary schools and set up a need for Catholic teacher training colleges, and from then on, education in Ireland took on a predominantly religious ethos. (Fahy 1987). Inglis writes that ‘It was through the schools that bodily discipline, shame, guilt and modesty were instilled into the Irish Catholic’ (Inglis 1998:157). It was through the schools, also, that notions of gender and class were reinforced: Catholic schools were gendered, and provided gendered curricula; separate schools catered for pupils from differing social backgrounds. Nic Ghiolla Phadraig points out that

A feature of religious-run secondary schools has been the provision of elite schools for children of the bourgeoisie and upper classes. These Schools were established in the last century as a counter-attraction to the Protestant public schools in England which drew pupils from the affluent Catholic classes in Ireland (Nic Giolla Phadraig 1995:605)
Religious vocations were fostered in the schools and, in time (in collaboration with the state authorities) candidates recruited into religious life through the school systems came to control most of the social institutions of the state such as hospitals, orphanages, reform schools and houses of correction. Religion, gender and class were issues of significance in the operation of all social institutions, and operated seamlessly over generations. Describing her convent education in the nineteen-forties and fifties, Grainne O’Flynn explains that since ‘Docility was a commended trait in each nun’ … ‘a similar trait in female students became a discernable educational objective’ (O’Flynn 1987:81). It was, of course, a trait totally unsuited for dealing with the brute realities of marriage and motherhood in Irish society whatever the rank or class.

However, before such influences could be consolidated, two separate catastrophes changed forever the social, demographic and economic landscape of the country: home-based farm industries such as spinning, weaving and sewing fell to factory-based industrialization; and subsequently, the occurrence of the calamitous Great Famine of the nineteen-forties. In the first instance, social upheaval resulted because, traditionally, a woman marrying into a farm had brought the value of her labour to the marriage; in the new economic circumstances, ‘dowries in the form of capital rather than labour skills were required’ (Hynes, c.Inglis 1998:180). Dowerless women now faced into a life of dependency, service or emigration, instead of marriage. Choosing one son to inherit the farm, rather than sub-dividing the land as had been earlier custom, further complicated the marriage prospects of both women and men: delayed marriage, and ‘made matches’ between young women and much
older husbands became a fixed feature in Irish life. (Inglis 1998:177). Sexual continence and purity became necessary characteristics for men and women who had little prospects of marriage, or paid employment. Notwithstanding that it entailed a life of self-sacrifice and celibacy, service within the church presented as a desirable life choice, and rearing a son for the priesthood or a daughter for the convent became a cherished ambition for many a mother.6

Historians and demographers differ as to who suffered and who benefited from the Great Famine, and as to exact numbers of how many perished or were forced into exile: several of the arguments are summarized by Inglis (1998:180-187). However, there is general agreement that the worst effects of the famine fell on the rural poor: by the end of the century more than two millions of the labourers, cottiers and small holders of Ireland had been wiped from the scene through starvation, sickness and death, and through displacement and emigration. (Lee: 1973:1). The class that best survived the Famine, the tenant farmers, comprised the people who were already the mainstay of the Catholic Church – the providers of money for building churches and religious houses, and of sons and daughters to carry out the religious and social reforms to be delivered by the Church. For the Irish mother, prospects of the emigration of her children became a fixed feature of life. Instances of emigration, whether regarded as necessity, as refuge, or as the gateway to freedom, figure in each of the novels examined in this thesis.

6 This latter situation is reflected frequently in Irish women’s fiction: in Kate O’Brien’s The Ante-Room (1934), set in the eighteen-eighties, and Lia Mills’s Nothing Simple (2005), set in the nineteen-eighties, the middle-class heroine has an older brother working abroad as a missionary priest. Mary Lavin’s Mary O’Grady (1950) also features the maternal drive to have a priest in the family.
Irish life in the final decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth may be characterized in terms of ferment and zeal; of hectic political, social and cultural campaigning. Movements formed (and split) for land reform and tenancy rights, for Home Rule, for Irish cultural revival and Gaelic language revival; for suffrage, workers’, and women’s rights; for pacifism, for and against support for the ‘Great War’ in Europe; for constitutional nationalism and for militant Irish republicanism: Mary Maguire, a primary teacher and later a writer and literary critic who married the poet, Padraic Colum, is cited by Cullen Owens:

Almost everything significant in the Dublin of that period was run by the young; youth, eagerness, brains, imagination, are what I remember of everybody. There was something else that was in all of them; a desire for self-sacrifice, a devotion to causes; everyone was working for a cause for practically everything was a cause. (c.Cullen Owens 1984:39).

Such levels of zeal and voluntarism reflect not just youthful idealism and passion, but also the levels of unemployment and underemployment affecting a generation of educated and talented young Irish men and women whose futures were subject to the decisions of a British parliament.

A high proportion of the campaigning and activist youth of this recollection were women, many of whom clung to Republicanism and remained resolutely opposed to the Treaty of 1921 and the setting up of the partitioned Free State in 1922. Mothers and wives as instruments of persuasion were both active, and used to effect by both sides in the aftermath of the Civil War. (McCoole 2003:62); Hill (2003:84). Despite divisions, many had high hopes that the causes fought for would come to
fruition, that the sacrifices endured by the poor in the Dublin Lockout of 1913, the horrors and loss of those affected by the carnage in Europe in the Great War; the blood-sacrifices of the 1916 Easter Rising and its aftermath, or the bitterness engendered through the Civil War might be assuaged or justified when the Irish Free State was set up. The Irish Constitution of 1922 re-iterated the rights to ‘equality for all citizens’ of the 1916 Proclamation, and afforded the right to vote to all citizens over the age of twenty-one. However, as Cullen Owens writes, it ‘can be seen as the last piece of progressive legislation affecting women until recent times’ (Cullen Owens 1984:130), a statement reiterated in Murphy (1989) and Ward (1993). Cullen Owens claims that failure to achieve more than what labour and feminist activist, Helena Molony, was later to call ‘a sorry travesty of emancipation’ (c. Cullen Owens 1983:132) was due to a lack of a feminist perspective in Irish society at that time: women chose to subjugate their feminist beliefs in the causes of nationalism, and of party politics – ‘The mass of Irishwomen were untouched by feminism’ (Cullen Owens 1983:134).

The notion that feminism disappeared during the first fifty years of the independent state is challenged by historians: (Daly 1997); Beaumont (1997). Diversity in approach and ideology has been a problem for women’s organizations of all decades, as has been the factor, as Beaumont (1997) points out, that most groups comprised middle-class, educated women, and did not attract the support of the mass of the female population. It is the case also, that whatever their convictions, few women would have been in a position to participate in group activism: lack of independent means, time, and transport would have been major deterrents, especially to those rearing children. (Daly 1997). Myrtle Hill makes the point that while activist
women played an important part in Irish life, they represented only a small minority, and that most people were more engaged with the struggles of every-day life in times of extreme economic hardship. (Hill 2003:97). Linda Connolly (1996) argues that active feminism entered a period of abeyance rather than of complete decline in the earlier years of the state, and claims that the political work carried out by traditional women’s groups such as the Irish Housewives’ Association and the Irish Countrywomen’s Association was ‘a necessary precondition for the resurgence of feminism and the women’s movement in 1970’ (Connolly 1996:49).

1920s – 1960s

When the Free State Government was set up in 1922, the economy was stagnant, and the wounds of the civil war were still open: the newly established regime was justifiably mindful of the presence and power of the Catholic Church in Irish society: as Dermot Keogh explains ‘A state weakened at birth by civil war, depended all the more upon the Catholic Church to help it achieve popular legitimacy’ (Keogh 1996:104). Keogh points to the development of what he terms ‘the politics of informal consensus’ (Keogh 1996:112), whereby politicians, although schooled in the Catholic ethos of the ‘Devotional Revolution’, sometimes compromised, and allowed pragmatic considerations and the contesting rights of religious minorities to prevail when political necessity demanded: in 1930 William Cosgrave was unwilling to impose an outright ban on sale of contraceptives in deference to minority claims: De Valera imposed a ban 1935, but refused to include the ban in the 1937 Irish Constitution. Unfortunately any ‘informal consensus’ took little account of the needs or rights of women and mothers. European-wide sentiment and Catholic social policies as expressed in Catholic teaching held that the natural place for women was
the home, rather than public life or the workplace. Beliefs that men, as the ‘breadwinner’ and ‘head’ of the family, should be afforded the available work and wages to meet the costs of raising a family gained ground. For the next fifty years, the pragmatic considerations of Irish governments came to actively discriminate against women in terms of citizenship, of jobs and career opportunities, wages and conditions; and of marital status, reproductive concerns and other human rights. Tax and welfare systems were biased towards the ‘breadwinner’ model, and the ideal set up as paradigmatic of Irish womanhood was the ‘mother in the home’.

Feminist and post-colonial studies (Nandy 1983; Meaney 1993; Yuval-Davis 1997) have noted the world-wide practice of empowering men to the detriment of women’s rights in constructing national identity in post-colonial situations; Ingman points to the use of Judith Butler’s theories of gender performance by Mayer when stating that ‘Men become the nation’s protectors, women its biological and ideological reproducers (Mayer c.Ingman 2004:3) From the earliest years of Irish independence, the political rhetoric and legislation of the new leadership shifted from issues of national freedom and governance, to focus on women and on the family as the unit of society: in this, the interests of both government and Church converged, with state authorities ambitious to construct a new national consciousness free of Anglicising influences, and the Catholic authorities concerned to control the perceived spread of moral laxities from the wider world. In the years following, censorship and proscription came to form the core of Irish family law, bearing heavily on the status and life of the mother, and ensuring that idealized images, rather than lived experience, should form the narratives of female national identity.
Threats to women’s employment rights came in 1925 in a Government Bill by which women were to be excluded from competing for positions in higher civil service grades and from occupations deemed unsuitable to them, such as the police or armed forces. There were vociferous protests by women who had been active in the struggles for suffrage and independence (Ward 1995:163). The Bill was withdrawn, but subsequent legislation chipped away at the rightful claims of women in work. In 1932, a law requiring women to retire from National Teaching on marriage was enacted. This marriage bar was extended to all civil and public service employment in subsequent years, and the practice was taken up by many private sector employers. The legislation clearly reflects Catholic ideology: Grainne O’Flynn records that the Department of Education was regularly pressurized by religious school principals to tailor school curricula for girls in order to reinforce the view that ‘A woman’s place is in the home’ (O’Flynn 1987:92). In consequence of these policies, many urban families chose to prioritise the education of sons over daughters – a girl was expected to marry and become the dependent of her husband; young women were channelled into lower paying and less influential jobs, limiting promotion opportunities and depleting the supply of female career role models. In addition, since women who did not marry were often denigrated, as ‘Old Maids’ who had been ‘left on the shelf’, women entered, or were sometimes pressurised into unwise marriages rather than remain in an impoverished single state.\footnote{The attempt to run a marriage bureau in Room for a Single Lady registers this situation.}

The 1924 Juries Act proposed to ‘exempt’ all women from jury service. Robust opposition from influential feminists succeeded in having changes made
which allowed for an ‘opt out’ clause for women to be inserted.\footnote{See Beaumont (in Valiulis and O’Dowd 1997:173-188) ‘Women and the Politics of Equality.'} A second Bill, introduced in 1927, proposing to remove women from the juries lists ‘in the interests of efficiency and financial savings’ (c.Hill:2003:100), evoked more protests from the ‘old guard’ of women activists and from a number of women’s groups (Hill 2003:100). Although unable to prevent the legislation, the protesters succeeded in having an ‘opt-in’ clause for women inserted into the Bill. As well as constituting an affront to women’s rights of citizenship, the 1927 law rendered the generality of women voiceless in the Law Courts, and left them ignorant of Court operations and case hearings. Of particular relevance to mothering practices, the ‘exemption’ from jury service kept the prevalence and levels of domestic violence in the state under wraps: Elizabeth Steiner-Scott finds that ‘Following the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, reports of wife-beating declined in the press’ (Steiner-Scott 1997:142), in consequence, she believes, of state intervention.

Physical assaults classed as ‘marital’ or ‘domestic’ violence have been almost universally regarded as ‘a matter for the family’. In his collection of oral histories, *Dublin’s Lost Heroines: Mammies and Grannies in a Vanished City*, (2004), Kearns confirms this as the tradition in inner-city Dublin society; he reports that inner-city women had no faith in the police or the legal system, and believed that the attitude of the law was, “she must have deserved it!” (Kearns 2004:90). Myrtle Hill reports a similar lack of confidence in police intervention in Northern Ireland even in more recent times, (Hill 2003:193) and notes that both sides of the border have shared the practices of lenient sentencing for spousal abuse, as well as failure even to bring cases to court. In the Republic, up until the nineteen-seventies, abusive husbands could not
be barred from the family home, and mothers usually stayed, or returned from what refuge they had found, if only to protect their children. It was not until the nineteen-seventies and eighties that feminists succeeded in having legislation enacted to allow for the barring of an abusive spouse from the home, and for the part-funding by the state of refuge-centres for ‘battered’ wives and their families. And, indeed, a more egregious injustice persisted in that, in law, a man was presumed to have the right to have sex with his wife; her consent, therefore, was not considered to be an issue. The crime of ‘marital rape’ was not defined in the Republic of Ireland until nineteen-ninety, and there was no successful prosecution for this crime until the year two-thousand-and-two.⁹

The Censorship of Publications Board was established in 1930, one of its powers being to prohibit the sale or distribution of what it decreed to be ‘indecent’ or ‘obscene’ literature. Although on-going protests at the censorship of works of literature were voiced in Senate hearings and in the press by public intellectuals such as W.B. Yeats, George Russell (AE) and Sean O’Faoilean, there was no outcry from the mass of people; the Irish displayed no wish to have community flaws aired to the wider world.¹⁰ A study of reading habits in the nineteen-thirties finds that ‘Crosses, guns and roses were the ingredients of the mass market of reading material during the 1930s’ (Russell 1999:28). Magazines with an Irish or religious content, Zane Grey stories of the American ‘Wild West’, and romantic novels published by Mills & Boone formed the popular choices of the book-buying public. Most writers of significance had their works banned, and many found it necessary to leave Ireland in

⁹Morrissy’s novel, *Mother of Pearl* features incidents of marital rape that go unreported or unpunished.

order to earn a living and to find a more congenial environment in which to live and write. In consequence there was an outflow of intellectual and dissident opinion and a further impoverishment of the cultural life of the nation. Given the gendered nature of Irish society, women writers whose works were banned suffered more from having their writings declared ‘indecent’ or ‘obscene’: Brendan Behan, finding his work banned, parodied a popular ballad and sang – ‘Oh! My name is Brendan Behan/I’m the leader of the banned’; both Kate O’Brien and Edna O’Brien took up permanent residence in England.

Censorship carried more practical than cultural implications for Irish motherhood, since the Board was charged with prohibiting the printing, publishing, distribution or sale of publications adverting to contraception or abortion. Deprived of information, many women continued bearing children long after their own health and their domestic circumstances demanded a halt. In addition, as some older inner-city interviewees disclose in Kearns’s oral histories, lack of information and any mature language of sexuality led to ignorance and crippling reticence about bodily functions, and especially about pregnancy. So taboo was discussion of reproduction that for some, even to mention the word ‘pregnancy’ was not acceptable. One interviewee testifies: “Your mother never spoke to you about having a baby. You were ‘in a family way’, that’s the way it was pronounced. You never said, she’s having a baby,” or “she’s pregnant” (Kearns 2004:97). In rural areas, a certain irony often underlay the comment, ‘She’ll be adding bits to her apron strings for the next while’. The Catholic Church forbade ‘artificial’ forms of contraception; even recourse to the ‘Rhythm Method’ (a somewhat unreliable method of birth control based on sexual abstinence during the fertile phase that came to be termed ‘Vatican Roulette’ in the less reverent
seventies) was made difficult since, although tolerated by the Church in certain circumstances, information about its workings was restricted in Ireland (Kenny 1997:5). An interviewee of Kearns recalls attempts at family limitation:

“I used the rhythm thing … living by the calendar and you’d count back and forward. I had ten children” (Lily Foy, 68).

Kearns concludes that the ‘Rhythm Method’ was ‘famously unsuccessful’ (Kearns: 2004:97) around many inner-city neighbourhoods. The ‘politics of informal consensus’ identified by Keogh (1996:104) may be seen to have transcended the civil-war divide when, in 1935, with the opposing side in the civil war now in government, Eamon de Valera outlawed the import, sale and distribution of contraceptives, a course rejected by the previous administration in deference to minority objections.

Employment rights of women and mothers were brought under fire again when The Conditions of Employment Bill 1935 was introduced, providing for ministerial limitation of the numbers of women employed in any given industry, as well as the types of employment to which women might be admitted. Again, there was vigorous opposition from the ‘old guard’ feminists and the Women Worker’s Union, but their efforts to have the bill amended failed. Caitriona Clear (1995) suggests that de Valera was influenced by his reading of a study on the damaging effects of industrial work on women, and on child mortality in the days of early industrialization. However, Catholic social teaching and papal encyclicals lie at the root of this gendered legislation: jobs were to be retained for ‘men with families’ irrespective of the circumstances of single women or of mothers with unsupported children. Coogan’s biography of de Valera discloses a letter from Rev. John Charles
McQuaid (later Archbishop of Dublin) to the Taoiseach where he references two papal encyclicals, and advises

These feminists are very confused. Both *Casti Connubi* and *Quadragesimo anno* answer them. Men and women have not equal rights to work of the same kind, but equal rights to *appropriate* work (c. Coogan 1993:497).

Endless back-breaking work was habitually undertaken by women on farms, and by women with large families: all such work was classed as ‘home duties’ and was unrecognized financially or in Irish law; a wife had no right of inheritance in the home and could be disinherited and made homeless until the introduction of the Succession Act 1965.

The move to enshrine ‘women in the home’ climaxed in De Valera’s 1937 Constitution which recognized the family as the primary unit of society, and which, in conflating the notions of ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ consigned women in general to the domestic sphere. Keogh provides evidences that de Valera entered into consultation with all the main churches when drafting the Constitution (Keogh 1996:125), and in particular, with his friend, Rev. John Charles McQuaid. Keogh asserts that ‘The future Archbishop of Dublin was the main architect of the Articles on family and marriage’ (Keogh 1996:122, n.99). Not surprisingly, recognition of the ‘mother within the home’ did not take material form when Children’s Allowances were introduced in 1944: the legislation specified that payments were payable to the father, but permitted him to allocate their collection to the mother.
Margaret MacCurtain’s summing-up of cultural and social conditions in the Irish Free State in the latter years of the nineteen-thirties and the early years of the nineteen-forties is cited by Connolly (1996:48).

The Irish Free State had by then become a state where gendered political forces had limited women’s access to political and economic power. It was a critical time for the citizens of the Irish Free State. Removed from the theatre of the European war by its constitutional stand on neutrality, the state paid the price in scarcity of money, food and fuel. There was stark poverty in many households and the spectre of tuberculosis struck with deadly effect at families. Children suffered woeful malnutrition with little hope of medical alleviation. (c. Connolly 1996:48)

MacCurtain’s realism stands in bleak contrast to the idealized pastoralism of de Valera’s notorious broadcast on St. Patrick’s Day, 1943, which outlined his vision of ‘That Ireland which we dreamed of’; De Valera spoke of ‘cosy homesteads’, of the ‘romping of sturdy children’ and ‘the laughter of happy maidens’. However, for many mothers (my own included), De Valera had ‘stood up to Churchill’, and had ‘kept us out of the war’; and despite the privations under which they suffered, he was afforded heroic status equal to that of the executed leaders of the 1916 Rising. Again and again, they exercised their lately-won votes in his favour.

From the nineteen-fifties on, there were signs of positive change, although change was not won easily, and economic conditions were dire; there was a housing crisis even though mass emigration reached record numbers. An attempt in 1951 to introduce a very limited scheme of medical care for mothers and babies (The Mother and Child Scheme) was shamefully defeated due to opposition from medical interests and the Catholic hierarchy, and led to the fall of a government. A largely similar scheme was introduced unopposed in 1953. The ban on married women teachers was
lifted in 1957 (Galligan: 1998). Nevertheless, while still highly censored and steeped in religiosity, Irish people were beginning to embrace the wider world: travel ceased to be just for emigrants, as affordable pilgrimages and package holidays to European destinations became available. And although Mary Dorcy’s recollections of growing up in Dublin in the nineteen-fifties and sixties (cited Hill 2003:135; Ingman 2004:18) present a very harsh cultural scenario, Italian, French and other foreign films (although censored) were showing in Dublin cinemas, and according to Fintan O’Toole (2000:52), there was something of a second theatre revival. The national airline, Aer Lingus, and the Irish Tourist Board were marketing Ireland as a tourist destination, and the Trade Board was finding some success in attracting foreign direct investment.  

1960s to 2000

New thinking on conscience and morality evolved following the election of Pope John XXIII in 1958 and his convocation of the Second Vatican Council in 1963. Church reform and renewal, and concepts of social justice, of openness and inclusivity, entered public discourse; terms such as ‘aggiornamento’, ‘ecumenism’ and ‘charismatic’ gained common currency, and suggested new ways of being Catholic and Christian. There was disappointment for liberal Catholics when in 1968, contrary to expectations, Pope John’s successor, Paul VI, reaffirmed the Church’s condemnation of artificial means of birth control in his Encyclical, *Humanae Vitae.* However, by that time, Irish society had opened up to the influences of television and popular culture; rock-and-roll had become the music of choice for the first generation

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11 Clare Boylan’s *Room for Single Lady* refers to the competing parades and processions of the Government tourist initiative, *An Tostal,* and the Church’s declaration of 1954 as the ‘Marian Year’ and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin into Heaven was endorsed as Church dogma.
of Irish ‘teenagers’, although, ‘getting yourself into trouble’ (unmarried pregnancy) could still be regarded as a female calamity, (Kearns 2004:108-125); (Hill 2003:131), (Ingman 2007:19) and ‘rushed weddings’. ‘taking the boat’, or ‘giving up the baby’ were still widely practiced by the unmarried mother, all circumstances reflected in Mother of Pearl and Room for a Single Lady.

However, from the nineteen-sixties on, changes in family law began to improve the status of women and mothers. In 1964, legislation recognizing the equal rights of a mother to share in the custody and education of her children was enacted, and the 1965 Succession Act provided for the rights of a widow to a share in the estate of her deceased husband. (Galligan 1998). In 1967, changes in censorship legislation ‘unbanned’ thousands of books previously held to be indecent. In that same year, free secondary education was introduced for all children in the Republic of Ireland, a change that was especially useful to young women. Tragically, at the end of the decade, in the wake of some years of protest and civil action by Catholics for an end to political and religious discrimination, the Northern Ireland State erupted into militant sectarian strife, ushering in the years of violence and suffering that came to be called ‘The Troubles’. Incidents of bombings, shootings and burnings became frequent, and scenes of buildings destroyed, of distraught women and children, and of choreographed funerals, were beamed into people’s homes via television, and came to dominate Irish life and consciousness. ‘The decade that had begun so buoyantly ended in flames’ (Tobin 1996:211). Hill (2003) provides a detailed and balanced account of the impact of ‘The Troubles’ on mothers, and on domestic life in general. Morrissy’s Mother of Pearl and Madden’s One by One in the Darkness portray in fiction the horror introduced into family life by ideologically driven violence.
Although the Northern ‘Troubles’ seeped into life in the Republic, especially following Derry’s ‘Bloody Sunday’ in 1972, and the retaliatory burning of the British Embassy building in Dublin, the nineteen-seventies are generally seen as the era of the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement. This is due chiefly to the small number of women (mainly journalists) who grouped under that title and burst onto the national television screens in a special edition of the *Late Late Show* in March 1971. The group’s manifesto *Chains or Change? The Civil Wrongs of Irish Women*, listed six demands as essential to break the chains of women’s oppression, the most controversial of which was the demand for access to contraception, considered as fundamental human right. The first public meeting of the IWLM was attended by over one thousand women, many of whom spoke for the first time of the patriarchal oppressions and injustices under which they and their children lived. A train journey to Belfast to buy and import contraceptives garnered media headlines and support, and also disapproval. (Smyth 1993). (Hill 2003). The IWLM inevitably fragmented over a variety of issues, but throughout the decade many offshoot groups formed and developed into agencies that are still working to better the lives of women and mothers.

The brash, media-savvy approach of the IWLM, ‘sent shock waves through Irish society’ (Scannell, 1988:129), as women’s issues gained mainstream attention across the media. In the years following, a whole generation of Irish ‘mothers in the home’ was educated in matters of sexuality and sensuality by means of feminist newspaper columns and talk-shows on the public broadcasting services. Often couched in terms of women’s physical and mental health, issues such as contraception, unmarried motherhood, forced adoptions, deserted wives, marital
violence, separation and divorce, all previously considered to be ‘delicate’ and ‘matters for the family’, were opened up to public debate. For ‘ordinary’ women, the ‘Pill’ had become widely, if semi-legally, available and, as statistics show, for the first time in history, Irish women were making decisions in respect of their own fertility: official fertility rates for women of child-bearing age show a drop from 6.0 children in 1951 to 3.5 in 1971 (Galligan 1998:27).

The sensational arrival of the feminists of the IWLM tends to occlude the long-term social activism of earlier women’s groups such as the Irish Housewives Association and the Irish Countrywomen’s Association but, as Hilda Tweedy claimed, the women’s movement was not ‘born on some mystical date in 1970 like Aphrodite rising from the waves’ (Tweedy, 1992: Epilogue). Galligan makes a claim for the growth in women’s political consciousness as originating in the 1960s through the work of women trade unionists, business and professional women’s groups and women’s social organizations (Galligan 1998). Pat O’Connor writes of Irish women’s ‘formidable ability’ to use organizational structures, and notes that the request in 1968 to set up the First Commission on the Status of Women was made by an ad hoc committee comprising ten women’s organizations (O’Connor 1999:74). Tweedy refers to ‘a long continuous battle in which many women have struggled to gain equality, each generation adding something to the achievements of the past’ (Tweedy 1992: Epilogue). The IHA, which saw its roots in the first wave women’s movement, worked to unite housewives and to improve living conditions: they lobbied government mostly on social and consumer issues; pressed for food rationing and for children’s allowances and school meals in the nineteen-forties, and marched in protest at the defeat of the 1951 Mother and Child Scheme.
The ICA, a much larger organization, formed in 1910, had its origins in the Irish Co-operative Movement. It took on such large issues as rural electrification, piped water, better housing and transport, and was recognized by the Irish government as the ‘prime mover’ in the demand for these facilities (Earner Byrne:2010:103). The ICA was running self-development courses for rural women long before that concept took hold generally; it encouraged young women to refuse to marry into a home without a piped water supply, running the slogan ‘Who said love, honour and carry water?’ (http://www.ica.ie/About-us/History.43.1.aspx. [accessed 07/02/2013]). Both groups (originally Protestant-led) were involved in the setting up of the First Commission on the Status of Women in Ireland in 1969 and in the Report of 1972 that formed the blue-print for the re-evaluation of the position of women in Ireland.

Reforming legislation introduced in respect of the status of women and the family in the nineteen-seventies emanated from a variety of sources. The 1972 Report of the National Commission on the Status of Women presented evidence of the discrimination faced by Irish women, and made forty-nine recommendations for reform. In 1973, the Council for the Status of Women was set up, with Hilda Tweedy as its Chairperson. Ireland’s entry into the EC in 1973 opened the European Courts of Justice and Human Rights to Irish litigants, facilitating challenges and rulings on discriminatory Irish laws: one of the first cases, led by Mary Robinson, was the McGee case, which eventually brought changes in the laws on contraception. Legislation on equal pay came in 1974 and on employment equality in 1997 as a result of European directives. The 1927 Juries Act was repealed as a result of a constitutional challenge to the Irish Supreme Court, (Robinson again leading), while government legislation in 1974 entitled a mother to collect the Children’s Allowance.
The visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland in 1979 was a joyful occasion in Ireland, the largest public event in the history of the state, and a massive popular success. The Pope addressed himself to ‘Ireland – Semper Fidelis’ (always faithful); he proclaimed his love for the ‘the young people of Ireland’ assembled in Galway. In Limerick, he spoke especially to ‘Irish mothers, young women and girls’ on ‘the vocation of giving life and caring for this life as a mother’; he stressed the importance of ‘traditional family life’ to the ‘young women of Ireland’. Hill writes that while in the aftermath of the papal visit, many women tried to follow John Paul’s guidance, ‘the restrictions on personal freedom imposed by the Church were becoming an irrelevancy’ (Hill 2003:157). At Drogheda, the Pope spoke to the ‘men of violence’, but his pleas for an end to violence also went unheeded, and the ‘Troubles’ continued, involving not just the militant participants, but affecting ‘ordinary’ families on both sides of the border and beyond.

In addition to the ‘Troubles’, Irish life in the nineteen-eighties was blighted by the intractable problems of unemployment (about sixteen per cent nationally) and, again, by mass youth emigration. Mothers were again rearing families for export. The economy was in deep depression due to reckless borrowings in the previous decade (Mac Êinrí 1997) and taxes, still favouring the ‘breadwinner’ model, reached punitive rates. The sorry sagas surrounding reproduction and divorce continued, with abortion constituting one of the most toxic issues in Irish life during the eighties. In 1980 a ‘Woman’s Right to Choose Group’ was formed by feminists, who set up the Irish Pregnancy Counselling Centre. In response, and fearful of legislation being ‘brought in by the back door’, that is, via the Irish Supreme Court, or the European Courts, a coalition of conservative groups sponsored a referendum to have the existing ban on
abortion inserted into the Constitution. Anne Enright recalls the battle-cry of feminist protesting groups:

‘Get your rosaries off our ovaries’, as we voted, over and over, while the pro-life louts hung around the Dublin streets with their jars of dead baby (Enright 2004:5-6).

The so-called ‘pro-life’ amendment was passed in 1983 by a two-to-one majority: the right-to-life of ‘the unborn’ was declared to be equivalent to the right-to-life of the mother. In 1986 the same groups took legal action and succeeded in having clinics offering advice on pregnancy and birth control closed down. On the liberal side, rights to purchase contraceptives were expanded. In 1985 married women gained the right to independent domicile in a Bill driven through parliament by Nuala Fennell, Junior Minister for Women’s Affairs. In 1987, the concept of ‘illegitimacy’ relating to children born out of wedlock was abolished, and the succession rights of such children were established in law. Ireland’s first IVF baby was born in 1986 (Hill: 2004:200). However, over the next few years, a series of outrageous and tragic cases highlighted how problematic matters of pregnancy and childbirth could be for the mothers and young women of Ireland. (Hill:2003:198); (The Field Day Anthology Vol.V, 1435-44); (Ingman 2007:22). In 1986 a referendum on the introduction of divorce failed; the 1989 Legal Separations Bill allowed for legal separation of couples in a marriage that been broken for at least two years.

A lift in mood nationally in nineteen-ninety came via an unlikely source – the World Cup Soccer Finals – Italia 90: a new sense of community and inclusivity became detectable during the celebrations as the Republic of Ireland soccer team reached the quarter finals for the first time ever. For women, the elevated mood was
maintained as the left-wing candidate, Mary Robinson, was elected as Ireland’s first woman president in 1990, thanks to the votes of Mná na hÉireann (The women of Ireland). She was succeeded in 1997 by Mary MacAleese, who served two terms. Both women were married and had children, and both had high-profile careers; both are acknowledged to have brought important new dimensions to the role of the Presidency. In 1993, legislation decriminalizing same-sex relations was guided through parliament by the country’s first female Minister for Justice, who spoke as a mother when explaining the rationale for such legislation. In 1995, a further referendum to overturn the ban on divorce succeeded by the narrowest of margins.

Throughout, the years, however, the contentious issues surrounding abortion refused to go away: several subsequent legal battles revolved around the tragic circumstances of raped early-teen girls. In a referendum in 1992, the electorate, faced with three amendments, voted for the freedom to obtain information on abortion, and for the right to travel to have an abortion. The 12th Amendment, proposing that the possibility of suicide was not a sufficient threat to justify abortion, was rejected. This issue, placed again before the people in 2002, was again rejected. Clearly, refusal or reluctance to bear or rear children was not the main preoccupation of Irish women: fertility rates around that time were among the highest in the developed world (Mahon 1994) and, by the end of the nineteen-nineties, close to one thousand children, mainly from Romania had been adopted into Ireland, necessitating enabling legislation. http://www.lawreform.ie/.pdf [accessed 9th March 2013].

In the nineteen-nineties, the economy was on the upturn: an early sighting of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ was reported by Morgan Stanley Bank in 1994, although, as
O’Connor records (citing O’Connell 1996:2), the gender of the animal seems to have been misconstrued since ninety per cent of the growth in employment over the previous twenty-five years had been in women’s employment. The year 1994 was also the year in which ‘Riverdance’, an updated and glossy interpretation of Irish traditional music and dance was screened to global audiences via *The European Song Contest*; Irish dancing began to open up career opportunities. Ireland, dubbed ‘the poorest of the rich’ in January 1988 by *The Economist* was judged to be about ‘as prosperous as the European average’ in May 1997 by the same paper. In that same year, the figure for mothers of one or two dependent children in paid employment stood at 43 per cent (CSO data, c. O’Connor 1999:246), a figure indicative of the degree of change taking place in the life of the Irish mother.

Emigration of Irish citizens continued, however, with many now travelling to Europe, rather than the U.K. or the U.S. Inward migration also became a feature of the nineties, when ‘Modest but significant numbers’ of people, many of them ‘counter-cultural’, came to settle in rural areas (Mac Éinri 1997), a situation that arises in *The Memory Stones*. Modest numbers of more ethnically diverse people sought refugee status or asylum, often finding that ‘Ireland of the Welcomes’ was closed for business: a not entirely new Irish attitude towards immigrants (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig 1995). On a happier note, on Good Friday, 10th April, 1998 the Belfast Agreement was signed, bringing hopes of lasting peace between communities in Ireland, North and South, and of a new relationship with the United Kingdom. The ‘Celtic Tiger’ was yet to roar.
The Protestant Tradition

Like ‘Mother Ireland’, the Protestant tradition in Ireland began with the Tudor conquest in Ireland, and the fall of the Gaelic order. Policy decisions to settle English-speaking Protestants from Britain in Ireland created the situation whereby at the beginning of the eighteenth century, most of the land of Ireland was held by new settlers and by native land-owners who had declared for Protestantism under English rule in order to hold on to their estates. Protestantism became the state religion, and with Catholics denied the rights to vote or to stand for parliament, the Protestant population came to enjoy privileged status and to exercise dominance in economic, social, cultural, and religious life, despite the fact that across the territory of what now constitutes the Republic of Ireland, they represented only a tenth of the population. This numerical weakness became apparent in the 1798 United Irishmen Rebellion, and provoked the Act of Union which abolished the Irish parliament and centralized political power in London. Protestant hegemony was undermined in the 19th Century by Catholic Emancipation, franchise extension in Local Government, and by the political moves towards Home Rule: it was overthrown as a result of the 1916 Easter Rising and the Treaty settlements of 1921-22 which led to the partition of Ireland and the setting up of the Irish Free State and a separate state in six counties of the province of Ulster. (Coakley 1998).

In the words of Terence Brown ‘The history of Protestantism in independent Ireland from 1922 to the late 1960s is a history of decline and isolation’ (Brown 2000:226). It is accepted that this decline was not the result of deliberate policies on the part of the new regime (Walsh 1970; Bowen 1983; Coakley 1998; Brown 2000),

12 The pattern in Ulster was different, since earlier ‘plantations’ had seen the settlement of large numbers of Presbyterians in that province.
but for Protestants, the establishment of the new state removed from them their political guarantee of Union with Great Britain. Partition also separated the twenty-six counties Protestant population from a large cohort of co-religionists in the northern counties, and further reduced them as a minority south of the border. Isolated rural Protestants had most to fear since from the opening years of the Home Rule crisis through to the years of revolution and civil war there had been agrarian violence, and along with the well-documented attacks on the ‘Big Houses’ of the aristocracy and gentry, many ‘ordinary’ families had found themselves subject to burnings, robberies, and intimidation. (Hart 1996; Coakley 1998). Urban populations, especially the working-class, were depleted initially by departure to the First World War and later by the departure from Ireland of the British army, of civil servants, and of members of the police forces who had served under the crown. (Brown: 2000:224).

The exodus removed the more robust forms of Anti-Catholicism and Protestant zeal from the new state, leaving a scattered and largely middle-class minority that maintained itself through social and religion-based, rather than political, institutions. Brown writes that between 1922 and the late nineteen-sixties,

A kind of unofficial, almost unspoken apartheid existed in Irish life, which made Protestantism a primary mark of social and cultural identification for Protestants and Catholics alike. (Brown 2000:227).

Organizations such as the Irish Housewives Association and the Irish Countrywomen’s Association were the beneficiaries of such accommodations as they both were formed under Protestant leadership and extended into the wider community; on the other hand, self-restriction of the Protestant ‘voice’ weakened opposition to the new hegemony, and women and mothers in general across Ireland were disadvantaged by this silence. Brown mentions the state’s policies with regard to
the imposition of the Irish language into the educational system, and the Ne Temere Decree of the Catholic Church as particularly alienating to the minority, but there is no report as to how the Protestant mother regarded these constraints. Anecdotally, the big fear of Protestant mothers was that their children would ‘marry out’. Most married women in the border counties were members of the Mother’s Union and were active in parish affairs. Self-segregated clubs and activities were maintained at parish level, as were the ‘Protestant only’ dances arranged across the country (Bowen 1983:171). These were generally regarded within the minority population as ‘marriage markets’ aimed at preventing mixed marriages and the dilution of their numbers. The relics of ‘the Ascendancy’ held to their English cultural traditions and select clubs that kept them at a remove from the rest of the population of all religions.

A notable improvement in relations between majority and minority groups since the nineteen-sixties is attributed by Bowen (1983) to a number of factors. He writes that economic improvements dictated that Catholics be recruited into employments previously reserved by Protestant firms for co-religionists: this is attributed to pragmatism; there simply were not sufficient numbers of Protestants to meet heightened industrial and commercial demands. Bowen also points to an increase in tolerance on the part of the Catholic population, perhaps due to ecumenism in the wake of Vatican II, and points also to an increase in secularism generally – not a relinquishment of religion, but an acceptance that religion might be a matter for private conscience or choice. The conflict in Northern Ireland is held to have led Protestants in the Republic to ally more closely with the Republic of Ireland, since they did not wish to be identified with the extremes of bigotry displayed by co-religionists in Northern Ireland. An identifiable spirit of co-operation between the
churches is also found to have convinced Protestants that integration rather than assimilation of their communities was a possibility. The acceleration in secularism in Irish society in the latter years of the twentieth century has led to a blurring of boundaries for Catholics and Protestants alike.

Section Two:

Literary Foremothers: Reproducing the Dead Mother

Looking back to the literary foremothers, it is the figure of the dead mother that most predominates in Irish women’s fictional literary representations of motherhood. An inexhaustive list includes novels such as Kate O’Brien’s *Mary Lavelle* (1936); Edna O’Brien’s *Country Girls trilogy* (1960; 1962; 1964); Molly Keane’s *Good Behaviour* (1981), Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September* (1981), Jennifer Johnston’s *The Invisible Worm* (1991), Clairr O’Connor’s *Belonging* (1991), *The Visitor* by Maeve Brennan (written in 1950, published 2000). In the context of nineteenth-century realist fiction, Hirsch writes, ‘It is the mother’s absence which creates the space in which the heroine’s plot and her activity of plotting can evolve’ (Hirsch: 1989); the frequency of the mother’s elimination in Irish women’s fiction is an indication of how seldom she figures as heroine, is given a voice, or has a trajectory planned for her that would take her beyond family and home. In the following piece, I examine four novels which feature either the death of the mother, the dying mother, or the mother as haunting presence in the consciousness of the heroine, the purpose being to show how the ‘pre-Celtic Tiger’ mother was imagined by Irish women writers. Publication dates for novels chosen span fifty years, and comprise *The Ante-Room* (1934/1988) by Kate O’Brien; *Mary O’Grady* (1950/1986)
by Mary Lavin; *The Christmas Tree* (1981/2) by Jennifer Johnston and *The Irish Signorina* by Julia O'Faolain (1984/5).

*The Ante-Room*, Kate O’Brien’s second novel, was published in 1934, when she was aged thirty-seven. She was educated in a convent boarding school from the age of six, but became agnostic in her adult years. Set in 1880, in the fictional town of Mellick, *The Ante-Room* shares some of the characters, and also the social milieu and *mores* introduced in her first novel, *Without My Cloak* (1931). This is the world of the wealthy Catholic families of the provincial merchant class that emerged into Irish society after Catholic Emancipation, having escaped (or profited from) the worst disasters of the Great Famine. Domestically, it is a world of culture and material comfort, registering no hint of the deprivations, dispossessions or forced emigrations that had been visited on the general population. Politics of the day intrude only in after-dinner conversation, but the influence of the Catholic Church, and the beliefs and practices fostered in the course of the Irish Devotional Revolution are all-pervasive. The novel is built around three important Feast Days of the Catholic Church: Hallow‘een, All Saints Day, and the Feast of the Holy Souls – all days that celebrate those souls believed to have gone to heaven, or to be assured of salvation following an appropriate time in purgatory. They are days tinged also with folk-memories of the ancient Irish festival of *Samhain*, a festival also associated with the dead.

In common with most Irish fictional works, the mother is not the protagonist in *The Ante-Room*: the heroine is Agnes, the youngest daughter of eight adult children, who still lives at home, and the novel’s main focus is on her emotional and
spiritual struggle against her secret love for the husband of her beloved sister, Marie-Rose. However, the separate mother/son plot involving Teresa Mulqueen, the mother of the family, and her second son, Reggie, commands a dominant place in the story. At the opening of the novel, Teresa has been ill for some two-and-a-half years and is in the terminal stage of her illness. There is almost no exposition of her earlier relationships with her husband, Danny, and the begetting of their eight children, or of her early relationships with her children as they grew towards maturity. However, the narrative informs that the eldest son is a priest ministering in Australia; three other sons are pursuing careers away from home in law, finance and medicine, and the eldest daughter is married to a country doctor ‘in the wilds of Galway’ and is ‘overwhelmed by many babies’ (O’Brien 1988:8). Marie-Rose’s marriage to Vincent, a Dublin barrister is foundering, a situation not yet known to the family. The domestic scene is very much the mother’s domain; her household is still running smoothly despite her terminal illness: all the signs are there of a family successfully reared, lending some support to the arguments of historian Caitriona Clear that the ‘maternal, domestic role’ was not always regarded by women as oppressive, and was sometimes regarded as ‘an investment worth making’ (Clear: 2000:10).

Teresa’s dilemma is not the fear of death, but the fear that after her death there will be no-one to look after Reggie, her second-eldest son, who is ten years returned home, diseased and ruined by syphilis, and who exists in utter emotional dependency on his mother. The narrative tells of how Reggie’s scandalous disease had dictated long periods in nursing homes before he was sufficiently well to come home, of how marriage and love were now forbidden to him, and of how the ‘sustained humiliations and fears of his state of health’ (O’Brien 1988:19) had reduced him to invalidism and
despair. Teresa’s death will deprive Reggie of the ‘the only one good thing’ (O’Brien 1988:19) that sustains him, the shield of love his mother had thrown before him to give him courage and hope ‘in the first terrified months of his illness’ (O’Brien 1988:19). For a mother with the sensibilities of the times, this would not have been easily done, but the narrative states that Teresa’s attentions to her son ‘had given understanding and patience to a woman as prudish as she was holy’ (O’Brien 1988:19). The narrative also states that ‘Firmly, ruthlessly, she had built for her wasted son a life that was safe from life’, and that ‘she had built it with a concentration of purpose which had almost cost her the love of her other children’ (O’Brien 1988:20). In the world of the novel, building a life for Reggie that was ‘safe from life’, may be seen in terms of looking to secure his eternal salvation rather than as a life-denying facet of the possessiveness so often attributed to Irish motherhood in Irish life and in fiction.

Several commentators are critical and sometimes judgemental of the mother character’s portrayed attitude to her son: (Reynolds (1987); Dalsimer (1990:29); Roche (1993:90); Madden (1988 Afterword). Roche’s allusion to the ‘suffocatingly Oedipal relationship between the dying Mrs. Mulqueen and her syphilitic son, Reggie’ (Roche 1993:90), is an indication of how readily commentators turn to the Freudian model for discussion of mother/son relationships, but what might also be taken into account is ‘the highlighting of spirituality’ attributed to Kate O’Brien’s writings by George O’Brien (2006:447). Recourse to a woman-centred mythology, as recommended by Hirsch (1989:5) for the interpretation of plot, could cast the mother in a different light, and it is possible that the story of Demeter and Persephone more readily illuminates the circumstances of Teresa Mulqueen and her son – a child
touched by death, and living under the reign of death, both physical and spiritual. Although in the final phase of her illness Teresa is refusing the role of passive patient, amenable to male medical diagnoses; she is insisting on a further operation that will prolong her suffering. She is not resigned, as a good Catholic mother might be, to her imminent death: in her prayers, she is pleading and negotiating with God to extend her time, to grant ‘a miracle’, to let her know where or to whom, Reggie might turn after her death. Her pleas are made

so that he would do no harm in his weakness, and yet might be a little happy, a little less than desolate … God must hear and answer (O’Brien 1988:17).

In terms of Catholic belief, Reggie is at risk of eternal damnation unless a morally safe environment is organized on his behalf. Like Demeter petitioning Zeus on behalf of her daughter, Reggie’s mother storms the gates of Heaven and pleads with God to release her son from the chains of death, to provide a protector for him who will keep him from mortal sin. There is a distinct lack of narcissism or sentimentality in this version of maternal love; it is a practical commitment, lived out, as the mother is aware, at cost to herself and to others whom she also loves. The answer to Teresa’s prayer comes in the form of Nurse Cunningham’s calculated, pragmatic decision to marry Reggie, a decision despised by Agnes, but understood by the local doctor, Dr. Curran, as a hard choice capable of consideration only because of the restricted opportunities open to young women without connections or resources in Irish society of the times.

As in many of O’Brien’s novels, romantic, heterosexual love does not thrive in the course of *The Ante-Room*: the novel sets value on dedication and commitment in
human relationships rather than on romance or sexual passion. Agnes, passionately in love with the wrong man, is advised by the priest in confession that it is the fate of earthly love to die, whereas ‘in the idea of God, there is matter for eternity’ (O’Brien 1988:89). The ‘idea of God’ shines through Teresa Mulqueen’s maternal love for the ‘prodigal son’ of her family as she faces into eternity. Even allowing for maternal overinvestment on the part of Teresa Mulqueen, Kate O’Brien provides in *The Ante-Room* a representation of a strong mother character and a version of love to be admired. Unfortunately, this is yet another novel to feature a dying mother.

Mary Lavin, who is celebrated for her short stories rather than her novels, published *Mary O’Grady*, her second novel, in 1950 when she was thirty-eight. Lavin, according to Fogarty, ‘has written consistently about the theme of motherhood’, and ‘invariably privileges the viewpoint of the mother’ (Fogarty 2002:89). Novels that cast the mother as protagonist are rare, and while the novel as a whole has been held to be flawed by Lavin herself (in Koenig 1979:244), and by Bowen 1975; Koenig 1979, Peterson 1988), as a mother, Lavin was in a position to write out of maternal consciousness. It is, of course, necessary to bear in mind Augustine Martin’s comment that for the portrayal of *Mary O’Grady*, it was necessary for the author to be ‘consistently in the heroine’s mind and sensibility, but not of it’ (Martin 1986:384). Like Kate O’Brien, Mary Lavin wrote out of a consciousness informed by a convent school education.

An identifiable problem concerning *Mary O’Grady* relates to genre. The novel is ostensibly in the realist tradition and, as has been pointed out by Peterson, (1988) the action takes place in Dublin over the course of the most turbulent years in Irish
history, not least of which would have been the 1913 Lock-Out which kept the Dublin tram workers (of whom Mary’s husband was one) out of work for many months. Lavin’s heroine is never grounded in the life set out for her, that is, working class life in a capital city at a time of extraordinary social change. A further anomaly lies in the material circumstances of the family – Mary, and her family, are accorded standards of living and education well beyond those of the working poor. Fogarty finds that although Lavin’s approach succeeds in giving prominence to the stories of women in times of turmoil usually omitted from the grand narratives, the ahistorical approach holds dangers of fixing women’s narratives solely in the realms of private reflection. (Fogarty 2002:93).

Fogarty’s (2002) discussion draws out the conflicted aspects of Lavin’s heroine: initially she sees Mary as portrayed in terms of Catholic ideology:

as embodying opposing facets of the Virgin Mary, in her aspect as sublime divinity on the one hand and in her persona as sorrowing mother on the other (Fogarty 2002:90).

Referencing Kristeva’s ‘Stabat Mater’ (1987) and Warner’s Alone of All Her Sex (1976), Fogarty traces the contradictory aspects of Mary’s life to the impossibility of living in conformity with the idealized aspects of maternal spirituality and suffering by which she is dominated. As the novel shows, it is unachievable for her to transcend the inordinate amount of suffering visited upon her in order to transmute it into a narrative of Marian maternal self-sacrifice: The heroine’s failure to reconcile herself to urban life may be seen as conveying the impossibility of living up to Irish society’s models of traditional motherhood, models such as the ever-nurturing and protecting
mother that Mary believes she, herself, enjoyed in her home in rural Ireland, but that cannot be reproduced in an urban modernizing environment.

On the other hand, Lavin’s heroine connects to an undertow that may associate her with the ‘loving and terrible mother archetype’ of Carl Jung (Fogarty 2002:91); such a connection in the novel ‘underlines the futility of a belief in the salvationary force of maternal love’ (Fogarty 2002:91). This view achieves force when it is considered that Mary O’Grady is directly implicated in all of the tragedies afflicting the various members of the family whom she loves, and for whose safety she harbours morbid fears: she fails to call a doctor when her beloved husband is dying, and in spite of her fears for their safety, she encourages the excursion by her daughters to an Air Show, where they meet their deaths. Fears of social stigma permit her to leave her son Patrick in a mental asylum, even after his recovery of mental health, and to see another son, Larry, reluctantly enter a missionary order and go to Africa so that she will not suffer the reproach of having a ‘spoiled priest’ in the family following his rejection at a diocesan seminary. Her intervention in Rosie’s affair with Frank Esmay precipitates the couple into their unhappy marriage.

Harmon identifies self-deception as ‘a persistent theme in Lavin’s fiction’ (Harmon 2006:74), and this provides a useful way of reading the novel. In every aspects of her life, Mary O’Grady’s actions are shown to be at variance with her declared beliefs, whether in matters of religion, of love for her parents, devotion to her own husband and family, or in relation to the outside world. Despite the egregious hardships of her life, and her failures in coping with them, just before her death, she rejects Rosie’s charges about the unhappiness of her life with the outcry –
Didn’t I have all you children? Didn’t I have your father? And didn’t we all have our love and affection for each other? What more could we have had than that? (Lavin 1986:380).

Kiberd claims that Mary Lavin was not concerned with challenging the mores of Irish society, stating ‘She had no desire to dig society up by its roots’ (Kiberd 1996:409). Lavin had no need to excavate: in Mary O’Grady, her eponymous heroine, she exposes the roots of a society where the models of idealized motherhood put before women were so far removed from their realities, and so impossible of emulation, that pretence and self-deception such as the heroine displays became the only viable responses. In Mary O’Grady, Lavin provides a representation of a conflicted and immature mother constantly at odds with the demands life makes on her, but unwilling to face the truths of her life to the very end.

Jennifer Johnston published her first novel, The Captains and the Kings, (1972) to major acclaim at the age of forty-two. Since then she has been one of Ireland’s most prolific novelists, and has won several prizes for her work. Although not of that class herself, Johnston’s early works were ‘Irish Big House’ novels concerned with the declining Protestant Ascendancy or Anglo-Irish class; close similarities between her characters and those in the novels of Elizabeth Bowen have been identified by (Hunt Mahony 1998:220) and Ingman (2004:38) In her later novels, families are moved down the social scale, but are still shown to enjoy lives of relative privilege, and to maintain educational or military connections with a British past that set them at a tangent with the Irish nationalism of the recently independent state – of the class referred to pejoratively as ‘West Britons’ (Bowen 1983:175). While Johnston rarely directs overt criticism at church or state constraints, nuanced
phrases and situations that register religious and cultural differences between the majority and minority communities in Ireland emerge in her texts. She was brought up within the Church of Ireland, but ceased to profess religious beliefs in adulthood. Her mother, Shelah Richards was an actress and theatre director; her father, Denis Johnston was a dramatist and journalist; they divorced when she was a young child.

A notable feature of Johnston’s novels has been the frequency with which they have figured the cold, emotionally disabling type of mother who clings to class convention in a loveless marriage. In The Christmas Tree, this type of mother is again figured, here mediated through the hallucinations, and memories of the narrating heroine, Constance Keating. At the time of the novel, Constance is dying of leukemia, and her mother has been dead for some years; Constance has refused medical treatment and is relying on pills and whiskey to see her out. Mrs. Keating (she is never given a first name) figures only negatively in her daughter’s recollections: Constance remembers being continually disparaged in comparison to her older sister; she recalls exasperated dismissals when, due to shyness, she failed to ‘perform’ socially as a little girl, and later when she resisted the social round of parties in preparation for the right kind of marriage. Above all, she remembers being laughed at when she announced she wanted to go to London to try her hand at becoming a writer. A possible reason for her mother’s antipathy towards her emerges during one of the hallucinatory exchanges between them in the final days of Constance’s illness: she was not the son both parents had wanted. Mr. Keating is also a cold, remote, totally self-absorbed figure. When Constance questions her mother about the distant relationships between her parents, Mrs. Keating replies
“He gave me everything I wanted and left me alone. I would have thought it was a very good arrangement. He would have liked a son. We would both have … If only … It was as good a marriage as most, I would imagine.” (Johnston 1982:65).

She refuses to contemplate the possibility that her husband’s withdrawal and neglect had roots in other sexual liaisons or orientation, declaring it to be a ‘silly question’ (Johnston 1982:66) such as her older sister would never have asked.

Weekes refers to Mrs. Keating firstly as ‘another oppressed mother figure’ (Weekes 2000:110), and later as a ‘colluding’ mother – a seemingly more apt phrase in that Mrs. Keating benefits from, and willingly participates in the role prescribed for her in patriarchal society. The only values she tries to pass on to her daughters are those of her own class: the only destiny she is prepared to foresee for them is a repetition of her own experiences, despite the empty nature of her marriage. The older daughter’s choices to marry a Catholic and to take on his religion, (one of the Protestant fears identified by Bowen (1983:168) are countenanced because her future husband is of equivalent social standing. In the course of another hallucinatory visitation from Mrs. Keating, Constance imagines herself being rebuked for her failure to achieve in life, while being compared to her sister, Bibi –“‘She has four lovely children. She has a place’.” (Johnston 1982:65). Mrs. Keating stands indicted for her narrowness of vision and for the cruelties she inflicts on her younger daughter, but she may be seen as typical of her times and class that gave ‘a place’ only to those women who ‘fitted in’ and were prepared to reproduce themselves in the interests of their caste.
Fogarty has identified in Irish women’s fiction the use of the mother’s death scene as a narrative marker in order to give shape or definition to the daughter’s story (Fogarty 2002:89). In *The Christmas Tree*, Constance, narrates that she had always felt she would find ‘some kind of release, an awareness for the first time of an identity’ (Johnston 1982:105) after her mother’s death. However, it is recorded that at her mother’s graveside, she was angry to find within herself the same confusion she had always felt, a state she traces to the sense of irritation and disappointment habitually conveyed towards her by her mother. It is in the graveyard that the first thought of having a child stirs in her consciousness – a surprising notion for a mid-forties virgin who has spent her life avoiding social entanglements of any sort. Later, at the very time she is trying to put the possibilities of pregnancy in train with a total stranger in Italy, she recognizes that her efforts to be a writer may have been aimed at establishing some sort of immortality for herself, and that the desire to have a child has arisen because she made no progress as a writer; she recognizes also how her chosen route to pregnancy would have angered her mother. What she is not shown to recognize is how completely she has allowed the imprint of her mother to negatively define her identity and her life choices despite her years away from home. Although she has repudiated her mother’s way of being in the world, she has never opened up positively to another way for herself.

Under the title ‘Reaching out to the Other’, (Ingman 2004:29-47), and referencing Kristeva (1993; 1991; 1974), Ingman discusses Constance’s ability to ‘reach out to the other’; she finds that this ability is enhanced because Constance is a mature woman who has ‘chosen a marginalized position as a way of critiquing her society’ (Ingman 2004:45), and has developed her own set of values and her own way
of living. It is also possible to see this ability as enhanced by Constance’s desire for anonymity: in going to Italy, she was on a personal quest, and had no intention of sharing a child if one should result from any sexual encounter. However, in reaching out to Jacob – a British, Polish Jew, a foreigner like herself, she meets a Holocaust survivor who has suffered unspeakable horrors as a child, but has not allowed them to totally define him: Jacob is shown to reject militant Israeli nationalism when he might have been justified in adopting it. Here Johnston makes a point that could hold parallels for people supporting violent action in Ireland: the point is also made through Constance that the legitimate grievances of earlier days should not be allowed to dictate the course of one’s whole life.

Constance is never figured in maternal terms and does not get enough time to help the daughter she bears to create an identity, but her gesture of handing the child over to Jacob to rear may be seen as her final repudiation of her own people and upbringing, and a ‘reaching out’ on behalf of her child to wider landscapes of ‘otherness’ than she had ever herself felt able to embrace. Her embrace of ‘otherness’ leads also to her success in completing her book – fulfilling Kristeva’s view that exile, either physical or mental, is essential to writing and creativity as ‘it provides the necessary distance from the values of the culture in which one lives’ (c. Ingman 2004:38). Unfortunately for Constance, although she had gone into physical exile, emotionally she had taken her disabling mother with her, and allowed her to stunt her life in many ways. Ingman identifies the mother in a hallucinatory episode towards the end of The Christmas Tree as a representation of ‘the call of the mother’ from ‘beyond time or the socio-political battle’ (Ingman 2004:47). But is only in hallucination that Constance may be drawn to the realm of the semiotic: when she
awakens she says, ‘I called for my mother’ … ‘it’s a funny thing.’ … I never called for my mother when she was alive’ (Johnston: 1992:157), a remark that sums up the tragedies of both their lives. Johnston’s representation of motherhood in The Christmas Tree seems stereotypical of her earlier mother characters, and accommodates notions of deserved matrophobia and ‘mother-blame’. Yet such notions are undermined in the construction of Jacob, the holocaust survivor, and of Bridie the foundling girl from the orphanage, both of whom have suffered much more adverse life situations than either Constance or her mother. Regrettably, in a novel figuring a dead and a dying mother, no positive representation of motherhood emerges.

Julia O’Faolain was born in London of Irish parents in 1932: her father was the internationally-known writer, Sean O’Faolain, and her mother, Eileen Gould, wrote stories for children; both were militant activists on the Republican side in the early days of the Irish state, but became disillusioned with the Free State as it evolved. Educated in England and Ireland, and at universities in Dublin and Rome, O’Faolain is said to have developed a questioning attitude towards religion at an early age. She has published four short story collections and seven novels; The Irish Signorina, her fifth novel, was published in 1984.

Again, The Irish Signorina is a novel where the mother of the protagonist has died, and where her story is mediated through other people’s memories, and by the effects she is shown to have had on the lives of others. Two further mothers (both Italian), feature in the novel, one a slightly drawn figure whose involvement advances the plot, and the other, the dying Marchesa Niccolosa Cavalcanti, whose influence is
to be seen in the past, present and future of every other character in the novel. Again, as noted by Fogarty (2002) it is maternal death that facilitates the heroine’s abilities to reach life-changing decisions. Matrophobia and erasure of the mother’s point of view feature strongly in this novel, where the struggle for the heroine, Anne Ryan, becomes whether to base her life choices on the principles of passion and romanticism which her late mother has claimed to profess, or on the principles of empowered rationality such as the Marchesa sets out before her. In the process she must revise her judgements on her mother’s life, and negotiate her way through the plans the Marchesa plots for her, and realign them to her own inclinations rather than following the designs of the dying woman. Fogarty (2002:94) writes that O’Faolain’s plot allows for two aspects of the ‘Family Romance’ to come into play: Freud’s (1909) ‘Family Romance’ model, which is male-oriented, and the feminocentric model identified by Hirsch (1989) where the fluid connections between women control events. O’Faolain’s novel organises plot variations and manipulations of both models; Freud’s notion of ‘The Uncanny’ may be seen to operate within the story also.

Matrophobia is a dominant theme at the opening of the novel: Eithne, (she is rarely named in the work) deceased mother of the heroine, Anne, is the object both of her daughter’s mourning, and of her matrophobic feelings towards her. Anne is visiting Tuscany at the invitation of the Marchesa, in whose household her mother had, years earlier, spent some time as a companion to Flavia, the reputedly flighty daughter of the house. Anne is trying to come to terms both with her mother’s death, and with the belief that ‘Knowingly or not’, her mother had ‘put the dead hand of her past on Anne’s present and spoiled it’ (O’Faolain 1985:17). Eithne’s endlessly-rehearsed and romanticised reminiscences of her stay in Tuscany continue to occupy
her daughter’s consciousness; these are stories that had seemed delightful in childhood, but came to seem pointless and without consequence as she grew into womanhood. Her mother’s stories had always centred on how innocent and carefree had been the time spent in Italy: beautiful clothes, dancing, and glamorous parties, but no flirting, or love affairs; “That was part of the agreement.” (O’Faolain 1985:16).

The dead mother is characterized totally by the deep resentment embedded in the heroine’s recollections of her: she blames her for the stifling relationship established between them following her father’s tragic death when she was fifteen, and for the bond that became ‘a cocoon of nervy intimacy’ (O’Faolain 1985: 14) during the latter months of her mother’s illness. The closeness instigated by her mother had permitted her to confide details of an adulterous affair she had had with ‘Cosimo’, an Italian rider at the Dublin Horse Show before Anne had been born. Anne’s feelings comprise the two aspects of matrophobia outlined by Rich (1995: 235-6): she desires to become purged of her mother’s bondage, to become individual and free; and she harbours fears of becoming her mother. She finds herself continuously questioning the close identification by which her mother is always the measure of her actions, ‘Would I have behaved differently? Am I like her?’; and by which she is filled with ‘the impulse to identify or reject’ (O’Faolain 1985:17). Believing that her mother’s life was blighted by her lack of courage in the wake of her passionate affair with ‘Cosimo’, who had wanted her to leave her humdrum marriage and go back to Italy with him, Anne has ‘absorbed a horror of the unlived life’ (O’Faolain 1985:16) such as she believes turned her mother into the ‘sour nag’ (O’Faolain 1985:74) or the ‘dispirited slattern’ (O’Faolain 1985:107) of her
memories. The perceived failure of her mother to follow her heart has convinced Anne of the rightness of pursuing one’s passions.

An alternative history of her mother confronts Anne on her arrival at the villa of the Marchesa Cavalcanti: the local Monsignor remembers ‘a fine girl – woman. … Full of spirit’ (O’Faolain 1985:35). Mother had not been the innocent girl of her stories, but had been sent home for fear of a liaison with Guido, the son of the family. Bit by bit it emerges that she had not returned to Ireland but had organised ‘a love nest’ in Florence where Guido used to visit but, calculatingly, never totally consummated their love because, since Eithne was a virgin, he would have been compelled to marry her. Eithne had not gone home, but had gone to London, hoping Guido would follow: a letter from her to Guido is produced from which it becomes clear that she had rejected the unlived life of ‘a mistress’ in Florence that Guido was prepared to offer. Information that ‘Cosimo’ was, in fact, Guido, comes via Guido, when he begins to pursue Anne. He explains that he was the lover her mother had declined to return with to Italy two years into her marriage, by which time, in consequence of the Marchesa’s pressure, he was married to his first cousin. Initial pity for her mother quickly turns to rage against her when Anne considers how her father and herself had suffered the consequences of her failed affair; how they, ‘like contiguous ninepins, had staggered beneath the blow which had felled her’ (O’Faolain 1985:74).

The inability to forgive her mother makes it easier for Anne to succumb to the ‘Family Romance’, to the blandishments of the Marchesa – a grander and more expansive mother-figure; and to succumb to the attractions of Guido, her mother’s
former lover, by means of which she is enabled either to displace her mother or, on the other hand, to complete for her, the life unlived by her. Anne’s turn to Guido means complete erasure of her mother: they agree between them that their affair will not be a reprise of Guido’s affair with Eithne; their love affair is to be ‘A new thing’ (O’Faolain 1985:111). While this may seem like a submission to patriarchy on Anne’s part, further turns in the plot send her in an alternative direction: neither is aware of the uncanny secret known only to the dying Marchesa and her confessor, the Monsignor, who is bound by the seal of confession.

A more attractive and influential mother character is provided in Niccolosan, the Marchesa Cavalcanti, who is in her mid-seventies, but again, death hovers as she is in the last weeks of her life, and it is only through her death that the heroine is enabled to take charge of the course of her life. The Marchesa’s interventionist style of mothering when her children were young has not produced the results she wanted: she admits this to herself with regret, but she is still intriguing and attempting to control the lives of her family, and perhaps also trying to make amends for past actions. Her son and grandson are interested only in politics, and her daughter is dead. Niccolosan finds herself facing uncanny and shocking situations such as Freud’s concept describes, with things ‘that ought to have remained secret and hidden’ (Freud trans. Strachey 1985:335) coming to light. This is signalled by the recovery, after several years, of Flavia’s remains which, having lain at the bottom of an alpine crevasse were exposed by the shifting of the snows. In a further uncanny turn, Niccolosan has received a letter from Anne’s mother, written just prior to her death, stating that Anne is Guido’s daughter, a situation of which Anne herself is unaware. The arrival of Anne reminds everyone of her mother years before, and brings to mind
the old problem: the scandal involving Guido. From the time of their first meeting, Niccolosa is alive to the danger of Guido and Anne falling in love, and presses Anne to be the sensible one in the matter; she enlists Maria Cristina, Guido’s estranged wife, to warn Anne of his constant philandering: Maria Cristina says of Niccolosa:

“She is a spider you know. Not perhaps a bad spider. Perhaps even a kindly one. But she does like to be in control.” (O’Faolain 1985:119).

Yet another touch of the uncanny surfaces as, at that same meeting, Maria Cristina gives Anne an old letter from Eithne to Guido rejecting the ‘unlived life’ of a mistress, which is what he was offering to her.

The Marchesa’s deliberate strategy of inducting Anne into her domain becomes obvious to the heroine from the earliest days of her visit, but her reasons remain unclear. Niccolosa is arranging for her to be shown around the farm, is pressing upon her the long history and ways of the Cavalcanti family, especially the role of the women who have always kept their hands on the reins when the men went to war. On her deathbed, the Marchesa reveals to Anne that she is Guido’s daughter, and asks her to promise to tell Guido. She is leaving the Villa to her, and wants her to live on it and farm it, and not to divide it. Niccolosa has earlier registered her fear of ‘not counting at all? Being cut off? Forgotten?’ (O’Faolain 1985:50); she has recognized Anne as ‘a throw-back’ to herself (O’Faolain 1985:181), who will keep up the traditions of the Cavalcanti family and safeguard the patrimony.

However, the desires and plans of this mother are also consigned to the silence of the grave: an empowered Anne recognizes herself as a Cavalcanti, as a member of
a family whose two vital rules seem to be ‘to keep patrimonies intact and preserve appearances’ (O’Faolain 1985:184). She proposes to do both by marrying Guido, her father, and by keeping the truth of their relationship from him. Anne’s decision both rebuts and reflects differing aspects of maternal inheritances: in marrying Guido, she will be following her heart, something her mother had advocated but never followed; in keeping the secret of their relationship from him, she will be able to keep the Villa intact in the family, but through means totally at odds with the wishes of the Marchesa; she will also be the holder of proofs of the uncanny family secret. Anne is also about to break the primal taboo on which the law of the father is built, dismissing it as ‘a word. A mirage. “Incest”’ (O’Faolain 1985:185); as something people are afraid to articulate. Yet again, the daughter’s empowerment succeeds through negation of the mothers. O’Faolain’s novel provides two diverse mother characters who exercise agency and power but they are ultimately defeated by death, and their wishes are spurned by a daughter who concludes that ‘decision rests with the living’ (O’Faolain 1985:185).

A summing up of the four novels gives a total of one mother on the brink of death, two who are already dead and must be banished from the heroine’s consciousness, and three who die at the close of the novel. One might ask, why this massacre of mothers? Not all representations are matrophobic: both Kate O’Brien’s and Mary Lavin’s ‘mothers’ are featured as heading for their just reward in heaven. However, both Johnston’s and O’Faolain’s heroines are represented as truly hostile towards their mothers, and no reconciliation between them is ever staged; in The Irish Signorina, even the influence of the rich and powerful Marchesa Cavalcanti is set at nought. Biographical details of the four writers reveal that O’Brien’s mother died
when she was five, and that the three other writers were products of ‘difficult’ or ‘broken’ marriages, so perhaps the concept of ‘mother blame’ and Winnicott’s notion of killing the fantasy mother while preserving the real one, or the memory of her, might help in interpreting the demise of so many fictional mothers. In addition, as shown in the earlier section, for women growing to maturity in Ireland in twentieth-century Ireland, ‘Mother Ireland’ had not really kept faith with her promises: killing off the fantasy mother could be interpreted as a political act.

**Section Three:**

**Maternal Subjectivity**

An early intervention on the topic of maternal subjectivity was made by Jane Lazarre in *The Mother Knot* (1976). In this frank and heartfelt memoir of Lazarre’s early years of motherhood she confesses to the ambivalence of her feelings about being a mother while trying to devote time to develop her literary creativity; she writes of her difficulties with the unsparing routine of constantly caring for her children, of writing while her child looked at TV or when he was sleeping. She sets out the conflicts and compromises of combining a life of literary creativity with life as a mother, and the perils of admitting to desires for a ‘larger life’ than that available to the full-time mother.

In the same year, Adrienne Rich set maternal subjectivity into the central feminist arena with her book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976/1986). Basing her methodology on ‘personal testimony mingled with research and theory which derived from both’ (Rich 1986:ii), Rich calls upon an expansive range of disciplines covering sociology, anthropology, psychology, history,
religious studies, memoir, autobiography, philosophy and literary criticism in her wide-ranging study. An important contribution lies in her distinction between motherhood as women experience it, and as male-dominated society works to control it.

*The potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction, and *the institution* which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control (Rich 1995:13).

Rich points up centuries-long traditions of patriarchal representation that symbolized, idealised or demonised the mother, and concludes that the bases of ‘institutional motherhood’ lie in ‘the unexplored depths of men’s fears’ (Rich 1995:191).

Testifying to her personal initial shock at the overwhelming experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, and at the changes in subjectivity brought about through such processes, she recalls the experiences of contesting emotions; of maternal ambivalence and guilt attaching to motherhood in a patriarchal world. She points to the necessity for mothers to balance the (often internalised) expectations of ‘the institution’ against their own beliefs and the claims of patriarchal, militarised society; and to the inevitable tensions that arise between the needs and claims of children and a personal impulse to creativity; she adverts to the fact that in society at large, and also in the family, blame falls first on the mother ‘if theory proves unworkable in practice, or if anything whatsoever goes wrong’ (Rich 1995:222).

A positive legacy of *Of Woman Born* has been the increase in feminist attention to the mother/daughter bond and to aspects of ‘mother blame’ and ‘matrophobia’ that second-wave feminists (herself included) were to the fore in
expressing while attempting to subvert the roles traditional society set out for women. Rich acknowledges that feminists had failed to allow for the anger of mothers, and had obscured daughterly needs for connection to maternal love and approval. This is a need, she suggests, that should be regarded as ‘the germ of our desire to create a world in which strong mothers and strong daughters will be a matter of course’ (Rich 1995:225). ‘The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy’ (Rich 1995:237) is one of Rich’s most famous claims, and one that she amends as to its universality in the 1986 edition (Rich 1995:xxv). However, her earlier contention that modern culture fails to provide any ‘enduring recognition of mother/daughter passion and rapture’ (Rich 1995:237) stands, as does the turn to Greek mythology and the stories of Demeter and Persephone for an overarching, powerful representation of the mother/daughter bond.

Towards the end of her book, Rich urges women to begin ‘to think through the body,’ ‘to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body’ (Rich 1995:285); to connect with the disparate aspects of our being – biological, intellectual, spiritual, political, not just in order to effect social change, but to bring about the ‘visions and thinking’ required to develop ‘a new relationship to the universe’ (Rich 1995:285-6).

Such a connection was something both promoted and undertaken by French literary theorist, Helene Cixous in the light of psychoanalysis and through the medium of *ecriture feminine*. Cixous’ critique of the oppositions and exclusions she believes drive the symbolic economy led her to coin this term to describe that which has been erased through the privileging of the (masculine/speech) ‘one’ over the
In ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1975) Cixous writes ‘Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time’; and also, ‘Write your self. Your body must be heard’ (Cixous 2000:255).

Luce Irigaray’s poem ‘And One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other’ (1979) stages a negative relationship between mother and daughter. The daughter feels her mother is over-invested in her, is filled up with her. Mother takes care of her, watches her, fears for her, so what could be worse for her than lying supine, already half-grown but treated like a child in the cradle. The daughter feels immobilised, and turns to the father, but all he has to offer is to turn her into a ‘perfect little girl’ waiting for some man to come along. Deprived of her daughter’s presence, the mother who has invested her entire identity in mothering finds she now has no identity. ‘You look at yourself in the mirror and already see your mother there. And soon your daughter, a mother. Between the two, what are you? What space is yours alone? In this poem the mother/daughter relationship remains locked in negativity. The daughter will repeat the mother’s fate: I too a captive when a man holds me in his gaze. Abducted from myself. Frozen in his reflection. Reduced to the face he fashions for me and trapped in the single function of mothering. There is a reversal on the part of the daughter at the end when she implores her mother not to sink into the maternal function: what I wanted from you, Mother, was that in giving me life, you still remain alive. The implication is that mother is the only one who can liberate the daughter, but she needs to hold on to an identity in order to do this. And if she is without identity, with whom can the daughter relate? (Irigaray: 1979)
‘Stabat Mater’, (1977/1986) Kristeva’s study of the Virgin Mother coincides with her own experience of maternity, recorded and reflected in the personal observations which break up the main body of the text. The first part of her essay summarises the historical development of the cult of the Virgin, drawing on Marina Warner’s Alone of All Her Sex: the myth and the cult of the Virgin Mary’. Her main concern is to point out that due to the demise of the cult of the Virgin, and of religion in general, we are left without a satisfactory discourse on motherhood. Where the cult of the Virgin traditionally offered a solution to what Kristeva calls the problem of feminine paranoia, the decline of religion has left women with nothing to put in its place. Freud’s contribution to this particular problem has been more or less nil, she argues, and the feminist critique of the traditional representation of motherhood has still not produced a new understanding of women’s continued desire to have children.

Listing the various psycho-social functions of the cult of the Virgin, Kristeva asks what it is that that subtle, but now necessarily crumbling edifice ignores or represses in modern women’s experience of motherhood. Replying to her own question, she points to the need for a new understanding of the mother’s body; the physical and psychological suffering of childbirth and of the need to raise the child in accordance with the Law; the mother-daughter relationship; and finally, the female foreclosure of masculinity. There is, then, an urgent need for a ‘post-virginal’ discourse on maternity, one which ultimately would provide both women and men with a new ethics: a ‘herethics’ encompassing both reproduction and death.’ (Kristeva 1986:160-1).
Kristeva argues that it should be possible to define ‘the mother’, since maternity, the act of giving birth, is the only function of the woman which establishes definable, different and positive existence for her. Yet, she declares, there is a paradox concerning the representation of the mother. In the circumstances of western society, where the sacral representation of femininity seems to be absorbed by motherhood, closer scrutiny reveals that it is not a mother, nor the state of motherhood that is held sacred, or that is idealized, but ‘the fantasy’ of a lost, idealized relationship – a fantasy of pre-oedipal, primary narcissism. What is venerated and idealised by both adult men and women is a lost state of plenitude, the sense of being one with the mother. A better way to explore maternal experience would be to listen to what mothers have to say; to look at the economic circumstances of women who mother; to look past the guilt that earlier, perhaps over existentialist feminists handed down, and to pay attention to the real experience.

In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, (1978) gender theorist, Nancy Chodorow stresses both the importance of the earliest days of the mother/child relationship and the social context in which children are raised. Her theoretical approaches are based on a combination of object relations practitioners such (Klein); (Fairbairn); (Winnicott); and the separation/individuation theory (Mahler). In Chodorow’s account of the earliest days of infancy, there is no difference between male and female infants: both experience blissful mother/child unity. The presumption is of a good, competent mother and of a child who expects to be loved without giving anything in return. In contrast to some object/relations theories, in her scenario, there is no need for the child to construct an alternate maternal object. The ongoing goal of adult life is to reactivate the supremely positive unified experience of infancy.
In the case of girls, since they are mothered by a person of their own sex, they form a continuous identification with her and ‘experience themselves as continuous with others’ (Chodorow 1978:167). The mother participates in this by treating the girl as an extension of herself, and has difficulty in distinguishing between her own needs and those of her child. As the girl develops, she will struggle to differentiate herself from her mother, and will turn to her father who symbolises independence and freedom. However, because he has been outside the girl’s earliest dyadic experience, he is not an object with sufficient power to break the deeper, primary, maternal bond. The girl does not turn away from him, but adds him to her previously dyadic world and defines herself in ‘a relational triangle’ (Chodorow 1978:169). It is for this reason that men, in Chodorow’s view, remain secondary, emotionally, even to heterosexual women. While girls may have difficulty with mothers who are overly invested emotionally in them, their hostility is usually limited because the ‘normal’ outcome of the separation ‘entails acceptance of her own femininity and identification with her mother’ (Chodorow 1978:182).

The boy’s experience differs: he has a consistent heterosexual love object, but must separate himself from identification with his mother, and move to identification with a (usually) more remote father. He has to struggle to repress any feminine identification in order to establish a separate sense of masculinity and individualism. In repressing his sense of femininity he may develop a sense of contempt for his mother, and for all women. The impact of the mother in this scenario is that she sees him as ‘a definite other’. In Chodorow’s view ‘The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world; the basic masculine sense of self is separate’ (1978:169). Women come to mothering through identification with their mothers and through the
desire for close relationships that men are not usually able to provide, and this is what perpetuates the reproduction of mothering. Motherhood is of value to a woman because through the relationship with the child she has the opportunity to recreate the early mother-child relationship, and to move to a dual identification with her mother and her child. Chodorow calls for men to become more involved in early child-care in the interests of providing balance in the powerful role of primary caretaker and more flexible attachment objects.

Maternal subjectivity is intrinsic to Sara Ruddick’s study, ‘Maternal Thinking’ (1983), drafts of which she circulated from the late nineteen-seventies, leading her to regard it as ‘a truly collective endeavour’ (Ruddick 2007:109). This paper addresses the intellectual and spiritual aspects of motherhood, and makes a claim for the intellectual capacities a mother brings to the work of raising her children to be regarded as ‘a discipline’. The views of Jurgen Habermas, Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch inform her work.

In Ruddick’s scenario, ‘maternal thinking’ works on concepts such as the preservation of life, the fostering of growth and the training of a child to become an acceptable subject within its community. In rearing a child appreciable to the next generation, the mother may find herself in conflict with the dominant ideologies of her community; but she may also find opportunities to assess and appreciate her own values. Virtues such as ‘humility’, ‘attentive love’ and ‘resilient cheerfulness’ are positive aspects of maternal thinking, while negative aspect lie in ‘denying cheeriness’ and ‘inauthenticity’, and in a type of thinking designated as ‘fantasy’ that
involves over-determining the life of the child to one’s own satisfaction. Although, on
the one hand, Ruddick privileges the role of women in maternal thinking

it is because we are daughters, and trained by women that we early receive
maternal love with special attention to its implications for our bodies, our
passions, and our ambitions (Ruddick 2007:107),

she also writes that not only mothers are maternal thinkers: maternal thinking may be
expressed in various kinds of caring for others, and men may also acquire maternal
thinking. (Ruddick 2007:118). Ruddick states that equal parenting by women and men
would bring about revolutionary and morally profound social reform, and expresses
the hopes that maternal thought should become a feature of the public realm: ‘to make
the preservation and growth of all children a work of public conscience and

African-American commentator, bell hooks criticized feminists in
‘Revolutionary Parenting’ (1984), on grounds of failing to take into account the
diversity of mothering practices and opportunities in groups other than those of the
white, college-educated, heterosexual, middle-classes. The portrayal of motherhood as
an obstacle to women’s liberation and as a trap confining women to the home and to
the dreary routines of house-keeping and childcare did not reflect the common
concerns of Black mothers or their communities; most Black women had long had to
undertake badly-paid work outside the home at a cost to their own maternal work of
home-making and child-raising which they often experienced as a site of
empowerment and resistance, rather than drudgery. White feminists, Ruddick in
particular, are accused also of romanticizing the mother/child relationship; and the
invitation to men to perform ‘maternal’ work is dismissed with the argument that boys
and men will not identify with child-care until the word ‘paternal’ shares the same meaning as ‘maternal’. hooks urges that women and men organize around the issue of affordable, community day-care centres, with men and women equally taking responsibility for childcare and for work inside and outside the home: such a system, she believes, would truly constitute revolutionary parenting.

Marianne Hirsch published *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* in 1989. This major work is about women’s relations and, more especially, about mothers’ relations to male and female plotting in literature; it traces the developments within the conventions of narrative that take the mother from absence and silence to subjectivity and speech. Although ambivalent in relation to psychoanalytic terms and concepts, Hirsch’s choice was to work within these frameworks in order to analyse femininity as culturally constructed and internalised by individual female subjects; some of the frameworks are expanded in order to consider feminist reformulations of Freudian theories provided by Dorothy Dinnerstein and Juliet Mitchell, and by object-relations and gender theorist, Nancy Chodorow. The views of French feminist writers Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, and Julia Kristeva, all of whom engage to some degree with Lacanian thought, are also considered. Hirsch’s methodology allows both psychoanalytic theories and narrative plots to ‘illuminate each other’, without privileging either, in the hope that they might ‘reveal deeper cultural desires in given historical moments’ (Hirsch 1989:11) in the narrative conventions of realism, modernism and post-modernism’ (Hirsch 1989:3).

Feminist revisitings to the male-centred ancient Greek myth of ‘Oedipus’, the story chosen by Freud as paradigmatic of human development in his psychoanalytical
theory, are found to omit or overlook the role of Jocasta, the mother in the narrative; no mode of subjective questioning is allocated to her. Represented through absence and silence in the ancient texts, she is found to be similarly re-presented in more recent modern and feminist approaches. Toni Morrison’s contemporary novel, Beloved (1987) is set out in contrast to the Oedipal myth and its revisitings by feminists, as a story that begins with the mother, that allows her to tell her story, to speak the unspeakable and, eventually, with the help of her lover, Paul D, and her wider community, to access a sense of herself and of self-worth with the exclamation “Me? Me?” (c.Hirsch 1989:8). Hirsch, like Rich, turns to the Demeter/Persephone myth as represented in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, finding in it a myth that foregrounds the perspective of the bereaved mother: ‘the hymn grants legitimacy to the mother’s feelings of bereavement, anger and wild desire, even as it insists on the inevitability of separation’ (Hirsch 1989:5). Because of its woman-centredness, the myth of Demeter/Persephone is seen to present to modern women writers the possibilities of re-writing the story of mother-child relations from the mother’s point of view.

Hirsch looks forward to theoretical models that will combine elements of historical, social and economic thinking with psychoanalytical thinking; to theories that will ‘oppose, as rigorously as possible, mystifications of maternity and femininity’ (Hirsch 1989:199), and that will take into account the practical needs and bodily experiences of adult parents, maternal as well as paternal. There is no claim that the mother’s story is the only female story, or that it offers privileged access into

13 In the version provided by Teresa de Lauretis, the critic’s focus of interest is directed towards the Sphinx; in Muriel Rukeyser’s poem, ‘Myth’, (her second visit to the story), there is again an encounter with the Sphinx, but this entails a move from a maternally-styled to an extra-bodily entity, and maternal silence is maintained; in Helene Cixous’s opera, the doomed couple are cast as tragic lovers, not as son and mother.
female subjectivity, but there is the suggestion that excluding the multiplicities inherent in maternal subjectivity – the stories of mothers who were/are also daughters – leads to ‘particular blindnesses’ (Hirsch 1989:197). Returning to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, where the plot begins with the mother, it is shown that opening up maternal subjectivity in narrative achieves a representation where the mother comes to recognise herself.

In *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood* (1997), Elaine Tuttle Hansen identifies three stages that feminist thinking on the mother and on motherhood has undergone in the last half of the twentieth century: repudiation, recuperation and an ‘emerging critique of recuperation that coexists with efforts to deploy recuperating strategies’ (Tuttle Hansen 1997:5). By way of engaging with the third strategy, Tuttle Hansen sets out to re-think definitions of motherhood and the maternal: her efforts reveal continuing disagreements in both feminist and more general discourses, but that one aspect, the relational aspect of maternity, is taken for granted in all sources.

Tuttle-Hansen sees women’s fiction written since the nineteen-seventies as more rewarding than in terms of broadening the views on alternative forms of mothering than the thinking put forward in feminist critiques. Fiction is seen to fulfill what feminist scholars have been calling for: ‘discussions of the borders of motherhood and women who really live here, neither fully inside nor fully outside some recognisable “family” unit; and often exiles from their children’ (Tuttle Hansen 1997:10). She points out that many novels have at their centre the kind of unconventional, or non-conformist mothers, such as ‘the mother without child’,
‘women who have abortions or who refuse to have children; women whose children are stolen or mothers who are ‘murderers, prisoners, suicides, time travellers, tricksters, or ghosts’ (Tuttle Hansen 1997:10). She further states that to foreground fictional representations of the less than conventional mother is likely to promote in feminist thinking an understanding of motherhood in all its diversities. No single meaning is attached to these stories; they all point to the diversities and complexities of the relational nature of motherhood.

Tuttle Hansen’s consideration of Susan Rubin Suleiman’s views on the importance of the play space, (a term imported from object relations theories in psychoanalysis), and her thinking on the absence of figures of the playing or laughing mother in contemporary women’s experimental writing leads to the figure of the ‘Mock Mother’, as identified by Magdalene Redekop. The ‘Mock Mother’ as viewed by Redekop, is a type that represents just about anyone behaving lovingly towards another in ways that might be considered maternal, in the traditional senses of the word; that is, as tending or caring, or putting the interests of the other to the fore:

stepmothers, foster mothers, adoptive mothers, child mothers, nurses, old maids mothering their parents, lovers mothering each other, husbands mothering wives, wives mothering husbands, sisters mothering each other, and numerous women and men behaving in ways that could be described as maternal (c Tuttle Hansen 1997:14)

Considered by Redekop as a female version of Freud’s ‘fort-da’ game with the mother in masquerade performing the role of the toy, (now here/now not; now mother/now not), and the intent of the game to subvert traditional definitions of motherhood, the literary presence and activities of the ‘Mock Mother’ are claimed to ‘enable us to walk “disrespectfully” around our idealised images of maternity’
It is argued that the ‘mock mother’ fulfils the function of the ‘mother without child’ both in Alice Munro’s stories and in the novels that inform Tuttle-Hansen’s own study. However, as she notes, the ‘laughing’ or ‘comic’ mother figures infrequently in women’s fiction: in stories that figure the humorous mother, the comedy or comic situation is rarely shown to be in the control of the mother. Possible reasons for this put forward are that the child-centred approaches of psychoanalytical discourses deemed to inform much of women’s writing denies to the mother the type of freedom or subjective autonomy associated with instigating ‘play’; or that stories of the ‘mother without child’ are often tragic, and work towards destabilising any notions that maternal subjectivity can be equated with total personal autonomy or freedom, given the relational implications of maternity. Setting in juxtaposition the ancient story of the Judgement of Solomon against some stories of parental rights decisions in U.S. courts, Tuttle Hansen claims that in contemporary society, the ‘good’ woman and mother, as in the Biblical story, can speak only to erase her authority, not to claim her child.

Maternal Subjectivity in the Irish Context

Maternal subjectivity in an Irish context was opened up by poet Eavan Boland in the nineteen-eighties. Boland was born in Dublin in 1944, one of a family of five children. Her mother was a painter and her father a diplomat. The family moved to London when she was five, a move that greatly affected her. She returned to attend secondary school in Ireland and went on to Trinity College, Dublin. Boland is a feminist, but not a feminist poet. She was greatly influence by Adrienne Rich but does not wish to detach herself from the great tradition of western literature – she wishes to write herself into it. In her book Object Lessons (1995) Boland describes how she
tried to locate herself within the Irish poetic tradition – she knew herself to be Irish
and she knew she was a poet. But Irish poetry was predominantly male and she could
find no role model, no account of another woman living out the vocation of a poet.
There were, in fact, women poets, but as Fogarty points out, there were difficulties of
access (Fogarty 1999:258).

As she developed as a poet, Boland realized that poetic images of women were
almost always fused with the image of Ireland as a nation. Women were figured as
Goddess, the *Aisling*, ‘The Poor Old Woman’, Dark Rosaleen or Caitlín Ni Houlihain
– as a woman waiting for the blood sacrifice of her young sons or for the intervention
of a dashing prince from over the water. Women were presented as symbols, as
idealized and romanticized creatures, or as inspirational muse. They were written into
poetry as passive silent creatures, as mythical motifs or ornaments of poetry: ‘they
became elements of style rather than aspects of truth’ (Boland 1995:135)

‘The Journey’, the title poem of a book of the same name (1993) serves to
illuminate Boland’s struggle to find her own voice as woman, as mother and as poet;
it also charts the journey to her mature body of work. The arrival of Sappho in this
poem highlights the poet’s search for a female voice and the absence of a female
mentor in the Irish cannon. In a witty response to the elite modes of Greek epic and
the Irish Aisling poem, ‘The Journey’ supplants the epic hero Aeneas and the Sibyl of
Beautiful Speech with a suburban woman who is a poet, and Sappho, sole female and
maternal survivor of the Greek lyric tradition; instead of ‘Erin’ of the Aisling there
comes ‘the misshapen, musical/Sappho’ who, uniquely from the archaic world,
presents a woman’s and mother’s point of view. Sappho and the speaker in ‘The
Journey’ arrive at the place where they could ‘make out women and children and, in the way they were, the grace of love’.

The first poems in ‘Night Feed’ (1982) open a new door into Boland’s world: this is a world where ‘home is a sleeping child’, where she lives in the ‘sort of light/jugs and kettles/grow important by’. Boland celebrates without sentimentality, the moments of intimacy and joy she found in motherhood. In ‘Night Feed’ (1982:135) the poet is cherishing the dawn moment – ‘the moment daisies open’ for her little daughter. This ‘is the hour/For the early bird and me/When finder is keeper’. The moment is also tinged with melancholy and the realization that the symbiotic moment cannot be prolonged, and the feed ends as mother and daughter ‘begin/the long fall from grace’. A further poem, ‘Partings’ (1982:140) reveals another moment where the mother regrets the loss of the baby from the womb into the world, even the safe suburban world of ‘the nursery light/on the nursery wall/among bears and rag dolls’. In ‘Endings,’ the tone is more mournful than regretful; the mother is conscious that ‘she will never fill a cot again.’ (Boland 1982:144).

It is in the context of Boland’s creative use of myth that the ancient Greek mother/daughter stories of Demeter and Persephone (Kore) assumed importance for my thesis and came to form a useful focus and framework for some of my discussions. The myth of Demeter and Persephone, as found in ‘The Homeric Hymn to Demeter’ dates back to c.650-550 BC (see Appendix I, Helene P. Foley’s translation) and is considered by Foley to represent ‘the earliest extant version of a myth that appears with many variants in later Greek and Roman literature and art’ (Foley 1994:97). The Hymn proved of particular interest to me because, as Foley
comments, it ‘concentrates on the mother’s story rather than the daughter’s’ (Foley 1995:83), and because, as Foley also states, it responds to contemporary mother/daughter concerns:

the representation of the relationship of mother and daughter in this poem – the powerful effects of their separation and reunion and the creative anger of the mother – resonates remarkably with contemporary psychological studies of the dynamics of the mother/daughter bond (Foley 1995:82).

The figure of Demeter and the story of the loss and partial recovery of the daughter, Persephone, assumed increasing significance for my examinations and analyses not just as paradigmatic of the mother in mother/daughter relationships, but also of the mother represented as powerful and as agent in her own cause. D’Arcy Randall credits Adrienne Rich’s turn to Greek myth in Of Woman Born with anticipating ‘an important poetic strategy in contemporary literature and film: recovery, exploration and development of the Demeter/Kore [Persephone] myth’ (Randall 2004:195). Randall points to maternal poets, for whom, she claims, the myth was like ‘a passport freeing them from the stasis of motherhood; they gain access to a dual identity as mother and daughter’ (Randall 2004:203); she cites Boland’s poem, ‘The Pomegranate’ (full version in Appendix II) as an instance where the myth is embraced in contemporary women’s poetry. Boland’s poem grants centrality, subjectivity and power to the mother in her response to the dilemma of mother/daughter separation. The poem opens with the mother – The only legend I have ever loved is/The story of a daughter lost in hell’; Boland registers the dual nature available to women: as mothers and daughters: I can enter it anywhere. And have. The second part of the poem sees the mother looking in on her teenage daughter, ‘beside her teen magazines/her can of Coke, her plate of uncut fruit; and the
If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift’ confers maternal subjectivity, reflectivity and agency. The entire poem portrays the kind of maternal strength and intergenerational mother/daughter gift-giving that might be looked for in a revisioning of the mother in contemporary Irish women’s literary fiction.

Anne Enright’s book, Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood (2004) evoked a personal response. When I started to re-read it for the purposes of my thesis, I found myself nodding in recognition or surprise every so often. I set out my responses and reactions to some of Enright’s observations in parenthetical statements; these observations are randomly selected.

Enright found she was offending people by writing about pregnancy and babies:
(So did Eavan Boland, even though she did not provide the gritty details. The frank detailing of the early days of pregnancy did not offend me: it brought it all back: the exhaustion, coupled with the secret joy that you knew you were pregnant).

She worked away at her typewriter while her baby slept:
(Just like Jane Lazarre and Adrienne Rich).

She sends apologies to her children for plundering their stories, and also to her mother, ‘whose voice comes through my own from time to time’:
(I find this last to be an experience that increases with the years).
Enright discusses anxieties around reproduction and the ‘experiences’ of young women in the U.S. who become pregnant as a result of alien abduction; this leads to condemnation of the ‘regression’ therapists and the pseudo medical exploitation of vulnerable young women. (It’s the wide open spaces of America that allow for aliens: in present-day Ireland, ‘spiked drinks’ lead to pregnancies in young women. Whichever way, it means trouble).

Enright describes going out to tell her mother that she is pregnant; her mother seems to visibly get younger as she digests the news. (I am now the mother – I have just been told that my twin son’s wives are both expecting babies in December next – I haven’t lost five years, but I am deeply, deeply delighted. And I can’t tell anyone else yet!)

Pregnancy is a non-place, a suspension, a holiday from our fallible and compromised selves. (Not on my watch).

‘Is there a pelvis over there on the floor behind you, could you pass it here?’ (How casually and confidently Enright discusses ‘intimate’ body parts. Yet the old fear emerges – how is the baby to get out?).

By her time of delivery Enright knows that her cervix has to do five things, but the sequence escapes her.
(I am thinking of the Dublin women in Kearns’s oral histories who couldn’t even say the word “pregnant”. Surely proof of social change).

What I find most impressive about Enright’s account of pregnancy, birth and early child care, is her ability to measure, to judge, and to be so frank about her feelings. This signals a truly remarkable change in Irish society: it says goodbye to the days when ‘women’s troubles’ were carried on in whispers; when menstrual blood was hidden and shameful, when women were commended for ‘keeping themselves neat’. While the tone of the book is mostly comic, every now and then a comment or a question slips through that raises some really important issue:

Do we need stories in order to produce emotion, or is an emotion already a story? What is the connection, in other words, between narrative and my alveolar cells? (Enright 2004:46/47).

Or

Will we need a new psychology in twenty years for children now grown up, whose fathers were there half the time, who changed the nappies and sang the lullabies, half the time or more? Is it possible that in twenty years time or so we will find it is the caring father, and not the caring mother, who is ultimately to blame? (Enright: 2004:153).

I believe that Enright’s memoir is important in that, coming from such an established and widely praised woman writer it raises the profile of the issues of motherhood and maternal subjectivity, and extends those issues into areas where they have been traditionally ignored. What is striking to compare is the confidence with which she treats her subject with the explanatory tones of Adrienne Rich or Jane
Lazarre in the nineteen-seventies. Enright may pretend, but she makes no apology for her extraordinary exploration of pregnancy, relationships and the first two years of infant life: this can work to the benefit of women and mothers especially, but also of everyone concerned to whatever degree with ‘the making of babies’.

As stated at the outset of my thesis, the mother in Irish literature has been deprived of subjectivity and has been represented through silence and absence, or in symbolic and stereotypical terms: sentimentalized, idealized, demonized, or figured as someone whose life is lived wholly for someone or something outside herself. And as shown in Section One of this chapter, a somewhat similar paradigm was set out for the mother in Irish life. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich points out the universal and age-enduring nature of similar images and attributes to them the patriarchal construct of ‘institutional motherhood’ that aims to silence mothers and keep motherhood under male control. The usefulness to my thesis of the feminist contributions by Jane Lazarre and Adrienne Rich lies in that in writings based in subjective experiences, they contest these universalised images. Both writers testify to the ambivalences and self-questioning brought about by the overwhelming experiences of childbirth and motherhood, and by the myths of serenity and completion attaching to motherhood. And both highlight the conflicts that arise in setting the need for creative expression against the demands entailed in the constant and sole care of children. The force of myth and ambivalences of motherhood feature in *Mother of Pearl*; and the desire for creative expression and a life beyond motherhood, without rejecting it, arises in *Room for a Single Lady*. In *Nothing Simple*, the narrating mother is also conscious of the constraints that confinement solely to the domestic role imposes. On the other hand, in two of the novels examined in separate chapters later on, *Two Moons*, and *The
Memory Stones, the cost to the child of the career-centred mother surfaces, but the issues are not pursued, and remain unresolved.

Both the positive and negative elements of subjective ‘maternal thinking’, as set out by Sara Ruddick, may be seen in operation in One by One in the Darkness and also in Two Moons. ‘Maternal thinking’ and its ‘virtues’ is available in all types of nurturing and caring practices, and in this scenario, male characters in Mother of Pearl and in One by One in the Darkness may be seen to engage. Elaine Tuttle Hansen’s study brings into focus the unconventional or non-conformist mother, in which category she includes the mother without child, and also the ‘Mock Mother’ as understood by Magdalene Redekop; this covers just about anyone who behaves towards others in a nurturing or caring manner as traditionally associated with mothering. Both Mother of Pearl and Room for a Single Lady portray such maternal figures. The absence of the ‘laughing’ or ‘comic’ mother in women’s fiction is attributed to the tragic nature of mother-without child stories, and to child-centred psychoanalytic frameworks that deny the mother sufficient subjectivity or autonomy to be the instigator of ‘play’. While neither of the novels mentioned here provide a subjectively ‘laughing’ mother, they both stage episodes of comedy or ironic humour with the mother as the butt of the joke. Situations where the mother is the cause of the humour, but not the instigator, as identified by Hirsch (1989:26), occur in both The Memory Stones and Nothing Simple. In Two Moons, the elderly mother, Mimi, is shown both to instigate the humour, and sometimes to cause it unintentionally, but would not fit into the category of the ‘laughing’ mother.
Pointing up the like failures of ancient story-tellers and of recent feminist writers to provide subjectivity to Jocasta, the mother of Oedipus in the Greek myth of Oedipus, Hirsch, following Rich, turns to the myth of Demeter and Persephone as a story that foregrounds maternal subjectivity. This turn, along with Eavan Boland’s poem, ‘Persephone’ provided a framework for my discussions of the mother/daughter story and the threatened loss of a child in *The Memory Stones* in particular, and was useful also in *Nothing Simple* and in the mother/son story in *The Ante-Room*. In Stumbling into Motherhood, Anne Enright may be said to embody the ‘laughing mother’ and to create many jokes while providing a detailed, candid and comical account of accommodating two pregnancies, childbirth and the early years of mothering within a writing career.
CHAPTER TWO

Maternal Lies, Secrets and Silences
in Clare Boylan’s Room for a Single
Lady, and Mary Morrissy’s Mother of
Pearl

Introduction

In The Mother/Daughter Plot (1989), Marianne Hirsch suggests that the most promising route towards the story of the mother may be through stories of mothers and daughters, and it was with her comments in mind, and in pursuit of my objective of discovering if the mother is re-visioned in contemporary Irish women’s literary fiction, that I chose to examine two novels, Room for a Single Lady (1997) by Clare Boylan, and Mother of Pearl (1996) by Mary Morrissy. Clare Boylan’s novel tells the story of the Rafferty family of three young girls and their parents in suburban Dublin of the nineteen-fifties, when declining family fortunes enforce the renting out of a room in their house: resulting from this a somewhat carnival parade of tenants passes through their lives as well as their home over the course of several years – people described by the father of the family, Eugene Rafferty, in one of his regular tirades as ‘Lame dogs, degenerates and the deranged’ (Boylan 1997:222), but many of whom come to be valued friends of the mother, Edie Rafferty. Mary Morrissy’s novel is based on an actual case of baby-stealing that occurred in Dublin in the nineteen-fifties, and the subsequent retrieval and return of the child some years later. The novel’s setting is an unspecific, but dystopian city that invites comparison with Belfast. The focus of the novel moves between the biological mother, Rita, the abducting mother, Irene, and the daughter Mary/Pearl, who is moved from one name
to another as she is moved between mothers. I have used the 1998 Abacus paperback edition of Clare Boylan’s novel and the 1997 Vintage publication of Morrissy’s work.

Hirsch acknowledges that mother/daughter narratives most often incline towards a daughterly perspective (Hirsch 1989:14) and, as noted earlier, literary critics Anne Fogarty, Ann Owens Weekes and Heather Ingman have observed the same tendency in Irish novels with Fogarty detecting a move from ‘matrophobic’ and daughterly texts to works ‘that find equal space for stories of filial protest and escape, and the otherness of maternal discourse’ (Fogarty 2002:89). Owens Weekes laments that Boylan, along with other Irish women writers, has ‘given voice to their own, but not their mother’s generation’ (Owens Weekes 2000:121). It cannot be claimed that Boylan’s or Morrissy’s novels have ‘given voice’ to their maternal characters in the novels examined here, in that maternal subjectivity in these works is quite limited, even though Morrissy’s employment of focalisation grants a degree of access to the subjectivity of her maternal characters. (The first person narrative in Part III of the novel relates to a woman who is refusing maternity). It can be claimed, however, that both novels offer a wide diversity of maternal figures for consideration: these are works in which mothers, and mothers’ stories matter.

Both novels provide intergenerational narratives that foreground the stories of mothers and daughters, bringing maternal experience into particular prominence, and both provide what might be called a miscellany of maternal characters, with stories of their own, as well as mother characters that are involved in a wide-ranging assortment of mother/daughter plots. While it is true, as Hirsch intimates, that the mothers’ stories are frequently accessible through those of the daughters, in many cases, the
story of the mother remains shrouded in what Adrienne Rich has termed 'lies, secrets and silences’ (Rich 1979:189). In some cases, physical severances between mothers and daughters at crucial stages obstruct the possibilities of tracing maternal stories through those of the daughters, and in others, the story of the mother is truncated in favour of following the progress of the daughter.

This chapter borrows its title from an essay by Adrienne Rich, ‘Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying’ (1977); at the time of writing, Rich was addressing the ethics of relationships between women, but I found this essay useful for my thesis since, in identifying discrete maternal stories, as well as maternal stories in mother/daughter plots, it became evident that in the context of even close mother/daughter relationships, stories remain hidden or are conveyed in distorted form; a pervasive theme to emerge from the novels was the extent to which the fictional mothers have recourse to lies and deception, and how secrecy and silences shape many relationships. Rich notes that honesty in women has never been valued and that, on the contrary, deception and dissimulation on the part of women has, historically, been rewarded. The writings of Rich, Hirsch and de Beauvoir are called upon in this chapter to illustrate how deception and silences are shown to function not just as temporary stratagems for the mother characters in these works, but as resources essential to their negotiation of their lives, and to the maintenance or the dissolution of relationships. Tuttle Hansen’s discussions on mothers who find themselves marginalised, or who choose to live outside the boundaries set by the mythologies of motherhood have also been useful.
As stated above, both novels are set in family situations in Ireland in the nineteen-fifties (with Morrissy’s narrative continuing into later decades). The nineteen-fifties, like the nineteen-nineties, were years leading up to significant social transition in Ireland and the two narratives offer insights into the ideologies and the social conditions that shaped the life of the mother during those years. Although they share similar-type settings, the novels differ greatly in tone and treatment, and offer very differing perspectives on the representation of the mother and of the experiences of motherhood in mid-twentieth century Ireland. Clare Boylan’s work carries an air of comic irony and optimism, while Morrissy’s novel has a very dark and pessimistic tone – reaching to ‘the dark core of intergenerational relations’, according to Fogarty (2002:113). Both authors bring a welcome feminist awareness, as well as an openness of expression to their accounts of maternal experience, family life, and sexuality than was usual in Irish women’s writing in earlier decades: Boylan’s novel, although maintaining its ironic lightness of tone, adverts to father/daughter incest, to sexual predation on young girls, and to questionable adoptive practices, while even more controversial topics such as marital rape, and self-abortion, are introduced into Morrissy’s work. Most of these are themes that women writers in more reticent or more socially oppressive times were, with justification, reluctant to address with any degree of frankness; thirty or more years of feminist consciousness-raising, in conjunction with other social changes such as the abolition of censorship, and a media and public more sympathetic to liberal discourse, seem to have encouraged contemporary women writers to reformulate or re-state many of the beliefs surrounding mothers and the mother/daughter bond, and to challenge the long constituted and fixed notions of maternal identity and desire that prevailed in Irish society and in Irish literature. I have divided this chapter into two parts, each
examining one novel separately: Part One is concerned with *Room for a Single Lady*, and my discussions here fall under two headings: ‘Mothers and Social Struggle’ and ‘Mother and Artist’. ‘Mothers and Social Struggle’ discusses the impact of controlling ideologies and myths of motherhood, and the stratagems employed by the fictional mothers in contesting or eluding them: issues of the ‘marginalised’, and ‘mock’ mother arise here. The second heading, ‘Mother and Artist’ covers the thwarted artistic ambitions of Edie Rafferty, the principal mother figure of *Room for a Single Lady*, and her struggle to move beyond her domestic captivity and to develop her creativity. Part Two of the chapter concerns Morrissy’s *Mother of Pearl*, and my examinations here are also accommodated under two headings: ‘Maternal Desire’ and ‘Maternal Ambivalence’: Here, again, the myths surrounding motherhood arise, and topics such as maternal desire, reluctance to mother and refusal of motherhood are discussed.
Part One

*Room for a Single Lady*

**Mothers and ‘Social Struggle’**

Historically, the term ‘social struggle’ has been used to refer to political movements aimed at securing better conditions and rights for oppressed working-class people: such movements were frequently gender-blind, and failed totally to take into account the additional oppressions under which mothering and the activities of motherhood were undertaken by women of all classes. Working from Rich’s comments that

> Experience shapes us; randomness shapes us, the stars and the weather, our own accommodations and rebellions, and above all, the social order around us (Rich 1986:vii).

I have adopted the term ‘Social Struggle’ to describe the wide range of activities with which the fictional mothers in Boylan’s novel need to engage in order to negotiate their lives. The novel lays open the oppressive effects of the various types of gendered social controls as they operated in the patriarchal and paternalistic society of mid-twentieth century Ireland; it portrays how social ideologies and mores operated and, in the process, limited the most basic legitimate needs and aspirations of mothers. Commenting on the Irish Constitution of 1937, and on women’s place in Irish society, Fogarty has noted that while the value of the mother’s work within the home received official recognition within the Constitution, this recognition was paternalistically inspired. She states that

> While setting out to acknowledge the contribution of mothers to the wellbeing of the state, the constitution also severely delimits and restricts their ambit. The veneration of women in their role as mothers ironically has the effect of
diminishing their power; well-intentioned paternalism paves the way for social oppression (Fogarty 2002:87).

Room for a Single Lady provides mother characters that are constrained to struggle against social strictures and the prevailing oppressive ideologies and myths of motherhood in creative and, sometimes, morally and legally dubious ways.

An early example of the type of ideology attaching to motherhood can be seen in the template for the ‘proper’ mother created by poet and novelist, Nora Tynan O’Mahony in 1913 when she offered the opinion that the

True mother has no thoughts of self; all her life, all her love, are given to her husband and children, and after them, and because of them, to all and everything that have next most need of her (c. Luddy 1995:17).

This conflation of motherhood and life-long service to others lasted well into the twentieth century, as Tom Inglis (1998) has noted, and elements of it persist to the present day. Tuttle Hansen writes that according to the myths of motherhood, ‘a mother is someone who sacrifices something she has and wants, or is willing to do so, for the good of another’ (Tuttle Hansen 1997:23). While Boylan’s novel rejects the notion of the ‘proper’ or ‘true’ mother, the extant societal expectations of maternal self-surrender, and the struggles of mothers to comply or to contend with these expectations, surface extensively, and form an important part in the construction of maternal characters in the novel.

The Myths of Motherhood

As emerges throughout the work, the great social divide between mothers in mid-twentieth century Irish society was not based on religious belief, class or race, but
on marital status. All churches and both states on the divided island of Ireland, supported, it must be acknowledged, by practically all sections of divided communities, decreed that the proper place for bearing and rearing children was within ‘the family’ – the narrowly defined and robustly defended legal entity based on heterosexual marriage, in which the husband and father held primacy, and in which the wife and mother was conferred with the legal status of chattel. To a greater extent in the Republic of Ireland, and to a lesser extent in the Northern Ireland state, the place of the mother was held to be ‘within the home’. The diverse maternal figures in *Room for a Single Lady* are portrayed as conducting lives that are heavily influenced by, but not always in conformance with the dominant ideologies of mid-twentieth century Ireland, that is, with the ideologies of churches and states, and the communal values engendered by those ideologies. Boylan’s novel does not represent the mother as essentially self-sacrificial, as ever-willing to give life-long devotion to a husband, and to however many children ‘the good God might send’, with little thought for her own needs, or interests. Mothers in the novel are portrayed neither as total victims nor as passionate rebels: rather they can be seen to struggle and negotiate their various ways between the dictates of society, their own personal needs and aspirations, parental commitment and the needs of children and, in some cases, the often childish or irrational demands of emotionally immature husbands.

Myths of the ‘proper’ mother, of course, attached to the woman who was at least notionally within patriarchal control, that is, to ‘the married mother’. When Edie Rafferty, the principal mother of the novel, shudders and reflects to herself ‘Oh, the price one has to pay to get children’ (Boylan 1998:127), she is already aware that for a woman to live within conventional society, the price to be paid ‘to get children’ is
marriage. Marriage was deemed sacramental, and was presumed to offer societal stability as well as protection and comfort to mothers and children; but in the narrative under consideration, myth and reality more often collide rather than converge, and marriage sometimes fails to offer either stability or protection. Instead, it covers a multitude of circumstances and often, indeed, a multitude of sins. Moreover, it is shown that marriage frequently leads to mothers living in complicity with what Rich describes in the essay that prompted the title of this chapter as ‘The Lie of the happy marriage…of domesticity… of psychic cruelties, public and private humiliations’ (Rich 2001:34). Boylan creates mother figures whose lives are dominated by recourse to deception and, as in the case of Edie, are challenged as to how to bring up their daughters in such an environment. As the text shows, social regulation in a patriarchal world renders it almost a necessity for the married mothers to struggle under cover of deception, and to resort to a life of inauthenticity as the only viable modus operandi. For the woman who became pregnant outside of marriage, even greater problems lay in store, the problems of disgrace and marginalisation.

**The Marginalised Mother**

In her study, *Mother Without Child* (1997), Tuttle Hansen recommends that attention should be turned to

> discussion of the borders of motherhood and the women who really live there, neither inside nor fully outside some recognizable ‘family’ unit, and often exiles from their children (Tuttle Hansen 1997:10).

Tuttle Hansen’s allusion is directed not just to ‘unmarried mothers’ but also to lesbian mothers or to divorced mothers who lose custody of their children – categories of mothers who went without recognition in mid-twentieth century Irish society or
literature. Although ramifications of plot in Boylan’s novel introduce diverse types of mothers who live on the margins of the standard family unit, the most commonly marginalised type of mother in society was, of course, the ‘unmarried mother’. Irish society provided separate, submerged ideologies and an alternative set of myths for these women who found themselves rendered ‘other’ simply by becoming pregnant prior to securing a husband: the girl deemed ‘innocent’ whose ‘name was taken’, the ‘brazen hussy’ and the ‘wanton woman’ all found a place in gossip and folklore, but not in constitutional legislation or under sound legal protection. The woman who produced a child before she could produce a husband of her own was, at best, hustled into marriage, (as happens with the teen-aged Rita Golden in Mother of Pearl). Where no man was willing to take paternal responsibility, the pregnant woman was often forced to give up her child for adoption by strangers, or was swept to the margins of society to live in a sort of muted disgrace; or obliged to ‘take the boat’ and fend for herself in England.

Room for a Single Lady registers somewhat benignly the plight of unmarried pregnant women who were forced to emigrate, or to retreat behind convent walls or, indeed, since alternative myths called for an alternative range of deceptions and subterfuges, to take more risky and radical action such as making claims of paternity against a man who had not fathered her child. Early in the novel, the narrating character, Rose, becomes aware of the ‘vague, uneasy excitement’ (Boylan 1998:31) generated in the household whenever the name of Josephine, the former family maid arose: the mystery is solved with the overheard reference to ‘a terrible thing: a girl gone on a boat to England to have a baby.’ (Boylan 1998:34). Sissy, the sexy and reckless second tenant of ‘Josephine’s room’ confides to Rose that she has been
'caught' and will ‘have to go to the nuns.' (Boylan 1998:86). Dora McAlorum, more worldly-wise, and in pursuit of money, falsely credits the somewhat simple Mo Mankievitz (a co-tenant with Minnie, his much older cousin/wife), with paternity of her child, calls round to the house and brazenly announces – ‘The thing is, I’m in a jam and I don’t really care who knows’ (Boylan 1998:116).

While attained through humour, in her textual treatment of these marginalised, mothers, Boylan achieves her wish ‘to have a share in illuminating how life was lived in a particular place in a particular moment’. (cited London Independent May 22, 2006). In her book, *Women in Ireland: A century of Change*, Myrtle Hill writes

The majority of young women throughout Ireland who became pregnant while unmarried in the nineteen-fifties suffered profound shame and guilt, and most gave up their babies for adoption. Much of their experience remained hidden, their stories untold (Hill 2003:131).

In *Room for a Single Lady*, marginalised mothers such as these feature as comic, minor characters, and the novel provides limited exploration of their experiences and emotions. While their stories are not followed in detail, Boylan’s satirical treatment projects somewhat utopian outcomes for two of them, but there is no such outcome projected for Josephine, the former family maid, who is fitted into the pattern of her class and times: presumed to have taken the boat to England; she is mentioned briefly in regretful terms by Edie, the principal mother character, who cannot afford to replace her, and as a fleeting memory for Edie’s children, for whom she had provided early care. Boylan re-writes the traditional script somewhat in respect of two of the other characters: the outcome of Sissy’s pregnancy – her condition known only to the narrator, remains undisclosed, but at the end of the novel Sissy re-enters the story, undefeated, free from the confines of the mother and baby home, and flaunting an
engagement ring and the uniform of an Aer Lingus air-hostess, thereby signalling her prospects of marriage, as well as the unlikely attainment to one of the few glamour jobs of nineteen-fifties Ireland. The narrator observes that ‘In spite of her disgrace she had survived’. (Boylan 1998:377). Again, while Sissy triumphs to an unlikely degree, the prevailing customs of secrecy and silence surrounding extra-marital sexual activities are shown to work against the interests of young girls: Sissy’s reckless candidature for motherhood should have provided a cautionary tale for the Rafferty children; instead, she becomes a figure of glamour and excitement, and represents for them a romantic vindication of youthful rebellion: Sissy also subverts the myth of the ‘unmarried mother’ and might figure also as a candidate for a ‘re-visioning of the mother’ but for the fact that no narrative of her motherhood is provided; her baby and its destiny remains clothed in silence.

The second marginalised maternal character in Room for a Single Lady, the unmarried Dora McAlorum, is shown as also suitable for entry to Tuttle Hansen’s category of ‘Mother without Child’. Her story shows her outwitted by the woman she seeks to rival, and defeated in her attempts to deprive Minnie Mankievitz of both her money and her simple-minded husband, Mo. Dora is induced to relinquish both Mo and her baby in exchange for money, tickets to the U.S.A. and the charms of an unreliable Hungarian pastry-cook, all provided through the subterfuges of Minnie. Dora is, of course, one of the ‘baddies’ of the novel: the text does not invite sympathy for her, characterising her as more interested in money than in Mo or her baby daughter, but her story also reflects the way life was lived at the time, when handing over her child to a married couple, whom no-one knew what sort of parenting they would provide, was considered not just the best option, but right retribution, for the
single mother and, so the ideologies claimed, was always ‘in the best interests of the child’. Ironically, the surrogate mother, Minnie, would have been precluded from adopting a child legally, on the grounds of race, religion and age, and on these counts, Minnie’s representation renders her initially as a marginalised mother, but her larger characterisation and her colourful route to motherhood also render her suitable for inclusion in another group, that of the ‘Mock Mother’ which forms the next part of my discussion.

The Mock Mother

Tuttle Hansen proposes the notions of the ‘mock mother,’ and of the ‘mock mother’ as being employed to ‘subvert traditional definitions of motherhood’: she bases her discussion on the thinking of Magdalene Redekop, who calls on women writers for greater exploration of ‘the laughing mother’. Tuttle Hansen claims that mock’ or humorous types of mother figures include numerous surrogates: stepmothers, foster mothers, adoptive mothers … and numerous women and men behaving in ways that could be described as maternal (Tuttle Hansen 1997:14).

In *Room for a Single Lady*, while there are many comic situations and comic mother characters throughout the novel, none can really be described as ‘the laughing mother’. The humour attaching to maternal figures is usually of the Homeric variety: one may laugh at or with the comic mother figure, but she rarely gets to create the joke. The figure of Edie Rafferty’s elderly mother is employed to provide some comic commentary, but the ironic humour and pathos attaching to her situation does not cloak the fact that because she is old and senile, no-one wants to take care of her, and she is settled into an old people’s home while her daughter is in hospital. My
definition of the ‘mock mother’ extends to prominent female characters in the novel whose route to motherhood is less orthodox than the natural route, that is, figures whose attainment to motherhood provides comic or ironic comment on the prevailing ideologies of motherhood.

Selena Taylor, the somewhat lugubrious first tenant of the ‘Room’ in Boylan’s novel provides both humour and pathos in the saga of the Rafferty family’s tenants. Her journey to motherhood is secretly orchestrated by Edie Rafferty, the principal mother character in the novel, by means of her interest in a short-lived marriage agency. Selena exists on the margins of society for a number of reasons: she is poor, plain and, fortuitously, for the sake of the plot, Protestant, in a predominantly Catholic society. Socially inept and unwary, she is a butt for the cruel little jokes of the Rafferty children, and when forced out into the wider world, proves to be ready prey for the small-time adventurer and con-man. Pathetically, she carries the burden of a terrible secret – the secret of sexual abuse by her father, something that, as the text demonstrates, is more likely to diminish her chances in life than to land her father in the law-courts or in jail. It is reflective of the times that no one who becomes aware of Selena’s father’s assaults reports the matter to the police: local nuns and a priest provide somewhat ineffectual help, and Edie, who is trying to rescue her says ‘There is no point in telling the police, but I must do something’ (Boylan 1998:238); This is construed by her husband as ‘meddling in affairs that are none of your business’ (Boylan 1998:282), although he eventually rows in with the rescue plan. But even when it is found that Selena has been driven to attempt suicide rather than return to live with her father, the truths of her home situation never enter the public domain.
The resolution for Selena, through which she becomes step-mother to two terrifyingly self-possessed children, sees her married to a comfortably-off middle-aged stroke victim who, happily, and importantly for the times, also happens to be a Protestant, is set out in the world of the novel in terms almost of fairy-tale, thereby providing an ironic comment on social horizons, and the aspirations and opportunities open to injured or marginalised women in nineteen-fifties Ireland. Selena and her physically stricken suitor fall in love at first sight, and having been rescued from her tragic situation by him, the self-described ‘happiest woman alive’ (Boylan 1998:342) faces into a life of care-giving as a ‘proper’ wife in the comfortable surroundings of leafy suburbia, with the possibilities held out of future children of her own bearing – her husband, fortunately, having retained some vital capacities.

Minnie Mankievietz, the most colourful woman character in Room for a Single Lady may also be included in the ‘mock mother’ category on account of her illegitimate route to motherhood. The most wily and entrepreneurial tenant of the Rafferty’s ‘Room’, and initially financially straightened, like most of the characters in the novel, Minnie is a Jewish immigrant, something likely to render her eligible automatically for marginalisation in Irish life. An unlikely candidate for the role of first-time mother (she is fifty years old) she, even more than Selena, takes the less orthodox route to motherhood. Minnie is married to her simple-minded and much younger cousin, Mo, although their relationship seems to veer more closely to that of mother and child than of husband and wife: at one stage, having been lured astray by the predatory Dora McAlorum, Mo explains – ‘But you’re my Ma’ … Dora’s young. She’s pretty.’ (Boylan 1998:139). The text does not linger on the Freudian implications of the situation, and concentrates instead on Minnie’s practical efforts to
establish a home for herself, her child-like husband, and the baby she knows he has not fathered.

Minnie stands in complete contrast to the owners of the house where she rents the ‘Room’: she runs three small businesses from this ‘Room’, while they, who have a whole house at their disposal, are shown on occasion to go short of nourishing food. She makes an art and a viable business out of the domestic chores of baking and cake-making, where Edie, the middle-class mother of the family has been trained to look down on these activities as menial household tasks. Minnie spots a rewarding gap in the market for the door-to-door sale of religious objects at a time when Eugene Rafferty, who fancies himself as a business-man, has made two failed attempts at emigration and several unsuccessful forays into the world of commerce, and cannot find work at home. Minnie succeeds in amassing enough money to further invest in her businesses and in a home of her own. The spirit and drive afforded to Minnie provide an ironic commentary on Irish society, pointing up how the adherence to outdated social mores and the endemic inertia that inhibited entrepreneurship and economic progress worked against the much vaunted ‘family values’ of the times. Through Minnie’s activities, the novel also drives home the point that care-giving, home-making and financial rewards need not be necessarily exclusive of each other, thus highlighting the irrationality of Eugene Rafferty’s prohibitions early in the novel on Edie’s attempts to earn money even when working from home, or to participate in the most modest of business ventures.

Contesting commonly-held beliefs that all women want children, Minnie’s journey into the role of surrogate or adoptive mother is not driven by a latent desire for a child, but by the need to counteract the machinations of her rival for Mo, the
duplicitous Dora McAlorum. The stratagem Minnie adopts for rescuing her husband from Dora’s demands are as well thought-out as her business ventures and, again, shows how subterfuge serves as a resource for women in negotiating their lives. Minnie’s actions are, of course, questionable on moral and legal grounds, but the text shows that it is her desire to protect the ‘family’ she has carefully constructed that drives her actions, not the desire to deprive another woman of her child. She finds the acquisition of the baby necessary in order to keep Mo happy at home with a child he believes to be his own, and assumes the role of surrogate mother with tenderness and ease. The textual resolution of Minnie’s story endorses her extra-legal actions in what seems like another fairy-tale ending, and the end of the novel sees Mo, Minnie and the baby established as a seemingly ‘proper’ family of husband, wife and child, safe within the bonds of matrimony. The novel vindicates the generous Minnie in opposition to the rapacious Dora, and leaves Minnie presiding over her unorthodox but happy family and her thriving business ventures.

Tuttle Hansen makes a further claim that the ‘mock mother’ is analogous to the figure of the mother without child which, she writes, may also be seen to embrace the mother to whom mothering does not come easily. Based on these latter terms, every mother figure in Room for a Single Lady qualifies for the ‘mock mother’ category. Perhaps it is that the very nature of mothering precludes its coming easily, although circumstances and temperament may make it less difficult for some than for others. While, owing to its tone and humour, it is not possible to detect the intention to totally subvert traditional definitions of motherhood in Boylan’s novel, it is possible to believe that her intention was (using Redekop’s phrase), ‘to enable us to walk “disrespectfully” around our idealised images of maternity’ (c.Tuttle Hansen,
1997:14). It is worth noting that in setting up the surrogate mothers of her novel, Clare Boylan does not discount or diminish the biological mother/daughter relationship: she has Edie assure her daughters ‘In all your lives … no one will ever love you as much as I do’ (Boylan 1998:126). However, Minnie’s role as surrogate mother suggests that other qualities may be regarded as equally as important as biological bonds in the activities of mothering and child-rearing, and that pragmatism, good nature and good intentions are as likely to form a basis for satisfactorily raising a child as the biological connection. Minnie’s interventions into the Rafferty family’s affairs prove that she has a better understanding of the requirements for child-rearing than do the parents of that family, whom she rightly accuses of not knowing what is going on under their eyes.

Minnie’s activities also signal that she cannot be defined simply by the labels of ‘mock mother’ or of ‘surrogate mother’. Although she stages major interventions into the Rafferty family, she does not usurp the maternal role in her dealings with the Rafferty children. When Bridie, the gifted, eldest daughter of the family turns to her, she takes her side against her parents and provides a second home for her, but this relationship is not posited as one of mother and daughter, but rather as a relationship between mentor and student: Minnie is prepared to train Bridie in business, and to finance her artistic education, provided Bridie works hard and maintains discipline in her studies. On the other hand, realising the dangers of the immature Kitty’s ‘cavortings’ with the milkman, she reports that situation to her parents without delay, and she confronts Rose about her petty thieving, but spares her the humiliation that a disclosure to her parents would bring. These are the actions of a wise and good friend, not of a woman seeking the satisfactions of surrogate or vicarious motherhood.
Through Minnie’s actions, and through the portrayal of other female relationships in the course the novel, recognition is registered that not all female nurturing or caring activities should be classed as maternal activities, or be assigned to the realms of motherhood. Simone de Beauvoir writes that

woman in her restricted sphere and isolation does not know the joys of the comradeship implied in the common pursuit of certain aims (de Beauvoir 1984:556).

Boylan’s novel counters this claim and shows how comradeship between women is possible, and how female friendships promote exchanges of physical care, of emotional support and of practical help. The novel shows also that extending the domestic sphere beyond the nuclear family can provide support for the mother, enabling her to build a network of female friendship and support. As a result of the exchanges between the multi-cultural mix of somewhat down-at-heel, and sometimes downright eccentric occupants who pass through the ‘Room’ of the novel, mothers and women who are not mothers are shown to be capable of establishing common cause truthfully, of forming affirmative friendships, without feeling a need to transmute their sentiments of regard into maternal emotions, and of conducting their friendships free of the shackles of lies, secrets and silences that male ideologies induce – presenting, perhaps, as appalling a vista to male ideologists as the prospect of the mother as artist.

**Mother and Artist**

In her essay, ‘Figuring the Mother in Contemporary Irish Fiction’ (2000), Ann Owen Weekes provides a critique of two of Boylan’s earlier novels, *Holy Pictures*
(1983) and Last Resorts (1984), in which she regards the mothers depicted to be ‘concerned, unsupported figures who live lives of inauthenticity, and who fail to nurture their children’ (Owen Weekes 2000:121). Owen Weekes gives the opinion that the mothers in these novels ‘show little of the conflict, the insecurity, the questioning, the helplessness and the love of the mother figures who tell their own stories’ (Owen Weekes 2000:121). Such criticism cannot be applied to the construction of Edie Rafferty, the principal mother character in Room for a Single Lady: the very qualities listed can be ascribed most accurately to this maternal character.

As is the case with many of the other mother figures examined in this chapter, Edie Rafferty resists ready categorisation in terms of motherhood. She might easily have been accommodated under ‘Mothers and Social Struggle’, since the novel highlights her constant struggle to negotiate between the demands arising from marriage and motherhood in circumstances of poverty and patriarchal restrictions, and her own inclinations towards personal freedom and frivolity and, more importantly, towards creative expression. Edie’s social background is lower middle-class, a formerly slightly privileged group that continued clinging to a life of cultured gentility as this became less and less sustainable in nineteen-fifties Ireland: ‘keeping up appearances’ became a constant social activity for members of her class. Accustomed to domestic help in better days (the hapless Josephine, who ‘had to take the boat’), Edie is shown throughout the narration of her youngest daughter, Rose, to be unwilling to engage in the endless drudgery of housework that was formerly the lot of the family maid, and to struggle against the demands of selfless commitment to others
deemed natural to motherhood in Irish society. The narrator recalls her despairing declaration:

Women have such little lives … expected to do the small unrewarding chores that must be done again tomorrow, to turn their talents to niggling skills like embroidery (Boylan 1998:26).

Edie is a woman to whom ‘mothering does not come easily’ (Tuttle-Hansen 1997:15), but she is shown not to take the role of mother lightly, and many of her failings in raising her children may be traced to the inadequacies of her education and to the perverse socialisation of women of her time. Her conflicted state of mind is revealed in the pragmatism of another declaration to her daughters:

Women’s lives are limited. That is how it is, especially in ordinary families. I have always done my best to give you girls a life of the mind so that whatever the future holds you will not feel trapped or bored (Boylan 1998:295).

As a woman to whom ‘mothering does not come easily’ (Tuttle-Hansen 1997:15) and, notwithstanding her conventional route to motherhood, Edie might be said to veer towards the carnivalesque or ‘Mock Mother’ category: she is constructed as oppressed, impractical, immature and inconsistent; as a woman who is sometimes too reliant on her children in her own difficulties, and as a mother who seems to be failing to nurture or adequately prepare them for life. There are many occasions when her children, especially her eldest daughter, seem to demonstrate greater levels of maturity than their mother. While it would be a step too far to describe Edie as a ‘laughing mother’, it can be said that, in keeping with the lightness of tone in the novel, she is allowed moments of humour and happiness, as well as involvement in incidents of ironic, and even black comedy: Christmas Day celebrations in the
Rafferty household could almost rival those of the Daedelus family in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* for domestic calamity. Boylan’s novel provides many instances where motherhood is not taken too seriously, when the text allows us, to ‘walk disrespectfully around our idealised images of motherhood’ (Redekop, c.Tuttle-Hansen 1997:14).

Edie might also be accommodated under the rubric of ‘Maternal Ambivalence’, a topic considered in my discussions of *Mother of Pearl* in Part Two. Although cast as a loving mother by the narrator, the sub-text in her story is one of protest and the desire to escape, whether this involves her taking to her bed – ‘it was what she always did when she could not face life’ (Boylan 1998:20), or withdrawing herself and the children from the ordinary domestic routine and embarking on grand plans for creative works and self-expression during her husband’s absence during a futile attempt at emigration; or retreating from family life to ‘the Room’ of the novel’s title to ‘reinvent’ herself, leaving the children to run the household – this last in retaliation for her husband’s prohibition on her involvement in work outside the home in a proposed marriage bureau. Maternal ambivalence can be seen in Edie’s somewhat uncommitted and unfocussed supervision of her children and in her conflicted views as to whether to educate them to exercise personal freedom and self-expression, or to prepare them for compliance and submission in the conventional roles that she believes most likely lie before them. She may be faulted in her rearing of her children, but only in the light of her circumstances and experience. Through the medium of Rose’s narrative, it emerges that Edie has no clear idea of how to prepare her daughters for the world that faces them, since what this offers is a patriarchal order
and culture against which she continually strains, but which she cannot bring herself to fully reject.

However, when her eldest daughter goes missing, Edie is not remiss in setting out through the worst parts of the city in order to find her: in this incident, while Edie is not quite Demeter prepared to descend to the Underworld, neither could she be regarded as a neglectful mother ready to abandon her daughter. In this relationship, the mother/daughter story does not follow the classical or popular psychoanalytical route: the breakdown in relations between mother and daughter is not due to hostility or hatred on the part of either mother or daughter, but to mutual love, and to an awakening to her own creativity and identity on the part of the daughter. Secrets and silences play no part in this relationship, and there is no dissimulation or pretence at play in the mending of the mother/daughter breach as Bridie explains her rebellion: ‘Because unless I set myself against you completely, I would have done anything in the world for you’ (Boylan 1998:327). In addition, the ‘tragedy’ of the loss of the daughter to maturity and a mind of her own is set in a manageable context for her mother with Bridie’s promise that ‘You won’t be losing me … We’ll be women together’ (Boylan 1998:327).

Allowing for all of the above, what justifies the provision of this section in my discussions is Edie’s construction as a mother who craves a cultural life, and who has strong aspirations to become a painter. That she is shown in her middle-age to be still aspiring to become a painter at a time when her eldest daughter is grown into her teenage years and already demonstrating signs of mature artistic talent, points up the dilemma faced by the woman who, although perhaps grudgingly, but also lovingly,
engaged with her husband and children, wished to extend herself to a life beyond the
domestic domain, and to fulfil her own creative imperatives. Furthermore, as the plot
shows, this desire for creative fulfilment is not just a matter of self-indulgence; it is
fuelled by the fact that Edie’s artistic capabilities could be the means of bringing in
desperately needed earnings into a household impoverished by a prolonged spell of
unemployment suffered by her husband, Eugene who, in the role of Victorian or
Edwardian *paterfamilias*, refuses to countenance her taking up any employment
outside the home. Edie feels obliged to hide the fact from her husband when she
succeeds in earning a few pounds from providing illustrations for a magazine.

Edie’s artistic development is impeded on several fronts. Her domestic
circumstances, her poverty, and lack of education might be regarded as the first
hurdles. She is also confronted by what Rich has described as the ‘institution’ of
motherhood (Rich 1995:13) that opposes anything that might come between the
mother and her complete surrender to the needs of husband and family. Tied into the
minutiae of running a household in the most stringent of economic circumstance, she
is overwhelmed by the demands of bringing up her three young daughters, while
looking after her own aged, senile mother (the physical demands of which bring on a
dangerous miscarriage), and is worn out by the constant necessity of providing
emotional support to her husband in a time when they are beset by unemployment,
and the disappointments attaching to his doomed commercial ventures. Virginia
Woolf’s famous items necessary for artistic freedom for the woman writer of fiction –
‘money and a room of one’s own’ (Woolf 1989:108), are as far from Edie’s grasp as
are the education appropriate to her needs, the artistic *milieu*, the materials, the space,
and the uninterrupted hours necessary for a painter to flourish. A most salient obstacle
is the opposition of Edie’s husband who although he professes to be ‘very proud’ (Boylan 1998:186) of her talent, refuses to take her work or her aspirations seriously, or to offer any help or encouragement that would make it possible for her to do so. On the contrary, towards the end of the novel, he throws her sketch book on the fire, pitting her attempted defence of her work as ‘art’ and ‘worth something’ to her (Boylan 1998:361) against the supposed delinquency of their three young daughters.

Rich has claimed that ‘The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children’ (Rich 1995:223), and in Edie’s case, ‘the institution’, embodied in her husband Eugene, finds her guilty of failing all three of their daughters, the time spent ‘doodling’ being cited as the cause of all their perceived moral lapses.

An interlude in the lives of Edie and her daughters early in the novel following the departure of Edie’s husband to England to find work offers insight into her feelings of oppression, her need for creative activity, and the artistic opportunities afforded by her husband’s absence. This interlude takes the shape, somewhat, of the sojourn described by Adrienne Rich in Of Woman Born, where Rich describes herself and her young sons as living as ‘conspirators, outlaws from the institution of motherhood’ (Rich 1995:295). Rich’s account describes her sense of liberation in the absence of her husband and the abandonment of the strict routines of meal and bed times while on vacation, and her delight in the freedom to stay up late into the night to read and write while the children slept. What is striking in Rich’s account is her sense of foreclosure when the interlude came to an end with the re-instatement of the forces of ‘institutional motherhood’ (Rich 1995:13). In Room for a Single Lady, the narrator tells of Edie keeping her children home from school, and of her embarking them on
grand acts of creative activity, before she ‘disappeared into the drawing-room to paint a picture’ (Boylan 1998:23). In her husband’s absence, Edie’s artistic energies embrace attempts to induct her children into the world of art – ‘You girls come from a long line of very gifted people, artists and musicians,’ … ‘You will be creative’ (Boylan 1998:24), and … ‘You will learn to be unconfined’ (Boylan 1998:26). The small amount of money sent from England by Eugene is spent on black emulsion paint which is used to cover one wall of the kitchen and form a backdrop for the children’s expansive drawings, something understood by the children as an act of defiance by which ‘we had painted out our father’ (Boylan 1998:26).

Closure to this interlude comes with the return of Eugene, shabby and unsuccessful, who confesses that while there was work available in England, he could not exist without his wife. Quietly and guiltily, his very weakness and neediness operating as a further draining demand, the kitchen wall is repainted, Eugene takes control of the household, and Edie once again takes to her bed. Commenting on the working-class mother writer in Portrait of the Mother-Artist, Nancy Gerber comments that husbands who lack opportunities for upward mobility or economic security, whether middle- or working-class, ‘often assume the patriarchal role at home with wives and children’ (Gerber 2003:3); this is a role that Edie’s husband is shown to assume with some regularity, and a situation in which Edie is shown to collude in the interests of bolstering her husband’s self-image and of maintaining harmony within the home. The suppression of Edie’s capabilities in the interests of placating or propping up her husband’s self-esteem is observed by Alma, a family friend – ‘Eugene is disaster-prone, but look at you! If you had your chance there would be no holding you back’ (Boylan 1998:183). The case is not made in the novel that Edie was
spectacularly gifted or talented, or that she had either the capabilities or ambitions to become a ‘great’ artist. But the case is made that it is not just her poverty or lack of training and education that stand in the way of her artistic progress; the novel shows how the ideologies of motherhood operate in her life to stifle her creativity and to generate the belief that a mother’s artistic development must be achieved at the expense of her children. Edie’s defence of the worth of her art is answered with her husband’s exaggerated rhetoric – ‘Is it worth it to you to have one daughter run away from home and the other two harlots before they are out of their teens?’ (Boylan 1998:361).

Confronting restrictions, prohibitions, and the diminishment of her talent, situates Edie into a long history of women artists in the western art world: Frances Borzello, whose book, *A World of our Own: Women as Artists* (2000) concentrates on the women who succeeded in this world, outlines the problems that women artists-in-the-making have traditionally faced: exclusion from the academies, from life classes and from classes in anatomy; social proprieties that prevented women from joining in with communities of artists where theories of art, and new technical approaches were developed. Most insidious of the obstacles, according to Borzello, was the refusal to take women’s work seriously:

men saw women’s work as evidence for unchanging female qualities and judged everything they produced as fixed and female, so that when a woman produced a painting that impressed them, they said she painted like a man (Borzello, 2000:8).

Irish art history also provides ample evidence of the ways in which women artists were deprived of opportunities to develop their art in a serious way, except in the field
of design. Jeanne Sheehy records that, from the mid-nineteenth century it became accepted in society that training in design for manufacture was desirable for women; with references being made in public speeches to the ‘domestic character of the female mind’ (Sheehy 1987:9), although, as Sheehy notes also, the admission of women to the Schools of the Royal Dublin Society from about eighteen-fifty onwards caused tensions there, since the male students considered themselves to be attending for serious, professional purposes, and regarded the women as privileged amateurs.

The question arises as to why there should be such widespread, abiding hostility to women’s serious participation in art. Not disregarding the social and ideological considerations outlined above, I believe that Rosalind Minsky’s exploration of Donald Winnicott’s psychoanalytical thinking offers another consideration. According to Minsky, Winnicott took the view that play and the artistic imagination, and the enjoyment of art take place in the same psychical space. The artist, he believed, is the person who most completely embodies the desire for the types of authenticity and personal integrity that are to be most valued. Minsky cites Winnicott’s view (1958:150) that it is

through artistic expression we can hope to keep in touch with our primitive selves whence the most intense feelings and even fearfully acute sensations derive, and we are poor indeed if we are only sane (c. Minsky 1996:123).

Fears that the ‘primitive selves’ liberated in the course of women’s creativity freely expressed, would be disruptive of the carefully constructed images of ‘femininity’ and ‘maternity’ enshrined in male ideologies must surely underlie the historic reluctance to admit independent women into the art world. The ‘most intense feelings and even
fearfully acute sensations’ (Winnicott), capable of articulation by women and, more particularly, by mothers, are what male domination has sought to control in art and culture; hence the proliferation in art of she-demons and anti-mothers such as the Maenads and Furies, of Medea and Clytemnestra of Greek mythology, and their equivalents in other cultures.

In her discussions of the myths of motherhood in *Identity and Difference: Culture, Media and Identity* (1997), Woodward refers to Marina Warner’s argument that ungoverned energy in women raises the issue of motherhood, citing one issue as the “fear that the natural bond excludes men” (c.Woodward 1997:250). In Boylan’s novel, Edie’s husband’s sense of rivalry towards his children is recorded in the opening pages; he is described by the narrator as ‘impatient to get back to Mother, to break the magic circle that she made with her girls’ (Boylan 1998:2); Edie’s desire for a liberating involvement in drawing and painting may be seen as posing for Eugene an additional, unwelcome challenge for his wife’s affection and attention, and the novel informs that it was only when he has got a new job, and a new two-seater car, and has forged a new father/daughter relationship with his intelligent eldest, maturing, daughter, that Edie ‘was pleased to have peace to get on with her painting’ (Boylan 1998:374). At the end of the novel, the narrator tells of Edie having finished a new painting entitled *The Wedding* – showing ‘a thin girl with no clothes on, wearing a wedding veil and clutching a bunch of wild flowers’ (Boylan 1998:375); of her excitedly proclaiming it as the best thing she had ever done; that she has hopes of it being accepted for an exhibition and, tellingly, that she is ‘waiting for the right moment to tell your father’ (Boylan 1998:375). However, the impression is given that the power of the ‘institution’ of motherhood is on the wane in Edie’s life, and that
Eugene’s judgement that the picture was ‘lewd and vulgar’ (Boylan 1998:377) and his prohibition on her exhibiting it would be without effect. But the fact that she had been obliged to work on her picture in secret points to the type of irrational opposition that the ‘institution’ of motherhood was capable of bringing to bear on the mother and artist in respectable mid-twentieth century Irish society.

Part Two

Mother of Pearl

Maternal Desire

Traditional patriarchal thinking that allies women with nature naturalises the view that all women want to have children. Sigmund Freud’s claim that a woman is only compensated for her lack of a penis by giving birth to a child, preferably a male, seemed to give scientific backing to this most persisting myth of motherhood – that a woman’s capacity to bear children predicates strong, and even overwhelming, instincts to do so. Freud’s findings were, of course, contested by female theorists and psychoanalysts (Horney, de Beauvoir, Klein), and Adrienne Rich has pointed out, that ‘most women in history have become mothers without choice’ (Rich 1995:13). Ann Oakley, writing in nineteen-seventy-four stated that the dominant myth of motherhood in western society was based on the three beliefs ‘that all women need to be mothers, that all mothers need their children and that all children need their mothers’ (c. Nakano Glenn 1994:9), and a nineteen-eighty-seven discussion of new reproductive technologies by Michelle Stanworth, cited by Steph Lawler in her essay ‘Motherhood and identity’, claims that ‘according to ideologies of motherhood, all women want children’ (Lawler 1996:155). However, as Stanworth’s discussion further points out,
the same ideologies do not see that maternal desire should be permitted to be the controlling factor in reproduction:

Ideologies of motherhood also construct ‘other’ women for whom motherhood is not seen as an option; single women, lesbian women, and disabled women are often expected to forgo mothering ‘in the interests of the child’. (Stanworth, c. Lawler 1996:155).

It goes without saying that nature frequently overrides both ideologies and maternal desire and, as Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out, ‘woman’s fecundity is decided in part voluntarily, in part by chance’ (de Beauvoir 1984:510). A most salient feature in the two novels examined for this chapter is that from the woman’s point of view, rather than ideology, biological drives, maternal desire or female agency, it is the reproductive wheel of fortune that determines whether a woman becomes pregnant, or attains to motherhood.

In the world created in *Mother of Pearl*, no babies arrive conventionally. Women in the novel become pregnant through the criminality of marital rape – the origins of Irene Rivers, the protagonist for part of the novel; through seduction, and ‘the curse’ of absolute fecundity in unplanned incidents with two different men, as is the case with Rita Golden/Spain, also a protagonist, and mother of Mary/Pearl and Stella; by chance or good fortune – the traveller woman, who describes her baby as ‘my first to live’ (Morrissy 1997:130); by mistake – ‘Neither wanted or unwanted’ (Morrissy 1997:213) in the case of Mary/Pearl, who self-aborts. The briefly-introduced Mamie Speight, a warm, though ironically sentimentalised mother character, reveals that she still grieves for the babies lost through many miscarriages earlier in her life. The only woman constructed in maternal terms who is shown to
exercise agency in pursuit of a child is Irene Rivers, who attains to motherhood, if only temporarily, through phantasmatic longings and the criminality of child abduction. Irene’s construction in terms of a revisioning of the mother forms the next part of my discussion.

Irene Rivers, who is the protagonist for a major part of *Mother of Pearl*, might also be accommodated under two alternative categories set out by Elaine Tuttle Hansen in *Mother Without Child* – that of ‘Mock Mother’ by virtue of her unorthodox journey to motherhood, or that of ‘Mother Without Child’ both because she is precluded from conceiving a child due to her husband’s impotence, and because she loses custody of the child she steals. My decision to include Irene Rivers in this section of the chapter was taken in order to demonstrate how, through the character of Irene, this novel projects maternal desire as a minimal factor in human reproduction and, instead, posits the desire for motherhood as inspired by social demands and personal need rather than by biological drives or mothering instincts, thus contesting the prevailing ideologies of motherhood.

It has been noted that the construction of Irene Rivers in maternal terms begins with her marriage to Stanley Godwin (McDermott 2003:271). This first construction can be seen to be false and ironic in the light of Stanley’s sexual impotence. His construction of Irene in terms of maternal fecundity as ‘a map stretching southwards’, offering ‘what he knew was impossible. New life’ (Morrissy 1996:34-5) is a product of romantic fantasy and longing. In stark contrast to his romanticism, Irene’s view of Stanley is entirely pragmatic and rational: she needs rescuing, and she sees in Stanley an escape route from the sexual predations of the boiler-man in the TB sanatorium,
who has threatened to expose her practices over several years following her cure, of undressing for the pleasure or comfort of countless male patients in return for small gifts and trinkets during the time she was employed in the sanatorium kitchens.

In Irene’s subjectivity she is presented as having considered her clandestine sexual activities as self-sacrificial acts of healing directed towards the infected patients – ‘her calling, she believed, her life’s work’ (Morrissy 1967:24). But the activities of her ‘calling’ had been ‘always done in darkness’ (Morrissy 1967:23) and were something she feared would ever be disclosed to Dr. Clemens, who had been instrumental in curing her tuberculosis. Irene believed he would see them in the same light as did the boiler-man – that she had ‘sold herself for favours’ (Morrissy 1997:24), such ‘favours’ residing in the pathetic and ironic collection of ashtrays, calendars and clocks passed on to her by numerous male patients whose cures had not been effected, and who would therefore have no future need of them. It is difficult to decipher from the text if, in rationalising her activities, Irene can be said to be entertaining a degree of self-delusion, and to be in total denial of her own needs for intimacy and sexual pleasure: the text of the novel discloses that on Charlie Piper’s first approach ‘A strange warmth invaded her limbs’ (Morrissy 1997:19), but in a focalised passage revealing Stanley’s impotence, the text states ‘Her life’s work, the joyless skills of years, were of no use’ (Morrissy 1997:38). It is unlikely, in a novel so devoid of altruism, that Irene’s sexual interactions could be totally without self-interest, despite her self-justifications, and although the narrative informs that ‘to be watched as she undressed had been robbed of any erotic allure; she felt she was revealing very little’ (Morrissy 1997:23), and although the trinkets or gifts had not
been bargained for or always forthcoming, she maintained her ministrations, and would have continued to do so were it not for the dangers posed by Davy Fry.

What is clear from the text is that in these sexual transactions, Irene always had agency, was always in control; she was permitted to touch, but she never allowed herself to be touched. Irene is said not to have regarded her activities as sexual relations since she never allowed sexual penetration; maternal drive to procreation played no part in her activities, and she had no feelings of warmth or intimacy towards her ‘clients’. The novel states that the many beneficiaries of her attentions became blurred in her recollection into ‘a procession of the wounded, who Irene recalled with the helpless fondness of a mother for her absent, roving sons’ (Morrissy 1997:24). Here Morrissy seems to be offering an ironic challenge to notions of both maternal desire and maternal love: Irene’s sexual interactions did not admit the possibilities of pregnancy, and the inability to recall the individuality of her sexual contacts is at odds with the emotional attachment and conventions reserved for mother/son relationships. Irene’s sterile sexual exchanges bear none of the hallmarks of loving relationships of any description, and her only recorded moment of sexual pleasure throughout the novel is achieved in a solitary act where ‘she was naked; there was nobody to see her’ (Morrissy 1997:62).

It is not just the concepts of maternal desire and love that are put in question in this part of the novel: in three separate subjectivities, Irene is constructed differently in the classic categories identified in feminist discourse – as mother, by Stanley; as whore by Davy Fry; and as virgin in her own subjectivity. However, Irene does not quite fit into any one of these categories: Stanley’s impotence renders his construction
an impossible fantasy; Irene’s activities can hardly be viewed as prostitution, or as her having ‘sold herself’, since she did not always receive reward, and since her sense of self was so utterly diminished by the ravages of her illness, her abandonment by her family, and by what she regarded as the plunder of her person through her radical surgery. On the other hand, her years of sexual interaction, although excluding penetrative intercourse, might be deemed to render her hold on virginity as something of a technicality. The novel’s questioning of these three linguistic constructs demonstrates how flexible and subjective linguistic and social constructs may be, and thus puts all linguistic and social constructs in the novel into question, including the concepts of maternal desire and maternal love.

Irene’s constructions of herself in terms of motherhood have their origins in social pressures, not in biological drives or maternal yearning. In her first maternal self-construction, Irene pretends to a non-existing pregnancy, and in the second, she pretends that she is the mother of a three-months-old baby girl. Her announcement of the false pregnancy is fuelled by her desire to fit into her husband’s community where she is looked on with a suspicion that she feels would best be placated by the production of a child; and also by the more trivial wish to triumph over the barbed comments of an intrusive neighbour. Her second maternal construction, the lie told to Charlie Piper, a random caller to her home, and former patient at the sanatorium, (and also her initiator into her clandestine disrobing activities), is to protect herself and her life as a married woman from her former fellow-inmate, and to prevent Stanley from learning about her years of sexual interaction with the male patients in the sanatorium.
Irene’s false constructions of herself in terms of motherhood are associated with a lifetime of lying and with personal calamities for herself and for her husband. Her announcement of the false pregnancy reveals a deep-seated and previously undisclosed desire for a child, not on her own part but on Stanley’s part. It fuels their half-shared fantasy of a potential child, a self-evident irrational hope in view of his sexual impotence, but entered into totally by him, and partially by Irene. Facing the truth of their situation induces the loss of the phantasm, confronts him with his own foolishness, and, as Irene has anticipated, lays bare the emptiness at the core of their marriage. With mutual blame ensuing, Stanley publicly announces a miscarriage, reveals Irene’s secret history of TB, and plants the suggestion that she carries a mental instability. Irene, blaming him for the death of the dream, comes to despise him and to withhold all physical and mental contact from him. This episode in the novel disrupts notions of maternal desire, and places frustrated paternal desire for a child to the fore in their relationship. Again, the notion of maternal love is, ironically challenged: during the phantom pregnancy, the new form of attention that Stanley lavished on her ‘was the care Irene associated with a mother’ (Morrissy 1997:46), but this devotion turns to her betrayal by Stanley and to alienation from her in the clear light of disappointing reality; it also resembles Irene’s own mother’s type of maternal ‘devotion’ that included betrayal and abandonment of her daughter when she contracted tuberculosis.

The second false claim to motherhood reaffirms Irene as a practiced liar in Stanley’s eyes, and sets her on a path to the criminal abduction of a baby from a maternity hospital. This occurs when Charlie Piper’s visit re-awakens in her memories of her time as a TB patient at Granitefield, and leads to new contemplations, firstly of
the scars that signalled her own brush with death, and her re-birth through life-giving surgery, and subsequently to new thoughts about producing a baby. In these latter musings, Irene’s focus is not on the joys of motherhood, but on the creation of a ‘new wound’ on her body. Her fantasies of childbirth are suggestive of a form of masochism, the origins of which might be traced to her social conditioning both at home and in the sanatorium. She imagines herself as devoid of agency in the whole process of giving birth; she is convinced that any child would have to be delivered by radical and violent intervention, which would ‘mean another slashing of skin, a new wound’ (Morrissy 1997:54). She entertains the certainty that delivery would necessarily be by Caesarean section; with the child being ‘torn from her, yanked out like her shattered ribs had been’ (Morrissy 1997:54). Irene’s morbid imaginings are totally self-focused at this stage: her mental images are of further damage to her own body; she has no mental images of new life, of giving birth to a living child, of life as a mother with a child to care for.

Irene’s reflections on having a child are fuelled by further morbid imaginings that take the form of the laboratory creation of a child from the ribs (imagined as pickled ghosts) that were removed from her body during her treatment for tuberculosis. Anne Fogarty has pointed out that her musings appropriate[s] the patriarchal myth of parthenogenesis and uses it as a vehicle for a story of maternal longing that defies the laws of nature and offsets her sense of physical dispossession (Fogarty 2002:68).

Irene’s imaginings are also reminiscent of the creation of the Frankenstein monster: doctors grinding her bones, mixed with mother’s milk in a ‘bubbling laboratory’, (Morrissy 1997:55), with the prettified plaster-cast baby being baked in an oven,
referencing, perhaps, and mocking, the plaster statue of the Infant Jesus of Christian iconography. Rather than a child conceived through sexual congress and love with her husband, and nurtured in the womb from her own flesh and blood, Irene’s thoughts linger on this second model of parthenogenesis, envisioning a child as one created from herself alone; one that would be created from ‘dust and ashes’; a child of her ‘first loss’ (Morrissy 1997:55). From such perverse longings, this child is imagined in more concrete form, and a new fantasy is born when Irene convinces herself that a child, her child alone – ‘the fruit of Eve’s ribs’ (1997:55) rather than the product of Adam’s, exists in a hospital somewhere, alive and waiting to be found by her, her rightful mother.

The novel shows that it is from her solitary imaginings, and from her need to recuperate those parts of her self she feels were torn from her in the sanatorium, that the thoughts of a child take root within Irene. Her mental models of childbirth can be seen to move from the pathogenic, introducing new injury to her body, to the extremes of medicalisation and to commodification, with laboratory manufacture bringing a baby to life and, eventually to a turn back to a parody of the terms of Biblical creation. Ironically, these are all fantasies that rest on the interventions of men, and oppose timeless concepts of what is natural to motherhood. Social conditioning may be seen to have brought Irene to rely on male intervention: Dr. Clemens, who cures her tuberculosis, is described as ‘the first man to rescue her’, with Stanley Godwin, as the second (Morrissy 1997:14). Expecting retribution for her lie about her false pregnancy, she thought of fleeing – ‘until she realised there was nowhere to go, and no man to save her’ (Morrissy 1997:45).
In Morrissy’s construction, Irene is shown as unable to think of her act of child-abduction as morally wrong, which figures her as far removed from reality or empathy by her fantasies and needs. However, in her pursuit of her own ends, Irene is shown, as before, to exercise agency with a cunning and control that takes her right to the neonatal ward of the hospital to fulfill her needs. Her feelings when she takes the child into her arms are again narcissistic and self-focused: she believes the child’s fontanelle is fluttering to her pulse; she feels they are ‘as one’ (Morrissy 1997:70). In view of Irene’s history of sterile relationships, her feelings for the child may be seen in the light of Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that for the woman acquiring a child, ‘the infant satisfies that aggressive eroticism which is not fully satisfied in the male embrace’ (de Beauvoir 1984:527), or in the light of her further claim that a woman obtains in her child what man seeks in woman: an other, combining nature and mind, who is to be both prey and double (de Beauvoir 1984:527).

Abandonment by her family, the plunder of her self and her body through x-ray examinations and surgery, and her deprivation of fulfilling sexual and social interaction all point to a position where it is not maternal desire, but a desperate need to recuperate herself, that provides the impetus for Irene’s acquisition of a child.

Irene’s fantasising of the child imagined as ‘the fruit of Eve’s ribs’ (Morrissy 1997:55) does not divorce the child from the imprint of patriarchy, since Eve’s creation was derived from the rib of Adam, himself created from dust by an Almighty Father. Yet the text suggests that it was Irene’s wish that this baby should be a non-patriarchal child, the fruit of Eve’s ribs, rather than of Adam’s: when asked where the baby has come from, she alleges it to be the child of her phantom pregnancy that
Stanley had named ‘Pearl’, insisting ‘And this time she’s mine, all mine’ (Morrissy 1997:76). However, when the additional lie that the child is Irene’s own, fathered by Charlie Piper, is responded to by her rape with violence by her husband, and his actions accepted by Irene as just punishment ‘for all the things Stanley did not know about her’ (Morrissy 1997:78), the suggestion is that patriarchal order is re-established. But again Irene de-legitimises the baby within the community with a further lie, announcing that ‘the child was adopted, an unwanted baby, a product of sin’ (Morrissy 1997:79). Acceptance on Stanley’s part that ‘Pearl was a well for both of their secrets’ (Morrissy 1997:80) indicates a stand-off in male-female power relationships, with gratification of both maternal and paternal desire achieved, if only temporarily. As a character, Stanley is feminised, and maternalised, on several occasions throughout the novel; his willingness to keep up pretence, to ‘live the lie of the happy marriage’ (Rich 2001:34) allies him further with maternity through the kind of social negotiations that are common to the other mother figures in this work, and offers him, perhaps, as an alternative model of mothering, or perhaps, as acting to highlight through a male figure, the contradictions demanded in women’s mothering.

The maternal construction which proffers the ‘mother without child’ appropriating the child of another woman invites from the reader something akin to the Biblical judgement required of Solomon. Who is the more fitting mother? Who is the rightful mother? the mother who so wants the baby she is prepared to risk everything in order to gain her ‘Pearl of Great Price’, or the biological child-mother, Rita Spain who, having been repelled by the sight of her premature baby in the incubator, having even momentarily, welcomed the idea that her baby might have died, later comes to the guilty conclusion that someone else ‘had wanted her baby
more than she had’ (Morrissy 1997:126). In comments on the resolution of a parental rights law suit and the debate around issues of surrogacy in the U.S.A., Elaine Tuttle Hansen states what she claims to be the prevailing view of society – ‘to want a child too much – so much that one breaks the law – is still to prove that one isn’t really a fit mother, that one can’t subordinate one’s own needs for the child to the best interests of the child’ (Tuttle Hansen 1997:23). Hansen further claims that, in contemporary western culture, ‘The ‘good’ woman and mother can speak only to erase her authority, to renounce possession, to disown her desire’ (Tuttle Hansen 1997:23). A passage in the novel which shows that Irene realises that the law has probably caught up with her, and that Pearl is about to be taken from her, stages Irene as the ‘good mother’ of this scenario. This passage provides evidence of a ‘proper’ house-hold, of loving parents, with nursery toys and bed-time stories, with recollections of illness and dangers surmounted, but it carries also Irene’s acknowledgement that their days together were ‘days of stolen happiness’ (Morrissy 1997:86) that she recognises will be brought to an end through the intervention of the state authorities. While society is shown to come down on the side of the biological mother, the novel shows that society’s primary consideration in the return of the child to that mother is based on legal ownership, not on the ‘best interests of the child,’ or on who is likely to be the most fitting mother; or, indeed, who most desired to act in a maternal capacity towards her, thus demonstrating the lowly position granted to maternal desire in the hierarchy of social regulation, despite the sustained maintenance of beliefs to the contrary.
Maternal Ambivalence

Maternal ambivalence has long been an issue of concern to feminist thinkers, and has featured prominently in feminist discussions of motherhood. De Beauvoir, commenting on the conflicting emotions experienced by newly pregnant young women, and also on women’s silences surrounding these emotions, states that

Pregnancy and motherhood are variously experienced in accordance with the woman’s true attitude, which may be one of revolt, resignation, satisfaction, or enthusiasm’ (de Beauvoir 1984:510).

Adrienne Rich writes of ‘the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness’ (Rich 1995:22) and Hirsch, wondering where the voices of mothers are in scholarly accounts, asked ‘where are their experiences with maternal pleasure and frustration, joy and anger?’ (Hirsch 1989:23). Tuttle Hansen’s discussion on motherhood raises questions about mothers to whom ‘mothering does not come easily’ (Tuttle-Hansen 1997:15). Ambivalence towards the experience of motherhood itself, and also in mother/daughter relationships figures significantly in the novels under examination here. Maternal feelings of ambivalence are shown to derive from the weight of myth surrounding motherhood, from the essentialist nature afforded in society to maternal love, and from the changes that motherhood inevitably introduces into a woman’s life. Ambivalent emotions are shown to arise also from the dilemmas experienced by the mother rearing daughters as to whether to continue the pattern of indoctrination into the status quo deemed suitable to equip young women for life, or to set them on a path against it. Personal ambivalence towards the social order that confines mothers to just one role, regardless of personal or vocational callings in other directions is also an issue.
In *Mother of Pearl*, maternal ambivalence surfaces as a major theme in the character of the teenaged Rita Golden, whose first child is stolen from the maternity hospital, and not returned to her until four year later. Through this character, the protagonist for part of the work, the novel exposes the tyranny of maternal myths, pointing up the guilt and shame Rita experiences over her lack of those responses deemed appropriate to motherhood, and the role played by society in shaping or in demanding approved maternal emotions and types of behaviour.

**The Reluctant Mother**

The myths of the perfect mother, holding out the possibilities of constant and unconditional maternal love and of total self-surrender have been so pervasive, that it has been difficult for women not to internalise them, or to elude a sense of guilt at failure to fulfil the expectations raised by them. The myths can also, of course, be quite seductive to the mother. As Nakano Glenn observes in her essay on the ideologies of motherhood

We are reluctant to give up the idea that motherhood is special. Pregnancy, birth and breast-feeding are such powerful bodily experiences and the emotional attachment to the infant so intense, that it is difficult for women who have gone through these experiences and emotions to think that they do not constitute unique female experiences that separate them from men (Nakano Glenn 1994:22-23).

However, as is shown in the case of the teen-aged Rita, discussed below, motherhood is perhaps even more difficult for the woman who has not experienced the ‘right’ emotions during pregnancy and childbirth.
Rita Golden, rushed into pregnancy and marriage soon after her eighteenth birthday, enjoys none of the bloom that pregnancy often brings. She feels revulsion towards the foetus within her; is horrified by the ‘stick-like’ premature ‘creature’, a daughter, that is delivered from her body with surgical intervention; appalled at the greed and ferocity of other babies at their mother’s breasts, and ‘both baffled and irritated’ by the ‘dreamy calm’ which the other new mothers fall into when breast-feeding. She is deprived of ‘the hypnotic kind of union, like being in love’ (Morrissy 1996:120) that she can observe all around her., and is relieved to be sent home while her baby remains in the hospital. If Rita has no feelings of motherly love towards her daughter, she is, herself, equally unmothered: a remarkable aspect of her alienated state is that her consciousness never reaches back towards her own fairly recently dead mother. Her mother-in-law, who pressed for the marriage to take place, is presented in the novel as a totally negative mother figure, and is seen by Rita to be more interested in the healthy boy delivered to another woman than in the puny granddaughter that Rita has so unwillingly produced.

When Rita is informed of her baby’s abduction, she momentarily indulges the ‘wicked thought’ (Morrissy 1996:125) of its death or absence, with the fleeting hope that the happenings of the last few months of her life could be obliterated, and that she might be granted a new start. She is plagued later on by superstitious recriminations and guilt, and with the belief that because she had had her palm read by a traveller woman who had called to her door that ‘The tinkers had a claim on her child’ (Morrissy 1996:114). She faces the ‘terrible truth’ that ‘someone had wanted her baby more than she had’ (Morrissy 1996:126). Rita’s ambivalence towards her first-born daughter surfaces again when the child is restored to her after four traumatic years.
The narration has disclosed her frantic turn to a sort of magical religion in the years between that led her, in the early days, to the delusion that her child had been consigned to hell in punishment for her, Rita’s, sins, and later, as the text indicates, to the blessed, but equally deluded belief that her baby had joined the angels in heaven: ‘An angel baby, a child of flight, gifted in wisdom and foresight’ (Morrissy 1996:144). With Rita’s capacity to give up hope for her child’s return, to eventually yield her to some heavenly power, the novel seems to be putting the ideal of the constancy of maternal love under strain. However, the novel challenges this latter notion itself: because of Rita’s youth and immaturity, and the traumatic events that have shaped her life in the interim, it is impossible to draw firm conclusions about maternal feelings based on her feelings for her child, or to judge them in the light of the norms of the maternal reaction of women who have not suffered such trauma. Simone de Beauvoir has observed that

The mother’s relation with her children takes form with the totality of her life; it depends upon her relations with her husband, her past, her occupation, herself (de Beauvoir 1984:537).

Rita’s story positions her not just as a reluctant mother: she is presented as a traumatised victim of circumstances that neither nature nor society has equipped her to deal with. Rita’s traumas have included the accidental conception and birth of an extra-marital second child, which forms the pretext for a new start to her marriage to Mel, by which time she sees herself as ‘the wiser and more treacherous’ (Morrissy 1997:147) partner. This is followed soon after by her husband’s murder in a case of mistaken identity, a tragic event she believes to be the act of God exacting his part of the bargain she made when she had offered Mel’s life to get her first baby back. The return of her stolen child is not seen by her as the ‘miracle’ announced by her parish
priest (Morrissy 1997:156), but as God keeping his part of her treacherous bargain. In Rita’s consciousness, however, that bargain had not been her only treachery: she knows herself to be the most shameful of mothers: ‘a mother who, in her heart, had given up on her first born as dead’ (Morrissy 1996:160). Ignorant, if no longer innocent, the weight of maternal myth is shown to press heavily upon the teen-aged mother. Anne Fogarty has suggested that the novel ‘opens up to investigation the notion that maternal love is a natural and instinctive aspect of the female economy’ (Fogarty 2000:68). However, Rita’s story is one of maternal loss and ambivalence, not of maternal love, and as in the case of Irene, the woman who abducts Rita’s baby, so many and so extreme are the vicissitudes of her life, that it is difficult to make any valid generalised judgements on aspects of female economy, maternal or otherwise in her case in Morrissy’s post-modern novel.

The concept of unconditional maternal love is not just put under question, but is trivialised, in that part of the novel where Rita goes to claim the recovered child: The text shows Rita’s concern to be more centred on the optics of the family grouping than on any natural or biological relationship.

But for the birthmark, Rita would have chosen the flaxen-haired child … because she would have looked well with Stella. She certainly wasn’t going to go for the one with the bandy legs and a cold sore (Morrissy 1997:159).

Owing to the fractured nature of the relationships that both Rita and Irene are shown to endure, and the experiences of extreme loss and betrayal they suffer in times of youthful vulnerability, the possibilities for the development of what might be legitimately considered natural human responses, including the responses of maternal love, are greatly diminished by the workings of the novel. Anne Fogarty writes that
In this postmodern fable, imagined relations replace biological bonds, thus destabilising filial and maternal identities and rendering them more elastic and expansive’ (Fogarty 2002:113).

Postmodernism turns to the simulacrum: maternal cathexes in this novel are directed towards dream children and photographic images; a potential child is sacrificed to a ‘phantom, ‘a willful sprite, a demon, perhaps’ (Morrissy 1997:216) of false memory.

As detailed earlier, Tuttle Hansen has written that ‘The ‘good’ woman and mother can speak only to erase her authority, to renounce possession, to disown her desire;’ (Tuttle-Hansen 1997:23). In Rita’s case, this scenario is reversed; she is too ashamed to act or speak against the dictums of maternal devotion, and while state and church authorities act to restore the child to her ‘rightful’ mother, for Rita it means accepting back ‘a stranger who had been suckled by wolves’, ‘a traitor …; a child who lived because Mel was dead’ (Morrissy 1997:160). Accepting this child involves a fresh start, when ‘every fresh start contained a lie’ (Morrissy 1997:160), which Rita eventually does, in terms associated with New Testament treachery, ‘with a kiss’ (Morrissy 1997:161) placed on the child’s forehead. Again, recourse to lies and deceit influence Rita’s decision that this child must never know the facts of her earliest years, and illustrates the power of the myths of maternal love: as a woman whose experiences of motherhood departed from arbitrarily-imposed norms she feels compelled into shame, silences and deceit; society provides no space in which she could confess to indifference or ambivalence towards her child. Her decision ironically counters the wishes of the ‘illegitimate’ mother, Irene, who was anxious that the child should be made aware of her earlier history, and leads to the psychic destruction of her daughter.
Rita’s reluctance to mother surfaces in later years in the recollections of her recovered daughter – recollections that also reflect the prevailing expectations of standards of behaviour appropriate to the mother. Pearl, now Mary, reveals of her mother that ‘She confided in us, as girls, as if she were a glamorous, elder sister. She liked us to call her Rita. Her girlishness made me uneasy’ (Morrissy 1996:170). Mary finds affirmation of her feelings towards her mother in her grandfather’s reaction to Rita’s week-end get-togethers

When will that girl ever grow up? … As if he, too, wanted her to be a different kind of mother and was endorsing my wish for it to be so (Morrissy 1996:189).

De Beauvoir claims that in the daughter, the mother seeks her double:

She projects upon her all the ambiguity of her relation with herself; and when the otherness of this alter ego manifests itself, the mother feels herself betrayed (de Beauvoir 1984:532).

It is this attitude that emerges in Rita’s relationship with her younger daughter, Stella. In Mary’s recollections Rita is recalled as rejoicing in Stella’s teen-age world of make-up, clothes and boyfriends; as flirting and sharing cigarettes with the teen-aged boys, as sitting up late in order to hear Stella’s confidences about parties or dances. Rita’s behaviour is shown to have the effects of excluding Mary – ‘I felt excluded and abandoned’ (Morrissy 1997:200) – and of overwhelming Stella, who forces the separation of mother and daughter by emigrating to Australia:

she wants to have my life’. … ‘She wants to be Rita Golden again as if none of this, you, me or even that fucking baby that forced her to get married had ever happened (Morrissy 1997:206).
Rita’s attempts at living a life beyond the narrow confines of motherhood, even vicariously, evoke disapproval, disappointment and impatience rather than compassion or understanding from her father and her daughters, each of whom would have wished her to be a different sort of mother.

**The Refusing Mother**

‘Cursed, as I am, by a savage reversal of the natural instinct, I have killed his child’ is the self-narrated confession of Mary/Pearl as she recovers from a self-inflicted abortion of a child she had conceived in love with her husband. Through this first-person account, Mary/Pearl further reveals that the pregnancy was a mistake, ‘Neither wanted or unwanted’ (Morrissy 1997:213); that she had always thought of herself as barren, but that she regarded the pregnancy as an ‘unsought-for miracle’ (Morrissy 1997:213) which she kept secret from everybody else. So why the horrific act of destruction? The roots of her horrific act may be traced to the disruptions of her early years: her abduction as a newborn infant by Irene, and her abrupt return after four years to her biological mother; or to Rita’s decision to keep the truth of her early years from her daughter, and to impose false memories of those years upon her, thus stifling her ability to grieve over the loss of the first parents she had known. Perhaps the most telling factor may be considered to be Rita’s fabrication of a stillborn older sister who so occupied Mary/Pearl’s confused imagination that she was experienced by her as more real than her living sister. Adrienne Rich’s thinking provides a perspective through which to view Mary’s and her mother’s actions: ‘Lies are usually attempts to make everything simpler – for the liar – than it really is, or ought to be’ (Rich 2001:32), Rich states, adding the assertion that in consequence of her deception,
the liar loses a part of her self, and deprives herself of a part of her life. Making everything simpler operates as a survival mechanism for Rita, but the consequences for her daughter are that she, also, is obliged to lie to herself, and to displace her own memories on to an imaginary child whom she calls Jewel, thus closing out a part of her life. Mary/Pearl narrates some of the effects of this splitting of herself:

I worried that one night I would wake up and find that our sister had slipped into my place and that Stella or my mother would not even notice that I was gone (Morrissy 1997:185).

Of her relationship with her husband, Jeff, she narrates, ‘I could not trust to happiness; it seemed constantly endangered’ (Morrissy 1997:212). Legitimate concerns for her husband’s safety in her adult years is experienced in terms of ‘a version of closeness’ but more ‘like a haunting, a rehearsal for the dreaded loss’ (Morrissy 1997:212). The imaginary Jewel was allowed to fade from her consciousness as Mary reached adolescence but, again as Rich points out,

The unconscious wants truth, as the body does. The complexity and fecundity of dreams come from the complexity and fecundity of the unconscious struggling to fulfill that desire (Rich 2001:33).

In Mary/Pearl’s case her unconscious refuses disconnection, with the result that the ‘absent presence’ of her earlier self that haunted her throughout her childhood, revisits her with renewed intensity during her pregnancy: ‘I was being revisited by the dream of a child I had created so long ago that I was amazed she still remembered me’ (Morrissy 1997:214). Anne Fogarty has commented that
all three of Morrissy’s protagonists invent ghostly daughters or sisters through whom they attempt to allay, and also to voice, the many anxieties and fears that sub-tend the mother-daughter relationship (Fogarty 2002:113).

While not disputing Fogarty’s interpretation with regard to the mother/daughter relationship, I believe that the recourse to fantasy daughters signals women’s difficulties with the experience of motherhood itself in a world so dominated by the myths and ideologies of constant and unremitting maternal love. Mary/Pearl’s main inheritance from her biological mother, Rita, would seem to be an overwhelming sense of guilt over the mental relinquishing of a child,

But Jewel, Jewel was fully formed, a child who was part of me, whom I had nurtured and loved and thought I had lost. How could I have abandoned her? (Morrissy 1997:215).

Mary/Pearl’s sense of guilt is intensified by the notion that her own mother had not adequately filled the role of mother, and the notion that there is no one to whom she could turn for help.

Fogarty’s critique asserts that ‘Biological kinship reveals itself to be an insecure basis for maternal affection in the novel’ (Fogarty 2002:112). Such kinship can be seen also to be an insecure basis for filial affection. Commentators (Fogarty 2002, McDermott 2003) seem agreed that it is the loss of what she remembers as her first home and of the mother-daughter connection that troubles Mary/Pearl. However, in her confused recollections throughout this section of the novel, the text offers possibilities that it was the paternal, rather than the maternal bond that was being mourned: Mary uses a neutral pronoun in her reference to ‘one of my many guilty secrets, wishing for a parent other than my own’ (Morrissy 1997:170-1). In the
incident where she is upended by Rita in order to dislodge the sweet given to her by the rent-man, Mary recalls that the sweet fell out of her mouth: ‘There it sat, like a lie, my sly, concealed longing for a different kind of love’ (Morrissy 1997:174). The presence of the rent man, and his surreptitious kindness, suggests that it was memories of her surrogate father that could have been triggered; the name that reverberates from her last memory of Jewel is that of her surrogate father, ‘Stanley’. Later she confesses that

The lopsidedness of our house constantly reiterated itself. I longed for the saving-grace of Grandfather Golden or my long-dead father (Morrissy 1997:200-1).

I have noted earlier the figuration of Stanley in maternal terms; the text offers possibilities that Stanley was the ‘different kind of love’ desired by Mary/Pearl, with Morrissy thus de-privileging the primacy of the mother/daughter bond. Rich has written that

a nurturing father, who replaces, rather than complements a mother, *must be loved at the mother’s expense*, and that the mother is twice-lost, if love for him takes the place of love for her’ (Rich 1995:245).

Mary/Pearl’s story is one of multiple losses: her natural parents, surrogate parents, grandfather, a ‘sister who keeps her distance’ (1997:217) and, above all, the deprivation of any sense of an integrated identity and of the possibilities of love. Rich has also written that

Until a strong line of love, confirmation, and example stretches from mother to daughter, from woman to woman across the generations, women will still be wandering in the wilderness (Rich 1995:246),
However, in Mary/Pearl’s case, even this line of love would seem to be insufficient: her desire reaches back to a time ‘Before birth. Not the scaly, red, wet burbling of the womb (1997:217). Morrissy’s text offers the possibility that Mary/Pearl’s ‘memories’ reach back to an ‘immaculate concept’, the immaterial ‘phantom baby’ created in Irene’s imagination and nourished in Stanley’s, of ‘someone whose presence I had never known’ (Morrissy 1997:218). In line with the pessimistic post-modern tenor of the novel, Mary/Pearl’s inheritance from both her biological and her surrogate parents seems to be emotional investment in the simulacrum, the loss of the real, and an incapacity for life or for moving on.
Conclusion

Both novels examined for this chapter show signs of feminist awareness in that both works expose the workings of the myths of motherhood as gendered social constructs that operate in patriarchal society to control and direct the mother. The novels also show that the traditional idealisation of motherhood does not benefit the mother, but is used to set boundaries to women’s activities and behaviour, and to categorise as ‘other’ those who stray beyond what are deemed to be acceptable norms – the ‘unmarried mother’, and the ‘reluctant’ or ‘ambivalent’ who display signs of wanting a life beyond motherhood and domesticity. Redekop’s concept of the ‘Mock Mother’, introduced by Tuttle-Hansen, shows how categorisation fails to encompass the richness and complexity, or the sufferings and losses of maternal life; and Rich’s concept of the ‘institution’ of motherhood, as well as her essay, ‘Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying’ (1977) illuminate both how constrictive the ideologies of motherhood may be, and how mothers are forced into duplicity and deceit either in conforming with them, or through contesting them.

Boylan’s comic approach in Room for a Single Lady is very welcome in that she manages to make light of her characters’ oppressions while, at the same time highlighting the difficulties they face. Her provision of so many un-idealised mother figures opens up a wide variety of aspects of motherhood, and of what makes for acceptable mothering, and her treatment of the mother/daughter plot in the relationship between Edie and Bridie is free of the hostility and ‘mother blame’ enshrined in so much of Irish women’s literary fiction. Boylan’s miscellany of ‘mothers’ may be seen to show initiative and courage in trying to shape their own lives and are rewarded at the end of the novel with successful outcomes to their
ambitions, constituting, I believe, re-visionings of the mother in the terms of my thesis. On the other hand, the dystopian world created in *Mother of Pearl* yields at the end of the novel only a dysfunctional mother, Rita, a deluded would-be mother, Irene and a depressed and haunted maternal ‘refusenik’, Mary/Pearl. Morrissy’s post-modern assault on maternal instinct, on maternal love and on sincere human relationships leaves a wasteland from which no nourishment can be provided, and where any sort of nurture is rooted in lies and deceit. Yet, due to its originality, and its post-modern irony, Morrissy’s novel may be said to re-vision the mother to the extent that the novel debunks all sentimentalisation or idealisation of the mother. She may also be said to have provided an alternative vision of the maternal in Stanley Godwin, the nurturer of the first fantasy baby, and of the stolen child, making Stanley the mother of Pearl.
CHAPTER THREE

Choosing the Unlived Life
in Deirdre Madden’s One by One in the Darkness and Jennifer Johnston’s Two Moons

Introduction

A great deal of feminist discussion on motherhood focuses on young mothers and on childbirth but, of course, motherhood does not stop when children are reared. My interest in examining the mothers in the above two novels in this chapter arose, initially, from the circumstances that in both works, the mothers are in their older years: Emily, the principal mother figure in Madden’s novel is in her late sixties, and Mimi, the senior mother in Two Moons is aged eighty, while her daughter, Grace, also a mother, is fifty. A further, central reason for examining these works in this chapter was the fact that, in contrast to the women in the previous chapter, two of the mothers, Emily in Madden’s novel, and Mimi in Johnston’s, are represented as ‘complicit’ or ‘compliant mothers’; that is, they are shown to have been ‘women of their times’ (the early decades of the twentieth century), and to have accepted without protest the ideologies and restrictions attaching to womanhood and motherhood in the political and religious circumstances in which they found themselves. As young women, their envisaged futures would have been to live ‘outside history’ as dutiful and loving wives and mothers, supporting and nurturing their husbands and children; they both may be seen to have chosen readily ‘the unlived life’ of women under patriarchal protection or domination and in conformity with the norms of domestic maternity. Grace, Mimi’s daughter, is portrayed in seeming contrast, as a non-patriarchal woman, a divorcee devoted to her acting career who states that she ‘lives through
other people’s words and ideas’ (Johnston 1998:112), but who is not as inwardly-confident as her outward actions project. Grace conducts a constant interior monologue, at one stage admitting to herself, ‘I know everyone’s lines except my own. Grace’s lines escape me.’ (Johnston 1998:124). A salient point to emerge from both novels is that however tangled they may become the ties of motherhood do not evaporate with death, distance, age or incompatibility.

For the title of this chapter, I borrowed the phrase, ‘choosing the unlived life’ from a poem of Eavan Boland’s, although I have not constructed my analyses around the poem. ‘Choosing the unlived life’ paraphrases lines from Boland’s poem ‘The Unlived Life’ (Boland 1989:78) which sets the small lives of the women settlers of Kentucky in contrast with the ‘iron omen’ of the steam train that announced the passing of one way of life and the arrival of another, both of which existed beyond the domestic world of women and children. The concepts entertained in this phrase seem particularly apt for the two older mothers in these novels, and seem not inappropriate for Grace, in view of the fact that despite all her worldliness, she is shown to evade many of the truths not just of her own life, but of those closest to her also and, in this way, to ‘choose the unlived life’. Another of Boland’s poems, ‘Outside History’ informs the concept of women in these novels living ‘outside history’.

The mothers examined in this chapter occupy marginal positions relative to the separate Irish states in which they live. Madden’s novel features a Catholic family living in rural Northern Ireland, and the mother, Emily, is shown as having had an awareness since young adulthood that she, a Catholic, lived under Protestant rule for a Protestant people. Johnston’s ‘mothers’ are atheist or post-Christian emanating from a
mixed-religion background, but carrying resonances of an over-hanging Protestant ethos that places them in a position of subtle negation of the nationalistic mores of the Republic of Ireland state. In addition, social class, an understated affluence and the exigencies of Mimi’s old age also serve to set them somewhat apart; with the exception of the cleaning woman, Mrs. O’Brien, none of the interacting characters in the novel are Irish. The manifestations of political and patriarchal opposition to difference contrast starkly in the two novels: the violence of the Northern Ireland Troubles crashes into the life of Emily and her family, with the murder of her husband, while Mimi’s life is affected by the slow drip of social legislation and cultural norms in the Republic that, while Roman Catholic inspired, found favour also with many elements of other persuasions and none in a socially conservative society; laws prohibiting divorce and homosexual practices being most relevant to the stories of the women in this novel. In both novels the maternal characters must face the facts that living ‘outside history’ offers no guarantee of protection or happiness. Choosing the ‘unlived life’ or opting to live ‘outside history’ does not pay off for the compliant mothers in the novels under consideration, any more than it does for Grace with the ‘stand alone’ policy she is shown to embrace.

Despite shared similarities, I have examined these novels separately: my analyses call upon an eclectic mix of theorists and commentators some of whose work has been useful for both novels and some relevant to just one. The chapter is formed around two parts, with Part One devoted to One by One in the Darkness and Part Two to Two Moons. For ease of reference, the theoretical influences brought to bear on Two Moons are discussed in Part Two. I have arranged my examination of One by One in the Darkness under three headings: under ‘Choosing a Narrative’, I examine
the personal history and early identity formation created for Emily, the principal mother figure in the novel. Emily’s narrative follows the conventional narrative path in which the husband’s story is dominant (the vertical axis); under the heading ‘Charlie’s Wife: The ‘One’ and the ‘Other’, I use Simone de Beauvoir’s arguments on the social construction of gender, and the concept of ‘woman’ as the ‘other’ to shed light on Madden’s construction of Emily as a young woman, and as wife and mother. The third heading, ‘Mothers, Daughters and Maternal Thinking’, uses Sara Ruddick’s concept of ‘maternal thinking’ to illuminate the positive and negative aspects of Emily’s mothering, in the first instance, and also to show how the narratives of Emily’s mother, and mother-in-law, placed alongside the relationships between Emily and her youngest daughter, present the problematic nature of inherited trauma and blame from mother to daughter. In this last regard, I believe that it is not just family dynamics that are brought under scrutiny in the novel, but the larger social and political context of Northern Ireland, with the critique urging change: change from the family dynamic that perpetuates injury and appropriation of people’s rights and lives against a background of silence, and change in political discourse and activity on similar grounds.
Part One

One by One in the Darkness

Introduction


Madden has been described as ‘a highly-sophisticated, very contemporary writer’ (Parker 2000:82), and has been included by Fogarty in a group of women fiction writers whose works may be considered to be ‘symptomatic of a fundamental transition in Irish culture and politics’ (Fogarty 2000:60-61). Parker’s essay rejects a claim that attaches Madden’s novel to the ‘lingering realist tradition,’ and makes a case for its consideration in terms of ‘postmodernism’ – a claim that is endorsed by Kennedy Andrews. Parker, points to ‘self-reflexive references, allusions to writing and other kinds of texts’ (Parker 2000:83), and Kennedy Andrews detects echoes from the poetry of both Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley. In his definitive comment on Madden’s literary genealogy, Kennedy Andrews, invoking observations of Thomas Kinsella on the ancestry of the [male] Irish writer, declares Joyce to be ‘the true father’, granting such paternal literary ancestry on the grounds that Madden may be seen to combine, as did Joyce, “Irish tradition” while simultaneously admitting the modern world’ (Kennedy Andrews 2003:161). No maternal literary ancestry is posited
by Kennedy Andrews, but it is possible to see in the novel an acknowledgement of Polly Devlin’s memoir, *All of Us There* (1983), with similarities residing in the closeness of the family of girls growing up on a farm in Northern Ireland, the small facial scar sustained in childhood which acts as a reminder of origins, the departure of one sister to London to work on a fashion magazine, and the slight efforts at Anglicisation, evidenced by accent or name change, this re-echoing Edna O’Brien’s character, Kate, in *The Country Girls Trilogy*.

The novel is described by Christine St. Peters as ‘a saga of a loving Catholic family’ (St. Peters 2000:119); Kennedy Andrews describes it as ‘essentially biographical fiction, the assembling of a family archive’, and also as ‘a trauma narrative exploring the effects of violent death on those closest to the victim’ (Kennedy Andrews 2003:152). Set in a week just prior to the 1994 IRA ceasefire, the narrative centres on the lives of three sisters and their mother, with flashbacks to their various childhood lives, to earlier events that formed their consciousness and identities, which included the rise of the Civil Rights movement, the eruption of the Troubles and the continuing civil strife that had led, two years previously, to the sectarian murder by Loyalist paramilitaries of a beloved husband and father. Earlier feelings of plenitude and security are set in contrast with the feelings of loss and hopelessness that have taken hold of the family members in varying ways in the time ensuing since the murder. The narrative movement in time and location and between generations and characters opens up spaces where sub-plots and intergenerational issues are explored and, in Ingman’s Kristevan reading, ‘registers a protest against linear time as the novel sways between the 1960 and the 1990s (Ingman 2007:163).
The story is told in the third person, with the retrospective chapters focalised through different characters; this produces a sense of subjectivity and personal consciousness that makes the characters more real, and serves to illuminate the sense of family, community and history that had pervaded life in the Quinn household. Emily, the mother of the Quinn sisters, and the focus of my study, is figured by means of an external narrator, through the eyes of other characters, through dreams, and through the workings of the plot.

While Parker’s (2000) critique concentrates on the Quinn sisters, to the exclusion of the mother character, lending some support to the contentions of a number of feminist commentators regarding the neglect of the mother and themes of motherhood in Irish literary fiction (McCarthy 2004); (Fogarty 2000; 2002); (Weekes 1990), Kennedy Andrews (2003) includes the mother character in his study, as does Ingman (2007). In remarks based on the structuralist theories of Roman Jakobsen, and post-modernist theories of Fredric Jameson, Kennedy Andrews points out that it is Emily’s murdered husband, Charlie, who functions in the work as both an artistic ‘dominant’ and a symbolic historical ‘dominant’, whose death precipitates a necessary “restructuration” of identity, (Kennedy Andrews 2003:160). Kennedy Andrews’ first point is validated in that all the surviving members of the Quinn family are forced to renegotiate their pasts in order to deal with the present. His second point that, Charlie’s death may be seen as an historical marker of social change in Northern Irish society also holds good and might, I believe, be extended to the mother, Emily: Kennedy Andrews writes –

Charlie stands for traditional notions of rural life, family, religion, sexuality and politics, at a point of cultural transition when the pressures of modernity
are also making themselves felt in terms of the increased social mobility and independence of women … (Kennedy Andrews 2003:161).

The traditional values outlined above are shown to be those also accepted almost unquestioningly by Emily. I believe that, while she is not the ‘dominant’ of the novel, she might be regarded as also marking historical change in that she is confronted with changed historical circumstances, and is brought in her later years to deal with many of the altered values of modernity, to show a willingness to learn from the past, and to reject the dangers of a breakdown of relationships within the family. The decision of Emily’s daughter, Cate, to have a child outside of marriage, and without a permanent male partner, touches on changing attitudes towards maternity in contemporary life and, as Kennedy Andrews puts it, ‘represents a radical re-writing of the traditional narrative of the Irish family’ (Kennedy-Andrews 2003:157). This concept might also have been extended to the narrative of the ‘mother’, were it not for the fact that Emily is kept in ignorance of the truth surrounding Cate’s pregnancy. Emily is brought to change her view of Cate’s situation as one in which ‘Cate had been overtaken by calamity’ (Madden 1997:55), the traditional, and often well-founded, maternal stance towards a daughter’s pregnancy outside of marriage, to the view that

You couldn’t always choose what happened in life, but you were free to decide whether or not you thought something was worthy of regrets (Madden 1997:123).

But this change is achieved only through Emily being shielded from the truth by her daughters. The planned resolutions to create a welcoming atmosphere for Cate and her baby, and never to create an atmosphere around the child to reflect, even indirectly, her inner belief that it is a ‘bad show’ for the child to have no father’ (Madden 1997:128), are made in the belief that Cate has been let down with regard to marriage,
and not in the knowledge that she had deliberately left herself open to pregnancy in an uncommitted liaison because she ‘wanted something real’ (Madden 1997:93) in her life. This one small step is the only forward movement allowed to Emily in the week in which the novel is set. However, it is a small step into the future signalling an acceptance of change – something that will affect herself as mother, and also the mothering of Cate in the fullness of time.

Choosing a Narrative

As constructed in the novel, a personal narrative of Emily’s choosing would have been one of living ‘outside history’; of living a life very much in line with Cate’s recollections of her childhood in the opening paragraphs of the work, as a traditional, domesticated Irish Catholic mother, marshalling well-behaved children with picture-filled prayer books at Sunday Mass; buying ice-cream for Sunday dessert, and staying home while the rest of the family went visiting on Sunday afternoon so that she could prepare their dinner. It is not through any action of hers, but through her husband’s sectarian murder that she is propelled ‘inside history’, to become a statistic of the Northern Ireland Troubles, and fodder for the media until a further atrocity would replace his murder. Yet, ‘inside history’ she has no larger role than outside of it: just as she was powerless to prevent Charlie’s murder, she is powerless to control the treatment of it, especially in the British tabloid press where the emphasis of his murder was placed on his brother’s membership of Sinn Féin, with the inference ‘that he had only got what was coming to him’ (Madden 1997:47). With the rejection of the formal complaint against the press treatment made at Emily’s instigation, her role and her story are relegated to the domain of the ‘private tragedies’ of the Northern Ireland
Troubles, and she slips back out of history to mourn her personal loss in the realm of the personal and familial.

The atmosphere of hopelessness and regret attaching to Emily in *One by One in the Darkness* has significance for the re-visioning of the mother: represented almost completely in terms of loss and lack, an air of negativity clings to her throughout the novel. Her personal history is book-ended by the shocking deaths of the two most beloved men in her in life – the sudden death in her early childhood of her father, and in her later years, the murder of her husband by Loyalist paramilitaries. The narrative states that Emily’s spirit has been twice broken – in the first instance, ‘by the time she was twelve’ (Madden 1997:114); this first fracture resulting not just from the death of her father, but from her mother’s harsh response to her childish grief. In addition, the loss of her father involved the loss of their home, and necessitated a move to an aunt’s house in Ballymena. A childhood marked by an unhappiness never addressed, is said to have found expression at first in temper fits and tantrums, and later in sullen resentment towards her mother, such unvoiced protests supporting Ingman’s view that ‘the novel inscribes the semiotic in various ways’ (Ingman 2007:163). Madden uses Emily’s situation to make a larger political and historical point with regard to The Troubles, in stating that spirits, whether those of a child or a society, never break cleanly, and the people who didn’t understand this were shocked when the dull, quiet girl, so eager to please, suddenly displayed a violent temper. They thought these two sides of her were at odds; couldn’t understand that the malevolence was the logical corollary to the obsequiousness (Madden 1997:114).
Emily’s characterisation, as the novel unfolds, provides more evidence of ‘the dull quiet girl’ than of the girl with the violent temper. Although political awareness comes to her as a young adult, with the intrusion of the sound of the Lambeg Drums prior to the 12th July Orange celebrations, and the intuition that ‘these people hated her, hated her, and would give her and her family no quarter’ (Madden 1997:115); her furious questioning of this situation being met with incomprehension on the part of her mother accounts for the situation that to the ‘mild fear that was so habitual that she took it for granted’, was added ‘a bitter anger’ (Madden 1997:115). There is the possibility that her anger was directed as much at her mother’s unquestioning attitude as at the people she believed to hate her. Her feelings from this time remain in the realms of personal grievance, and are never converted into political action or activism; she is never shown to transcend her own emotions; and any deeper political consciousness than that of her younger years finds expression under the steady guidance of her husband, Charlie. Standing beside an RIC officer and shouting support for the Civil Rights marchers years later represents the height of her political involvement, and to a great extent, her attendance at the march with her children can be seen as representing an act of personal defiance against her mother following a disagreement with her over the participants in the marches as much as a political stand. While the novel informs that Emily seemed to have ‘lost her usual timidity and shyness’ (Madden 1997:80) while shouting political slogans, it is Charlie and Helen, the eldest daughter, not Emily, who are credited with the realisation that they are ‘Looking at history’ (Madden 1997:80).

The second assault on Emily’s spirit occurs in the aftermath of Charlie’s murder in his brother’s kitchen, after which time she comes to the consciousness that her ‘heart had been forced shut’ (Madden 1979:125) and that she can’t forgive, and
has no desire for the ability to forgive the killer of her husband. The novel sets out a recurring dream she must endure, ‘one which troubled her night after night, which gave her no peace’ (Madden 1979:125). This dream, which makes an inter-textual reference to Michael Longley’s poem ‘Wounds’, may be interpreted in psychoanalytical terms based on Freud’s concept of the nature of dreams: the narration of the dream is distanced by the use of the third person, until the final first-person sentence that conveys her pain:

She was standing in Lucy’s kitchen, and at her feet was a long thing over which someone had thrown a check table cloth. There were two feet sticking out at one end, wearing a pair of boots she’d helped Charlie to choose in a shop in Antrim. The other end of the cloth was dark and wet; there was a stench of blood and excrement. At the far side of the room, a young man was cowering: eighteen, nineteen years old at the most, a skinny shivering boy in jeans and a tee-shirt, with ugly tattoos on his forearms. His face was red and distorted because he was crying. … “please Missus, I’m sorry for what I did, I’m sorry, so I am, please Missus”. She stood staring at him until he was crying so hard he could no longer make himself understood. Then Emily spoke, quietly, distinctly. “I will never forgive you,” she said. (Madden 1997:125).

Kennedy Andrews points out that dreams in Madden’s narrative ‘encode the tensions of the characters’ psychic lives’ (Kennedy Andrews 2003:154), and can be seen as their attempts to gain control over their circumstances. Emily’s dream of such resolute refusal of forgiveness to a sobbing, youthful assassin (a figure much diminished in the dream from the reality later presented), grants her some control, but it confirms her loss of faith in a God of love and forgiveness, and inserts her inside the bitter inner history of the closed heart and mind that was so much a part of the Northern Ireland Troubles.
Commenting on Freud’s work, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Terry Eagleton explains that

One stage of the dream-work, known as ‘secondary revision’, consists in the reorganisation of the dream so as to present it in the form of a relatively consistent and comprehensible narrative (Eagleton 1992:180).

Ingman cites Anne-Marie Smith’s explanation of the Kristevan view that:

*the unrepresentable may find representation in a type of dreamwork which makes visible and, in the account of the dream, brings into language images and emotion which otherwise have no access to the visible or to language* (c.Ingman 2007:165).

In these respects, while it can be seen that Emily’s recurring nightmare is framed so as to shape a comprehensible narrative of the loss of her husband, the narrative of her loss of faith remains unspeakable:

Oh she couldn’t tell even her own daughters what it was like to wake from a dream like that and to know it was the truth, to know that your heart had been forced shut. To be a woman in her late sixties, to have prayed to God every day of her life, and to be left so that she could feel no compassion, no mercy, only bitterness and hate, was a kind of horror she had never imagined. (Madden 1997:125).

It can be seen that Emily and her family are taken ‘inside’ history by Charlie’s murder, to association with a killing to be documented and investigated officially by the state, and to be reported and sensationalised by the national and international media; her desolation is private, unrecorded, and remains outside of history. In this her grief is set alongside the personal, maternal grieving of other mothers – her neighbour, Mrs. Larkin, who’d been ‘in and out of the mental hospital for years’ (Madden 1997:127) since her son blew himself up while planting an IRA bomb at the onset of the Troubles, and the disbelief of ‘Maguire’s Ma’, who cannot face the fact
that her youngest son is facing conviction as an IRA murderer, and who does not experience the circumstances as history, but as ‘All like a terrible dream’ (Madden 1997:176).

Charlie’s Wife: The ‘One’ and the ‘Other’

Marrying Charlie represents the sole stand on a serious issue that Emily is shown to take independently throughout the novel: her relationship with him is crucial to her construction. It is his welcome influence that is shown to dominate during their years together, and even after his death. Although subject to the same myths and ideologies of femininity and motherhood common to Irish womanhood as the maternal characters featured in the previous chapter, they are not experienced as oppressive. The only instance in which she features as objecting to the social mores of her society is when she questions the expectation that she should not maintain her teaching career after marriage; but while registering a protest, she accepts the convention and surrenders her career. As noted earlier, while some awareness of political oppression surfaces, in her consciousness, no notions of her religion as an oppressive force arise, nor does she display any evidence of feminist consciousness. The single most positive aspect in Emily’s personal narrative is that having met Charlie Quinn, she makes plain her interest in him and that, despite the objections of her mother, and the necessary abandonment of her career, she becomes Charlie’s wife.

In insisting on her own choice of husband, regardless of the existence of better prospects socially and materially, and of her mother’s opposition, Emily disrupts one of de Beauvoir’s mid-twentieth century concepts of ‘The Married
Woman’, where ‘the girl is married, given in marriage by her parents’ (de Beauvoir 1984:446). However, her actions justify another of de Beauvoir’s observations that ‘Economic evolution in woman’s situation is in process of upsetting the institution of marriage’: (de Beauvoir 1984:446). Emily has no wish or need to be ‘given’ in marriage, or to base her choice of husband on whether or not he was a ‘good catch’, as her mother had wanted. As a qualified professional primary school teacher, she has greater independence financially than most women of her time, and probably has better financial prospects than had Charlie. Emily’s choice of Charlie places her closer to the scenario for the young bridegroom, as outlined by de Beauvoir, where she states: ‘Boys get married … they look for an enlargement, a confirmation of their existence, but not the mere right to exist.’ (de Beauvoir (1984:448).

In the light of the loss of her father when she was young, her fractious relationship with her mother, and the want of warmth in her home, it can be seen that marrying Charlie does, indeed, offer the prospects of enlargement and affirmation, not just confirmation of her right to exist. The narrative relates that she remains in love with him all through their marriage, which may represent something of a re-visioning of the mother in Irish fiction. Indeed, a happily married couple may also be close to representing a radical re-writing of the traditional narrative of the Irish family, and of the mother in Irish women’s literary fiction. A further insight of de Beauvoir’s finds validation in Emily’s characterisation: the claim that for the young woman in marriage her husband is a demigod endued with virile prestige and destined to replace her father: protector, provider, teacher, guide; the wife’s existence is to unfold in his shadow; he is the custodian of values, the sponsor of truth, the ethical vindication of the couple (de Beauvoir 1984:480).
Throughout the novel, Emily seems to find comfort or security only under male aegis, be it father, husband or even the young priest who tries to offer solace in her bereavement, and whom she comes to looks upon as a surrogate son. The most positive aspect of her representation is that having married Charlie Quinn, she has many happy years living under his benign dominion. Kennedy Andrews writes that Charlie ‘is constructed in terms of an entirely benevolent patriarchy’ (Kennedy Andrews 2003:160-161), and Emily suffers no form of domestic oppression: instead, she is shown to receive the constant love and support of her husband. However, that the household, however benign, is as a patriarchal one, and recognised as such, is evident in the scene where Charlie decides that there would be ‘no more nonsense’ about Sally being excused from school – ‘because he hardly ever got involved in matters like this, when he did, there was no turning him’ (Madden 1997:66). Emily never questions the circumstances of her domestic life: to a great extent, she might be said to remain ‘the dull quiet girl, so eager to please’ (Madden 1997:114) of her girlhood. As Charlie’s wife, she can be seen to live as a loving and dutiful wife and mother, and as a compliant member of society, despite the political marginalisation of her community and even, eventually, in the face of British Army intrusion into her home. As Charlie’s widow, all that is left for her to say is ‘The world’s empty to me without my husband’ (Madden 1997:126).

In The Second Sex (1984), de Beauvoir argues that

just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine (de Beauvoir 1984:15).
A problem with Emily’s figuration in terms of the representation of the mother is that it sets her, and almost everything connected with her, as the oblique against which the absolute vertical of her husband, Charlie, and all connected with him, are defined. Emily’s family background of loss and fraught relationships is set against the somewhat idealised, extended Quinn family, a close-knit group, who seem almost organically rooted in their small farms on the shores of Lough Neagh. A meal of fried eels in Uncle Brian’s house connects the Quinn family with the earliest dwellers in Ireland who settled around Lough Neagh in pre-historic times: Emily’s admission that ‘if you’d given her a thousand pounds into her hand, she wouldn’t have been able to skin an eel’ (Madden 1997:34) projects her as less ‘of the soil’, or as a ‘blow-in’ to the area and to the type of life common to its inhabitants. Throughout the narrative Emily is shown as peripheral to most of the other rural customs and folk-life of the area and the family, aspects of life that lend colour and vigour to their world. She is never the one to initiate, or even be party to the visits to see the elk head, or the various holy wells, the woman with the ‘cure,’ or the ancient high cross that the other members of the extended family undertake. While attached to the family and to the life lived by the Quinns by love and good-will, in some nebulous way, she is not rooted in it. She is never shown to participate in the physical work of the farm, nor does she go out to work outside the home. Her only recorded outings seem to be attendance at Sunday Mass and reluctant and infrequent visits to her mother in Ballymena, a relationship not maintained through Emily’s efforts, but through Charlie’s determination ‘to keep as good a link as possible with the family in Ballymena’, on the basis that “Blood’s thicker than water” (Madden 1997:31).
The same pattern of negative representation emerges in relation to the respective grandmothers, Emily’s mother, ‘Granny Kelly’ (she never acquires a first name), and Charlie’s mother, ‘Granny Kate’. As an example, in her critique of the novel, Ingman comments that

In Madden’s novel, their valuing of colours draws the female characters together, as if to value colour is to register a protest against the condition of their lives (Ingman 2007:165).

‘Granny Kelly’ stands outside such a circle in that she is constantly associated with darkness: her black clothes, her bleak, inhospitable house where she had to sit with the curtains drawn because of problems with her eyes and, ultimately, through her physical blindness. Figured almost in terms of caricature, lacking even a single redeeming feature, it is not made clear if her coldness and harshness and her bitter sarcasm arise from earlier sufferings or are to be construed as part of an unyielding disposition that ‘never gave an inch’. Even the Quinn children have an early awareness of the ‘emotional falseness’ (Madden 1997:78) that filled their visits to Granny Kelly. Drawn in the bleakest terms, Granny Kelly embodies the worst aspects of maternity, and also of humanity. Figured in direct contrast is her idealised counterpart, Granny Kate – Charlie’s mother: Granny Kate fills life with colour and laughter and generosity: her descriptions of colours draw on imagery from flowers and birds, and she tells Cate, ‘I wouldn’t wear black, not if all belonging to me was dead (Madden 1997:164); Granny Kate reaches back to nature, to folk traditions, to story-telling and to genuine love and genuine values. Helen, the eldest daughter, recalls her as always saying that it was wrong to judge people, because you could never really know what it was like to be another person. ‘Only God could judge because only God could see into people’s hearts’ (Madden 1997:41). By contrast,
Granny Kelly’s character is defined by self-regard, narrow class consciousness, and intransigence: she never lets up on her opposition to Emily’s marriage, never resists an opportunity to belittle or insult Charlie. She champions an individualism that is totally at odds with the tenor of life and the outlook of the Quinns: condemning her fellow-Catholics ‘as a feckless, lazy bunch’ and the people involved in the Civil Rights Movement as ‘Communists’ she claims it is, ‘up to every person to look out for himself’ (Madden 1997:79). Through these older mothers is shown the various ways in which family bonds and community relations impact on identity. The contrasting grandmothers show that family divisions, like community and political divisions can be either healed or exacerbated through social interaction, but in the terms of de Beauvoir’s claim, they also identify Charlie, the idealised male, with the positive, as the vertical against which the oblique is defined. Figured through Emily, the maternal side of the family is identified always with the negative, ‘defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity’ (de Beauvoir 1984:15).

Further negative elements emerge in almost every aspect of Emily’s characterisation: she is not credited with any form of spirituality until after she suffers the total loss of faith following Charlie’s death; she is not affected or disappointed to the same degree as her husband when their eldest daughter, Helen, repudiates the Catholicism in which the family was steeped. While Emily is never shown to express any interests or preferences in terms of art or culture, Helen demonstrates a passionate devotion to classical music, and Cate, who works in fashion and media, has strong aesthetic preferences; these qualities are represented in the novel as a legacy from ‘Granny Kate’, as Ingman (2007:164) notes. Although it is Emily who has third-level education, it is her husband who is shown to have had cultural interests – in the poetry
of Seamus Heaney, in the literature and history of the locality, and in the local flora and fauna. It is only after her husband’s death that Emily develops a passion for plants and flowers, and this too, although it helps her ‘to bear time’, (Madden 1997:165) is not on her own behalf, but is for Charlie:

She didn’t know how to pray for him, so she cultivated roses on the earth that sheltered his body, and said to him in her heart, ‘This is for you, Charlie.’ (Madden 1997:106).

As Ingman explains

… after her husband’s murder, Emily becomes obsessed with growing flowers, using her love of flowers and the color of flowers as a way of attaching herself to the cyclical rhythm of the seasons. In doing so, she registers a protest, not only against political violence, but also against the demands of linear time, the symbolic order itself (Ingman 2007:165).

Ingman notes also, however, that in Madden’s novel, ‘the revolutionary potential of the semiotic is not presented as making any discernable impact in the realm of public discourse’ (Ingman 2007:165). Like her grief, Emily’s protests remain unspoken, outside history, and outside time, but they allow her to pull Charlie ‘back into the circle and back into her life’ (Madden 1997:106).

Mothers, Daughters, and Maternal Thinking

It might have been hoped that the birth of her children might rescue Emily from the cloud of negativity in which the narrative cloaks her. However, while the birth of their first daughter, is welcomed with delight by Charlie, as also is the second, giving birth to girls is represented as a disappointment to Emily:
She had never wanted daughters anyway: did they know that? Of course she’d never told them, but she read somewhere that children could pick up and understand far more than you would ever imagine in a house, even when they were tiny. She’d felt guilty at her own disappointment when Helen had been born, healthy and safe but not the son for whom she had longed (Madden 1997:110).

No explicit reasons for Emily’s reluctance to bear daughters are stated in the novel: from a psychoanalytical viewpoint, either her intense identification with her father, or her fraught relationship with her own mother might serve as explanations for her lack of interest; this fractured relationship is discussed in greater detail further on in this section. The narrative does not record any form of rejection of her children on Emily’s part, but it does register her mute acceptance that the two older girls were ‘closer to Charlie, right from the start’ (Madden 1997:110). Her emotional state on her third pregnancy is registered. She fears she will have no love to give to a third daughter but, ironically, ends up closer to Sally than to either of the others:

From the very beginning they’d clung to each other, literally clung, Sally holding her skirt, holding her hand, always sitting beside her and pressing up close, as if she wanted to be absorbed back into Emily, as if she wanted to become her (Madden 1997:111).

However, this close bond, although initially gratifying to both child and mother, turns into a relationship of co-dependency that stunts Sally and attaches Emily to the Irish literary maternal stereotype of the ‘smother mother’ who won’t let go, and the destructive, or ‘monster’ mothers of earlier Irish fiction discussed by commentators such as Owen Weekes (1990), Fogarty (2002) McCarthy (2004). That it may have been a compensatory attachment for Emily is suggested where the novel informs that at the time of Sally’s birth, Emily knows this will be her last child ‘and that the idea of a son is just a dream to be forgotten’ (Madden 1997:111). That the idea was never
quite forgotten surfaces in the maternal attitude adopted by Emily towards the young curate after Charlie’s murder.

Sara Ruddick’s theories on ‘Maternal Thinking’ are useful in analysing the relationships between mothers and daughters in Madden’s novel, especially those between Emily and her youngest daughter, Sally, and between Emily and her own mother. In addition, evidence of Ruddick’s notions of maternal thinking may be identified not just on the part of the mother, Emily, but also on the part of Charlie and, more particularly, of Sally, their youngest daughter, an aspect that is discussed further on. Emily’s story demonstrates the damaging effects such as ‘inauthentic thinking’ that may take hold in families when the negative forms of ‘maternal thinking’ are allowed free rein. It also demonstrates that a valuable legacy of caring, realised in qualities such as the ‘Attentive Love’ that Sally displays towards her mother, may be passed on when ‘maternal thinking’ is applied in positive and authentic ways. Ruddick’s claim that ‘Many women and some men express maternal thinking in various kinds of working and caring with others’ (Ruddick 2007:107) is borne out in Madden’s text: it is possible to locate ‘maternal thinking’ and ‘attentive love’ as practiced by both Emily and Charlie throughout the novel. The goals of preservation, fostering of growth and moral training are discernible in the commitment and the actions of both parents; ample evidence is presented of considered, close parental ‘attentive love’ directed towards their children, even if it is not always, and at all times, of the purest and most gratuitous kind described in Ruddick’s paper. The second daughter, Cate, can look back and feel somewhat ashamed to realise ‘how unremarkable she’d found the tremendous warmth and love in which she had grown up’ (Madden 1997:88), and the narrative records Helen looking back on her childhood
habit of imagining herself in relation to the universe, where her thoughts always took her back to her own bed, ‘where she was curled up, drowsing, waiting for sleep and feeling safe, so safe and so happy’ (Madden 1997:180). She can also look back at the row she had had with her mother over her decision to apply to study law at university, rather than go to teacher training college as her mother wanted: ‘she’d actually found it satisfying, because for the first time ever, they’d argued as equals’ (Madden 1997:160); Helen had asked for, and had been granted the right to make her own mistakes, despite her mother’s fears and misgivings.

A different scenario applies in the case of Emily’s relationship with Sally, where the adverse concept of ‘fantasy’ comes into play: in the novel, Emily fosters Sally in emotional dependency through a mixture of over-protection, indulgence and domination. Sally is said to most resemble her mother, is physically weaker than her sisters, is subject to psychosomatic illness, and apparently, is not as clever or confident as they. With the last of her daughters having started school, Emily finds the house silent and empty without the children, and ‘kept Sally home on the slightest pretext, for the merest sniffle or ache’ (Madden 2007:111). It emerges in the course of the novel that Sally becomes a teacher to please her mother, and has stayed in her job in the local school at her behest. Both before and after the death of Charlie, it is mostly her mother’s needs that keep Sally living at home when she might have moved away. Emily is thus shown to have re-enacted successfully through Sally the very situation she had resisted between herself and her own mother. While recognising that remaining at home is something of a ‘cop-out’ for her, that it relieved her of having to make a decision she was fearful of, Sally is conscious, also, of her ‘searing guilt’ (Madden 1997:140) when she questions the co-dependency of the relationship between her mother and herself.
Ruddick, acknowledges the influence of Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1976), in defining ‘inauthenticity’ as firstly, a willingness to accept the uses which society sets out for one’s children, and secondly, a willingness to remain blind to the implications of such use. What Ruddick (and Rich) describe is a public type of inauthenticity that may be identified and contested in political terms: in Emily’s emotional control of her youngest daughter, the whole family is implicated in a web of silence and inauthentic thinking that allows Emily’s exploitative maternal practices to continue without criticism, and permits the rest of the family to remain blind to the implications of such exploitation:

They rarely spoke of how their mother had taken possession of Sally so quickly and so completely. She would, of course, have denied it, but the last thing their mother ever wanted for Sally was for her to be autonomous and independent. It suited her perfectly to have her youngest daughter as a companion, whose will and whose nature she had formed to fit with her own needs (Madden 1997:140).

While many areas of Emily’s life are re-visited in the course of the novel, her appropriation of Sally is an aspect she is never shown to confront. What is recorded, however, is her discovery in the daughter she had thought she knew ‘to the depths of her soul’ (Madden 1997:111) a strength she had never known existed. This strength, first manifested after the death of Charlie, may be described in the terms of positive aspects of Ruddick’s concepts of ‘maternal thinking’ and ‘attentive love’, and of Murdoch’s cited description:

the patient eye of love … teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of self (c.Ruddick 2007:106).
Ruddick’s extension of maternal thinking to various kinds of caring is validated in the novel where it is related that after the tragedy of Charlie’s murder, Sally has been able to recognise the times when Emily was ‘truly helpless with grief’ (Madden 1997:111): on such occasions, she has provided tenderness and care; she has also known when firmness and sharpness are required, and care of this nature is ‘administered with an exact, even eerie, knowledge of what sort of treatment Emily needed at any given moment’ (Madden 1997:111). What is notable here is that Sally acts on her own knowledge of her mother’s needs, and that her response is to those needs, not to her own emotions. Ruddick believes (relying on Simone Weil), that the question ‘What are you going through?’ (c.Ruddick 2007:106) is central to maternal practices; it is a question Sally has no need to ask, so attuned is she to her mother’s needs. That Sally is capable of putting such capacities to use on behalf of her mother in times of crisis is admirable. But the unfairness of a situation where she expects, and is expected, to continue in her ‘maternal practices’ indefinitely is made manifest in the interlude with Cate’s visit to the schoolhouse, when her sense of entrapment in the situation is revealed. While Emily, as the prime instigator of the smothering mother/daughter relationship between herself and Sally, is to be indicted for the situation, so also must be her three adult daughters: in differing ways, all are beneficiaries of the inauthenticities of the relationship, and all carry some degree of responsibility for failing to intervene in the cycle of guilt and recrimination being enacted within the family.

The need for Sally’s ministrations and firmness comes into play when Cate comes home to tell the family of her pregnancy and again Sally takes charge in order to bring her mother around to acceptance of the situation. That the argument between Sally and her mother about Cate’s pregnancy is recorded in Emily’s consciousness as
‘the first major disagreement she’d ever had with Sally in her life’ (Madden 1997:112), is testimony of the degree to which Emily had subsumed her daughter’s identity into her own, especially when seen in the light of her view of their usual situation where agreements are reached between herself and Sally:

It wasn’t like two people discussing something, it was like one mind thinking aloud, debating with itself until it reached a decision as to what it liked best (Madden 1997:112).

The cost to Sally of this situation is made explicit in a description of her feelings towards her sister in the latter days of Cate’s visit home: Sally is silently resentful that Cate, living away from home, having been spared all the pain of helping their mother through her bereavement, has now brought home more trouble, and that the emotional work of placating their mother and warding off possible family disputes will again be left to her. Moreover, she knows she will never be able to speak of her feelings to Cate because

The long years of trying to please everyone had taken their toll. Concealing her true feelings if she knew they might cause pain or displeasure to those around her and saying the things she thought people wanted to hear had become so natural to her that she now found it impossible to do otherwise (Madden 1997:135).

Self-effacement such as Sally displays is akin to what, Ruddick describes as the degenerative form of the virtue of ‘humility’ required for ‘attentive love’; it might also be seen as a manifestation of the concept of ‘fantasy’ mentioned earlier, the ‘reverie, designed to protect the psyche from pain, from self-induced blindness, designed to protect it from insight’ (Ruddick 1997:106). Its manifestation in Sally exemplifies the damaging effects of Emily’s appropriation of her youngest daughter’s
life to her own ends, and raises the issue of ‘mother blame’. However, if Emily’s attitude towards her daughter is to be indicted, if Sally’s lack of voice is to be laid at her door, so then must the origins of Emily’s inability to speak her needs and feelings be explained: as the novel shows, Emily harbours a long list of ‘unspeakables’ that she is unable articulate; her desire for sons rather than daughters; her fears for her daughters as they grew to adulthood; her feelings of intimidation in the face of Cate’s glamour and worldliness, and of Helen’s outright rejection of all thoughts of marriage; and her disappointment that none of her daughters had married. All are issues she feels unable to put into words. Tracing back culpability for this incapacity creates a trail of ‘mother blame’ and ‘matrophobia’ that leads, inevitably, to ‘Granny Kelly’, the ‘bad’ Granny, and therefore, the ‘bad mother’ of the story.

The mother/daughter relationship between ‘Granny Kelly’ and Emily is the only one based on hostility in Madden’s novel. It is a relationship that cannot, however, be said to provide ‘a necessary counterweight to the sentimental and restrictive ideals of motherhood promoted by a patriarchal society’ as claimed by Fogarty in respect of another of Madden’s works\(^\text{14}\) (Fogarty 2002:115). Instead, it might be said to be ‘freighted’ with ‘apparently insurmountable prejudices about the malign force of maternal power’ (Fogarty 2002:115). Emily looks back only to coldness and harshness on the part of her mother; mother and daughter never relate to each other as woman to woman, and are never reconciled. Importantly, as daughter, Emily is represented as unable even to articulate her desire for reconciliation with her mother, but to sink into a depression after her mother’s death when, again, her desire for reconciliation can only manifest itself in a dream. Ingman’s commentary on this

\(^{14}\) The Birds of the Innocent Wood.
novel points to Kristevan thinking which regards dreams as ‘a space outside linear time where the unspeakable may be represented’ (Ingman 2007:163)

The narrative informs that in this dream, recalled years later, but experienced a few years after her mother’s death, Emily is the only one awake as she and her husband and children, together with her mother and brother drift down a river on a raft: she is brooding on the ways in which she has felt offended by each of them – her mother’s rejection of Charlie; Charlie’s largesse to his alcoholic brother; Helen’s sarcasm, and Cate’s garish make-up. Hearing the sound of a waterfall, she realised they were all going to drown, and ‘There was nothing she could do to avert disaster’ (Madden 1997:124). In the dream, this is a transformational moment for her; she is enabled to see things differently and, most importantly

her attitude to her mother was transformed by the spirit of compassion and forgiveness she now felt towards her doomed family (Madden 1997:124).

The novel presents the lessons available to Emily from this dream as, firstly, that she cannot control events, but that she can control her reactions, and in this way, manage how she feels about them (which ties in with Ruddick’s notion of ‘humility’ in ‘maternal thinking’). The novel informs that ‘This knowledge was the nearest she ever came to a reconciliation with her mother’ (Madden 1997:125), but it is a knowledge that also remains unspeakable, something ‘she found she couldn’t talk to anyone about, not even Charlie (Madden 1997:125). The second lesson is to try impress upon her daughters to learn to distinguish what is important in life, and what is not, and not to spend time or emotion on matters of little or no importance. Kennedy Andrews comments that ‘The dream allows her to achieve some kind of control over her life.’
I believe the dream may be seen to do something more: commenting on Freud’s theories of dreams, Eagleton notes that

the dream, [then] is not just the ‘expression or ‘reproduction of the unconscious: between the unconscious and the dream we have, a process of ‘production’ or transformation has intervened (Eagleton 1992:180).

The dream allows Emily to ease her sense of responsibility and culpability in respect of her feelings of ‘vexation and resentment’ (Madden 1997:124), and her concerns, with regard to her own family and her mother. With her extended family drifting towards the waterfall and catastrophe, her dream permits her to believe that there is ‘nothing she can do’ to save them; it allows her to overcome her feelings of annoyance and to rightly see the minor infringements of Charlie, Helen and Cate in a different light and, ‘most significant of all’ (Madden 1997:124), it allows of the moment of transformation that enables her to ‘forgive’ her mother.

There is never any question but that Emily’s mother is there to be forgiven, although, as Emily is recorded as explaining to Sally, ‘Believing that she was right and her mother was wrong was no proof against guilt’ (Madden 1997:124), a burden of guilt described to Sally as “It was like walking around for thirty years with a nail in the sole of your shoe” (Madden 1997:124). If ‘Granny Kelly’s’ ‘attentive love’ towards her daughter was deficient, Emily is shown also to be incapable of ‘attentive love’ towards her mother. Emily is never shown to ask her mother ‘What are you going through? She never reflects on what might have caused her mother’s vitriolic personality. Even after she is, herself, widowed suddenly, she is never shown to think about what her mother might have gone through on the sudden loss of her husband and her home. Eagleton’s explanation of Freud’s ‘dreamwork’, when applied to
Emily’s dream, sees her unconscious wishes for reconciliation appeased, without her having to re-evaluate her attitude:

Secondary revision systematizes the dream, fills in its gaps and smooths over its contradictions, reorders its chaotic elements into a more coherent fable (Eagleton 1992:180).

While Emily’s ‘dreamwork’ allows her to forgive her mother, for ‘Granny Kelly’, there is no redemption: her history remains unrevised, her reputation unamended; she remains the ‘monster mother’ of much Irish women’s literary fiction, described by Fogarty as

The figure … associated with the trauma of a past that can neither be buried nor resolved and with the struggle of the daughter to create an identity in the face of an overwhelming sense of illegitimacy and disempowerment (Fogarty 2002:86).

‘Granny Kelly’, the ‘demon mother’ is set in symbolic contrast to the idealised ‘Granny Kate’, the ‘earth mother’ of legend and fairytale. These ‘mothers’ function in the novel as showing how identities may be formed, and psychic legacies created through good and bad nurturance and by way of example, with Granny Kelly operating on a plane of negativity and Granny Kate on one of positivity: in childhood Cate says ‘I hope I’m not like Granny Kelly when I get old’, and is reassured that she will be like her Granny Kate (Madden 1997:41). Since neither Granny, although starkly and vividly drawn, the one demonised, the other idealised, is a fully rounded character, neither can be regarded in terms of a re-visioning of the mother in the terms of my thesis.

It might also seem that Madden’s novel does not lead to any great re-visioning of the mother: the principal mother character, Emily, remains immersed in home and
family, living contentedly ‘outside history’ under male influence, until she suffers the eruption of violent history into her life. Over the course of her life, she runs the household mainly in the interests of her husband and family, not in an overtly self-sacrificing way, but not, either, in a way that leads greatly to her own self-development. While she is not figured as a downtrodden, suffering, mother, neither does she figure as a ‘strong mother’, as a resource from whom others draw their strength: Cate’s visit home to announce her pregnancy is not to seek support, but to break the news to her mother as gently as can be arranged. In her construction of Cate, Madden re-writes the fictional daughter who becomes pregnant outside of marriage, and provides a potential mother figure akin to the ‘independent mother’ construct described by Kathryn Woodward as created in popular culture, that is the woman for whom motherhood is constructed as a choice; for whom ‘the father may not be essential to the needs of the successful mother with her child’ (Woodward 1997:267); for whom ‘Dependence on a man is not presented as the solution to the problems of single parenthood’ (Woodward 1997:271). Madden also rewrites the Irish mother faced with these circumstances, in that Emily who ‘never wanted a grandchild in these circumstances’ commits not just to accepting the situation, but to promising a welcoming atmosphere for this ‘different kind of mother’.

Emily’s representation differs from traditional Irish fictional maternal representations in other significant ways: her loving relationship with her husband, her total loss of faith in God, and her refusal of even the desire to forgive his murderers constitutes an alternative construct to the fatalistic mother characteristic of traditional Irish literary fiction. There is a seeming reversion to stereotyping in the problematic relationship fostered by Emily between herself and her youngest
daughter, where she is seen to engage in the tactics of the ‘smother mother’ also familiar to much Irish women’s literary fiction. Yet, as noted earlier, Emily’s appropriation of Sally is shown to have thrived visibly in a family dynamic that afforded benefits to all family members; so while ‘mother-blame’ is in order, a generalised family indictment might also be presumed. When Emily’s subjectivity is explored or exposed in the novel, as in her dreams, and in dialogue, she emerges as a thoughtful, concerned woman, who learns to move on from her own damaged relationship with her mother, to resolve to adopt new attitudes and to embrace new ways of thinking in dealing with the demands of ordinary life. Importantly, she is not a ‘haunting presence’ or a ‘spectral figure’ as have so many mothers been figured in women’s literary fiction: instead, Emily is figured as an ordinary woman, having to deal with extraordinary circumstances, managing as best she can.

And perhaps it is in Emily’s very ordinariness that one may find a re- visioned mother, a character that may be looked at with new eyes: Emily is shown to be a woman who has to re-make her identity in total opposition to the one her upbringing forged for her. As an ‘ordinary’ woman, she has to come to terms with the irrational and violent murder of her husband as a result of the civil conflict in which they had played no part, and to live her life without love and without the comfort of a religion that was an integral part of her life. As an ‘ordinary’ mother she is expected to contemplate without rancour the emigration or departure from home of the three children in whom she has invested so much: that she fails to do this in respect of one daughter indicts her, and sets her up for ‘mother-blame’. As an ‘ordinary mother’, and in total contrast to all the rules and conventions which informed her earlier years, Emily has to submit to the changing social *mores* that allow her daughters to eschew
marriage completely or, in Cate’s case, to choose the option of single motherhood. Against a tradition of ‘monstrous’ and ‘oppressed’ mothers in Irish women’s fiction, Emily’s more complex figuration may be said to constitute a re-visioning of the mother.
Part Two

Two Moons

Introduction

Jennifer Johnston, who was born in Dublin in 1930, had a late start as a writer, with the publication of her first novel when she was forty-two: she has since become one of the most prolific of Irish women writers. Her first three novels are often referred to as her ‘Big House’ novels: a fourth, later novel, *Fools Sanctuary*, (1986) may also be included in this genre. Johnston’s concern in these novels is with the homes and families of the declining Protestant Ascendancy or Anglo-Irish class, whose way of life is under threat in the wake of the Great War and the establishment of an independent Irish state. Christine Hunt Mahony’s study (1998) points out similarities between some of Jennifer Johnston’s youthful characters and those of Elizabeth Bowen. It is notable from the point of view of my thesis that Johnston’s early novels feature the cold, manipulative, emotionally disabling type of mother that became almost a stock figure in her work. At a public reading and question and answer session in Dalkey Public Library, Co. Dublin, in May, 2005, Johnston defended her constructions of the mothers in her work as cold and manipulating, stating that she had known many mothers whose interference and manipulation had destroyed their children’s lives: she also pointed to her later novels as portraying mothers in a warmer light. However, if one looks to Hunt Mahony’s critique of *The Captains and the Kings*, where she writes that ‘Johnston sympathetically portrays the damage Charles’ distant mother inflicted upon him, which crippled his marriage and his ability to be an effective parent’; and where the young boy in the story is described by the critic as ‘also the victim of an overbearing, unsympathetic mother’ (Hunt
Mahony 1998:222), it is possible to find how easily the tropes of ‘mother-blame’ and of the ‘destructive mother’ have been accommodated both in Johnston’s earlier writing and in Irish literary criticism. Despite the hopeful signs sent out in The Invisible Worm (1991), Ingman deems one of Johnston’s latest novels, Grace and Truth (2005) to be ‘as disempowering a mother-daughter story as any written in Ireland in the middle decades of the twentieth century’ (Ingman 2007:94).

The situation is very different in Johnston’s eleventh novel, Two Moons, (1996) in which the focus is on two mothers, Mimi and Grace, who are mother and daughter. In this work both of these mothers are given space to tell their own stories; we are admitted to their consciousness, and the plot unfolds also through dialogue, external narrative and focalisation. Johnston manipulates techniques of realism and magic realism, in a non-linear narrative that switches between past and present in an inter-generational narrative of mother and daughter and, to a lesser extent, grand-daughter. The novel is unusual in the field of Irish writing generally, and also in Johnston’s work, in that the protagonist, Mimi, is eighty years old, and her daughter, Grace, is aged fifty. The grand-daughter, Polly, is in her twenties. The work also represents a refreshing departure from traditional literary portrayals of motherhood in that both mother characters are created as women of complexity and depth, without idealisation, but also without the inflation of maternal influence which, as Marianne Hirsch has pointed out, leads to ‘mother blame’ (Hirsch 1989:19). The mothers in Two Moons are not totally exonerated from adverse criticism with regard to their effects on their daughters, but each woman is represented in her own subjectivity, with needs and desires of her own, and not depicted simply as a repository for the desires of others, or as the cause of their failings and disappointments in later life.
Adrienne Rich has written ‘Before we were mothers, we have been, first of all, women, with actual bodies and actual minds’ (Rich 1995:192): the two mothers in *Two Moons* could be said to be constructed with this principle in mind, and are not defined only by their maternity. I have used the 1998 edition of *Two Moons*, published by REVIEW, for my study.

As with Madden’s novel, I have called upon an eclectic number of commentators in analysing the mother figures in *Two Moons*. Anne Fogarty’s essay on ‘Uncanny Families’ (2000), and Nicola King’s *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (2000) proved especially useful to my explorations of the use of memory in the characters of Mimi and Grace in terms of motherhood. Grace’s attitude towards motherhood as set out in Johnston’s fiction responds to some aspects of Sara Ruddick’s ‘Maternal Thinking’ (1983). Insights from the works of de Simone Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich, Marianne Hirsch and Terry Eagleton helped my discussions in this part of the chapter, which is divided into two parts. Part One, ‘In the Final Phase’, concentrates on Mimi’s story; it examines Johnston’s construction of Mimi as a ‘compliant’ young woman who chooses ‘to go with the flow’ in her early life; as an elderly woman, bordering on confusion, with an ‘uncanny’ secret, the truth of which keeps erupting into her consciousness; and as an elderly mother whose middle-aged daughter complicates the mother/daughter relationship. In Part Two, ‘Waxing or Waning?’ the focus is on Grace’s story: my examinations here concentrate on Grace’s construction as a woman and mother who has actively shaped her own life and who has devoted herself to her art rather than to her relationships, and on the consequences such life-decisions bring on Grace, herself, on her mother, Mimi, and on her daughter, Polly.
In contrast to a great deal of feminist writing which stresses the connectedness of mothers and daughters, (Rich, Chodorow, Gilligan), relationships between mothers and daughters in *Two Moons*, are characterised more by discretion, disconnections and silences than by closeness and confidences. There is no move to characterise either mother as omnipotent or totally destructive, but neither is there idealisation or over-sentimentalisation. While daughterly attitudes could not be described as matrophobic, the narrative does provide evidence of both daughterly rejection of maternal influence, and of daughterly ambivalence towards the mother. The two mother figures are very different: Mimi, the older mother, is figured as very ‘feminine’, as coquettish or flirtatious – a woman who has been socialised into making herself appealing and attractive to men. De Beauvoir, writing of ‘The Young Girl’ states that

it is not by increasing her worth as a human being that she will gain value in men’s eyes; it is rather by modelling herself upon their dreams (de Beauvoir 1984:359)

Mimi is characterised in the novel as a woman whose early socialisation would have been conducted on similar lines: even at eighty, she is conscious that she still has a lovely smile. Long conditioned to dependency, she is inevitably more dependent than ever in old age. Her daughter, Grace, the second maternal character in the novel, displays elements of ‘afemininity’, which is perhaps an indication either of identity construction in rejection of her mother’s example, or the possession of a temperament more closely resembling that of her father than of her mother. Grace makes choices to suit herself, and projects an air of self-confidence and independence that belies her inner mental and emotional state. Grace’s daughter, Polly, would seem to have more
affinity with Mimi, than with her own mother, to have either inherited or developed a
dependent personality. She feels ‘divided’ by her parents’ divorce, and regrets not
having been part of a larger family, and not having had a conventional mother who
stayed at home looking after the children. There is no openness of communication
between these women: there are important emotional areas spanning the generations
that they never share or discuss, and that remain misunderstood or unexplored.
Equally damaging, the habits of privacy and secrecy developed in the earlier
generation are carried over, and operate to lay the foundations for future ruptures in
the mother/daughter relationships between Grace and her daughter.

Two Moons does not produce any great resolutions to the areas of
misunderstanding between the mother and daughter characters: there are no heart-to-
heart confidences, no disclosure of secrets, whether to be withheld forever or to be
passed on through the generations. Such resolution as is reached by Mimi is achieved
through her own consciousness and her own mental efforts, not through interaction
with her daughter. Grace is shown to actively stifle disclosures and confidences, but to
engage in constant interior monologue, through which her character and story unfolds,
and which shows that she is not nearly as assured inwardly as her outward manner
would indicate. Her daughter’s subjectivity figures less prominently, but Polly’s story
serves important aspects of the plot, and works to illuminate other aspects of the
novel. Polly’s character allows space for questions on maternal sacrifice and maternal
neglect to enter the work. While loving family interaction is shown to exist and to
operate between the three generations of women, there are also profound emotional
lacunae. Adrienne Rich has described the ‘cathexis between mother and daughter –
essential, distorted, misused’, as the ‘great unwritten story’ (Rich 1995:255). In Two
Moons, the cathexes between mothers and daughters are subtly recorded, and may, perhaps, be reflected in the title of the book. Two Moons suggests the constant pull between mothers and daughters, whether welcome or unwelcome; it suggests cycles of dependency; the waxing and waning of strengths and powers, and the continued presence to each other while yet remaining out of reach. The title is also reflective of the situation in which Grace, the ‘star’ of her own life, finds herself having to take account of the demands of two satellites, her mother and her daughter, who are exercising familial rights of dependency upon her.

The Final Phase

Mimi’s story

In Mimi, the elder mother figure in Two Moons, Jennifer Johnston has created one of the most delicate and delightful mother characters in Irish women’s literary fiction. Mimi is a character far removed from traditional representations of maternity either by Johnston herself, or by other Irish women writers of fiction. She is neither idealised nor demonised, and while represented in terms of suffering and loss, she is also depicted as flawed and frivolous, as the possessor of a mischievous sense of humour and of an appetite for a ‘bit of fun’ (Johnston 1998:203). A darker side to her nature is eventually also allowed to emerge. In another departure from Irish literary tradition, this eighty-year-old mother is figured as a post-Christian atheist, who believes that the only supernatural message she is likely to receive will say ‘Come in Mimi, your time is up.’ (Johnston 1998:22). At the opening of the novel, Mimi is receiving the visitations of a secular angel in the form of a fourteenth-century Italian shoe-maker; Grace is in rehearsal as Gertrude in a new Dublin production of ‘Hamlet’, and Polly, who lives in London, has come home to Ireland to introduce
Paul, the new man in her life to whom she becomes briefly engaged, and whose introduction to the family initiates a reprise of guilty love relations, and a new cycle of familial intrigue and secrecy.

Johnston has again moved her characters out of the ‘Big House,’ in *Two Moons*, but the novel is still situated in a somewhat ‘closed-world’ setting – a world where the characters seem to live ‘outside’ the history of the state, and where national politics or cultural influences intrude on their consciousness only in fleeting and subtle ways: a regretful mention at the lack of facilities for cremation on the part of Mimi, and a throw-away remark with regard to the Protestant population of Greystones by Grace represent the sum of political or national engagement by the maternal characters in the novel. Mimi is portrayed as having spent all her life in one of the wealthy residential districts of South Co. Dublin. Even after her marriage, she has lived in what had been her father’s house, but this does not seem to have given her any ascendancy in her relationship with her husband. Towards the end of the novel Mimi sets out her thinking at the time of her marriage:

> My expectations, like most of the women of my generation, were negligible; a family, a reasonable life, safety; with luck forever. In return, we ran good homes, were loyal wives, loving mothers, smiled at the right people; we saw our men right. It sounds pretty despicable now, but then it was the natural scheme of things (Johnston 1998:192).

Ingman points out that the early years of the Irish state was a regressive period for Irish women and that the emphasis on domesticity as natural to women from the foundation of the Irish state ‘did little to advance the cause of women in professional and public life in Ireland’ (Ingman 2007:14). Mimi’s tragedy is that she had been content to accept ‘the natural scheme of things’ (Johnston 1998:192), to embrace
domesticity, and to work within the confines of the prevailing ideologies of marriage and of motherhood. Now, at the close of her life, she is confined to the house and garden: symbolically, much of her time is spent in the shade of the magnolia tree planted by her father on the day of her birth, and the very air she breathes is pervaded with the perfume of the vigorous rose, Albertine, planted by her late husband. Mimi is shown to have lived all of her life either sheltered or shuttered by patriarchal order and Victorian-style control. Unlike the trees in the garden, she has never claimed a space sufficient for her own growth, and has never explored her own potential.

Early in the novel, it is clear that due to Mimi’s age and frailty, there has been a necessary reversal of roles traditionally ascribed to the mother. It is the daughter, Grace, who must now undertake the role of carer, cope with domestic routines, worry about her mother’s health, all the while trying to balance the demands of her career and her own emotional needs with those of her mother and daughter. Mimi is aware that Grace is engrossed in her forthcoming appearance as ‘Gertrude’ and is unwilling to allow her thoughts to be taken up with anything beyond the first night of the play, but Mimi’s own deteriorating health, exacerbated by recurring and unwelcome memories of her late husband, is forcing her to come to terms with both her past life and her limited future, neither of which offers pleasant contemplation. Fogarty points out that in his essay ‘The Uncanny’, Freud ‘sees the family and the home as primordial sites of gothic affects’ (2000:71): she explains that

He describes the category of the frightening as both leading us “back to what is known of old and long familiar” (p.340), and shocking us by exposing everything “that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (Fogarty 2000:71).
And it is true that in Johnston’s novel, there lies a scandalous secret that is never ‘outed’ between family members. The matter of the secret is raised only when Bonifacio, the *quattrocento* Italian shoemaker, who may have been raised from the realms of magic realism, or conjured out of Mimi’s fears and loneliness, or out of her dead husband’s exterior darkness, makes his appearance: he announces himself as a personage who free-lances as a secular angel, and as someone who has come to ‘mind’ Mimi. Even then, while the matter of the secret is raised, it is not shared, and maybe not even truly faced by Mimi or her daughter.

Bonifacio may have been conjured up through Mimi’s need for someone of her own, and in order to keep her from thinking about her late husband, Benjamin, and the unhappiness of their past lives, or he may be a manifestation of Benjamin in a more acceptable form. Bonifacio claims he was ‘called,’ but Mimi denies it was she who called. Fogarty views Bonifacio (following Otto Frank) as an example of the double, and an alter ego for Mimi that emanates from primal struggles within her psyche; I see him rather as an alter-Benjamin – an imaginary alternative to the dead husband Mimi does not wish think about. In Bonifacio, Mimi has projected the very antithesis of her husband – the ‘element of disorder’ (Johnston 1998:4) that she claims to prefer, as opposed to Benjamin’s strictness and oppressiveness. Bonifacio subverts the traditional images of piety, disembodiment and androgyny that attach to the angelic figure. He is sensual, sexually attractive, playful; he flirts with Mimi, magics a trip up Killiney Hill, produces full-bodied, fruity Italian wine, makes superior coffee; he inspires a trip to Dublin to buy expensive Italian handmade boots. Bonifacio lies bare-chested in the garden where Benjamin would not allow the daisies to grow; he can ease the physical pains that are increasingly invading Mimi’s body. There could
not be a greater contrast to the controlling, icily angry man steeped in religion, whiskey and silence that Mimi portrays her husband to have become over the years, a man who left her with only unhappy memories of their years together. Mimi’s interaction with Bonifacio shows she does not contest the idea of male dominance; she is content that he should take the lead, and basks in attentions that are caring, full of fun, and responsive to her needs. Bonifacio’s demeanour and Mimi’s responses present a portrait of the kind of relationship in which Mimi would have thrived, and provides an indication of a life she might have had with a partner other than her husband. Later in the novel, (confirming his doubleness as harbinger of death, as noted by Fogarty (2000:75), Bonifacio cedes place to the ghost of Benjamin so that he may reveal the dark secret at the root of his years of coldness and cruelty. However, at the end of the novel, despite having registered some new understanding of Benjamin’s failings, it is the comforting angel that Mimi chooses to partner her in her last dance into oblivion.

At the start of the novel, Mimi is feeling shadowy and insubstantial: she feels that she is irrelevant, that people look through her. Filled with loneliness and with fears for what lies ahead, we learn through her consciousness that she sometimes feels ‘like a monument, just sitting here waiting; reminding everyone of all sorts of things they don’t want to be reminded of’ (Johnston 1998:33). Mimi is aware that she is becoming more enfeebled, that her hands shake and fumble; she is concerned about all the possible physical complications that arise from the increasing debilities of old age; she is afraid that Grace, dedicated as she is to her career, will eventually have to put her in a nursing home. Johnston’s treatment here of the ills and fears of old age is tender, but refreshingly unsentimental: the comic and ironic aspects of old age are
also permitted to emerge. But just as Mimi is not defined only by her maternity, neither is she defined by the infirmities of old age; she is also portrayed as insightful and shrewd, and shows, along with her sense of humour, a certain gallantry in all her difficulties. Johnston’s treatment of this maternal character also serves to point up some of the main characteristics that have so inhibited Mimi’s development as a woman and mother of her time: her earlier unreflective acceptance of dependency, her inertia, and her tendency to always let life happen to her. The very name Mimi is indicative of this aspect of her character: we learn that she was originally called Eleanor, ‘a name she had never been able to bear’ (Johnston 1998:1), but it was not until her infant daughter, Grace, conferred the new one of Mimi in place of Mummy, that she ‘embraced the new one with energy’ (Johnston 1998:1), and used it as a vehicle of flirtation, saying ‘to certain people’ – ‘Je m’appelle Mimi’, (Johnston 1998:1) thus casting herself, like the heroine of La Boheme, as someone with a need for love, much to the discomfiture of her small daughter. Considered in light of her husband’s total sexual withdrawal from her, this adoption of such a romantic name may also reflect the needs of a woman desperately seeking affirmation of her sexual attractiveness, when the maternal labels such as Mummy or Mother would have put her out of bounds. That the situation of sexual abstinence could have been endured by Mimi and Benjamin for the rest of their married lives without discussion is an indication of the reticence in matters sexual, and the failures in moral courage to deal with them that prevailed in Irish society. It also confirms Mimi’s incapacity to take control in the matter of her rejection without explanation. Mimi confesses of herself that she has always ‘preferred lassitude to energy.’ (Johnston 1998:34); ‘has always been a fearful coward’ (Johnston 1998:76). Later she says ‘I thought Grace was mad to go off to become an actress. Thought – why doesn’t she sit tight and let life happen
to her.’ (Johnston 1998:167). Even in her old age, Mimi is shown to be still prepared to let others make decisions for her: it never occurs to her that she might, herself, take the decision to go into care, or that she should direct how she should be looked after in her final years.

The origins of Mimi’s romanticism may be discovered in the statement that she is irritated to find that she has only one childish and abiding memory of her parents – the romantic image of her father running out into the garden with a brass oil lamp, and singing the Victorian song, *Come Into the Garden, Maud,* to her mother. She recalls that she used feel they had a perfect relationship, but now realises that perhaps she was too self-absorbed to understand anything about them. She doesn’t really know the truth of their relationship. It is clear that Mimi has been imbued with ideas of romantic love – she tells Bonifacio that she ‘so much wanted to live happily ever after’ (Johnston 1998:178); but there is the also possibility that this recollected romantic interlude between her parents created in her either expectations that were never met, or feelings of exclusion that she was never able to assuage. Freudian theories of development would present the young girl in this scenario as jealous, as wanting to replace her mother in the attentions of her father, but bearing in mind Adrienne Rich’s claim that the ‘first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother’ (Rich 1995:218), it is also possible to view this one insistent scene as one that laid down in Mimi feelings of exclusion and abandonment by her mother. As Rich has written
There was, is in most of us, a girl-child still longing for a woman’s nurture, tenderness, and approval … a woman’s strong arms around us in moments of fear and pain (Rich 1995:224).

Mimi confides to Bonifacio that she has ‘always liked being cared for, watched over, protected’ (Jonston 1998:33). Ruddick claims that

> It is because we are daughters, nurtured and trained by women, that we early receive maternal love with special attention to its implications for our bodies, our passions, and our ambitions. We are alert to the values and costs of maternal practice (Ruddick 2007:107).

Much of the comforting attention Bonifacio pays to Mimi is similar to that which might be provided by a fond and nurturing mother, which sets up, perhaps, an instance of Ruddick’s concept of ‘male maternal thinking’ in operation, bearing in mind that Bonifacio’s construction bears no connotations of androgyny.

The theme of memory arises naturally in the portrayal of old age: it is useful as a narrative strategy in order to construct an earlier identity for an enfeebled or housebound character such as Mimi, and for plot construction. Memories may be a blessing or a burden because, like dreams, they are connected with the unconscious, and may display a similar anarchic nature. Because of her deteriorating physical and mental condition, there are occasions in Mimi’s story where it is difficult to distinguish between memories and dreams. In her book, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (2000), Nicola King claims that ‘it is impossible to imagine or formulate memory and its operations without the use of metaphor’ (King 2000:25; she identifies two Freudian metaphors used in describing the processes of memory: the ‘archaeological model’, which seems to presume that a ‘true lore’ of uncontaminated memory lies somewhere to be accessed through probing or digging, and the theory...
which posits the memory process as ‘one of continuous revision or “retranslation”, re-
working memory traces in the light of later knowledge and experience’ (King 2000:4).
King points out that the dominant metaphors within a culture often come to be
regarded as ‘common sense’, so that recent familiarity with visual and aural recording
has led to the popular notion of memory as ‘a store-house of experiences’ (King
2000:25), like a video or audio recording, a notion that is contested by on-going
scientific investigations.

These theories seem to assume a search for, or a re-working of the past. What
troubles Mimi about her memories is their anarchic activities: she tells Grace that
Benjamin sometimes ‘pops into my head unasked. That’s all. Quite uninvited’
(Johnston 1998:48). Fogarty’s essay on the uncanny points to the utilisation of
‘aspects of Gothic narration’ in contemporary Irish women’s fiction (Fogarty
2000:62). This may be seen in Johnston’s employment of memory with Mimi’s
recourse to a neo-gothic metaphor of entrapment when she tells Bonifacio – ‘It’s so
hard to get rid of the past … it’s like a web all round me. I keep trying to escape and I
can’t.’ (Johnston 1998:44). A major cause of distress to Mimi is the fact that in what
she knows to be a very late stage in her life, she cannot prevent herself from thinking
of Benjamin, and from remembering the unhappiness of her life with him. Thinking of
Benjamin hurts her head, makes her irritable with Grace, and brings on her ‘sulking
face’ (Johnston 1998:19); it makes her cough and lose her breath (Johnston 1998:63).
A heart attack and stroke are associated with Benjamin who also invades her dreams.
Allowing things to happen is no longer an option for her, as her long dead husband
In this last phase of her life, Mimi must look back on her life and her marriage to Benjamin but, as she admits to Bonifacio, sometimes she is not sure if she remembers the truth or what she would have liked the truth to be. Bonifacio replies, cryptically, that ‘lots of people rewrite their past … and believe it themselves’ (Johnston 1998:64), presenting possibilities that Mimi has spent a lot of her life re-writing her past, or that she is about to do so again. The escape of total forgetfulness is put forward, but Mimi rejects this – a late and rare indication of positive and brave choice on her part. For Mimi to reach the truth requires painful exploration of past motives, not just a selective evocation of memories: how well she succeeds is left to the reader; some truths are, perhaps, just too difficult. King states that ‘We remember in different ways at different times; the same memories can be recalled voluntarily and resurface involuntarily’ (King 2000:9). It is only when she has become a little tipsy from drinking wine that Johnston’s heroine can admit to her rejection by her husband. She tells Bonifacio

I was brought up to believe that to make a man happy, to keep him by your side in utter content, you only had to manifest your love for him in the most comfortable and charming ways possible. … But Benjamin didn’t seem to want anything I had to offer. Anything. (Johnston 1998:177).

She confesses she had thought about having affairs, and that Benjamin had been aware of this, but admits she never had the courage, and that, anyway, he would never have allowed it. While Benjamin is here cast as the oppressor by Mimi, the novel suggests that it was the ideas of dependency and outward decorum inculcated in middle-class women like Mimi, as much as their husbands’ strictures, and the law’s demands, that kept them within the confines of unsatisfactory marriages. As an institution of church and state, marriage was a life-long contract. Irish society held
neither place nor rights for the woman who walked out of a marriage, and custody
rights of children rested totally with the husband. In an exchange with Grace, Mimi
claims that if it had not been for her, she might have ‘run away from all that hatred’
(Johnston 1998:189), but this is said just after she has recollected with pleasure ‘how
tangled up we get with our children’ (Johnston 1998:188). Nothing in her
characterisation as a young woman indicates that she would have had the strength to
strike out for a life on her own, or that her life in conventional, upper middle-class
mid twentieth century Irish society had prepared her for such a venture.

The habits of hypocrisy and denial fostered in Mimi’s early years is brought
out in her recollections and in her interaction with Bonifacio as he insists that she
acknowledge that she was unhappy from the earliest days of her marriage:

So, I wasn’t happy. I pretended here. I pretended there. What’s wrong with

Mimi’s dream of Benjamin after the family dinner party reveals some of the truths of
their marriage: in her dream she saw Benjamin kneeling in prayer, ‘trapped in silver’.
She wondered ‘what grief was in his head,’ but, although she was compelled to stare,
she was not allowed to wake, or to call out to him (Johnston 1998:89). In the second
part of the dream he turned and stared at her, before disintegrating bodily until all that
was left were his eyes, two grey stones, which also disappeared. Eagleton explains
Freudian notion of dreams as

essentially symbolic fulfillments of unconscious wishes; and they are cast in
symbolic form because if this material were expressed directly then it might be
shocking and disturbing enough to wake us up (Eagleton 1992:157).
He also explains how the ego censors and distorts our dreaming in order to soften the impact of our dreams, and how the unconscious operates by means of ‘condensation’ which renders a whole set of images into one ‘statement’, and ‘displacement’ which may displace the meaning of one object onto something that may have some association with it. Mimi puts her frightening dream down to the fact that she’d had too much to drink during the course of the evening, suggesting that her ego may also have been lulled by the wine. A likely interpretation of her dream is that in life Mimi saw Benjamin beset by some unspoken grief, locked into his religion and his self-imposed sexual abstinence from her. She was forced to witness his grief, but could not leave the marriage, and nothing she did could reach him. The meaning of the second part of the dream, where Benjamin looks at her before he gradually disintegrates to two eyes on the floor, ‘like two grey stones’ may be interpreted through the later visit to the seaside resort of Greystones, the place where Benjamin used to leave Grace and herself on the beach, exposed to the east wind, while he went to the golf club alone: he never explained his actions, would never answer her questions, but would brush her aside impatiently. Mimi becomes very confused and distressed during a trip to Greystones with Grace and Charlie. She confides that she told Benjamin’s ghost to go away, and not come back, but then remembers ‘she always meant to say things to him and never did.’ (Johnston 1998:160). It becomes clear that the story of her married life was one of oppressive rejection, and also of silence and inaction; although she knew that Benjamin was deeply unhappy, and used to hear him crying at night, she did nothing, because she did not know what to do.

The final denouement of Benjamin’s secret homosexuality emerges in terms of a fairy tale told by the revenant Benjamin – ‘Once Upon a Time.’ (Johnston
It is told in terms of a doomed love – a once and for always affair of separated lovers, with no repetition of homosexual activity once he had married. Again, it is possible that Johnston is allowing Mimi’s romantic imagination to equivocate – a once-off homosexual affair before their marriage could be tolerated as a reason for Benjamin’s unhappiness; a life of homosexual activity or desire would be much less acceptable. Benjamin assures her he was never involved with anyone else after his marriage, that he had married her to keep him safe – again the notion of safety arises. But, bearing in mind that Bonifacio, who may be Benjamin’s double, has admitted to the delight he took in deception and lies when he was living, the question remains open. There may well, also, be an element of denial still at work, a truth that is too hard for Mimi to face. Reflecting the changed *mores* in Irish society, Mimi seems able to face the idea of Benjamin’s closet homosexuality at this stage in her life, but admits she probably would have been different in her youth. What she needs to know is that he didn’t hate or despise her, and what she feels she has to forgive is the fact that Benjamin never trusted her enough to share his secret with her. Mimi feels they might have managed a better life together, if they had both been in on the secret. She finds just enough energy to forgive Benjamin on this score. Thus, it is Mimi’s need to forgive, not Benjamin’s need to confess, that is served by the conjuring of angels and ghosts and dreams as she tries to come to terms with a life spent, as she believes, ‘learning very little’ (Johnston 1998:167).

The novel hints that Benjamin’s homosexual nature was not totally unknown to Mimi, although the matter of Benjamin’s sexual orientation was never articulated in their lifetime – she says to him early in the novel ‘you despised yourself for what you were, and you hated me for what I was not’ (Johnston 1998:142); and Benjamin

forgetting is mostly restricted to dissolving thought-connections, failing to draw the right conclusions and isolating memories … Forgetting impressions, scenes or experiences nearly always reduces itself to shutting them off. (c.King 2000:20).

As Mimi relates, she knew very little about sexuality when she was young. Benjamin had no desire for her. He gave her one child out of duty. When she left the marriage bed there was no discussion. The novel shows that all down the years they kept up a semblance of having a normal, if unhappy, married relationship. Benjamin immersed himself in whiskey and religion, and indulged in small cruelties and impatient domination. Mimi compensated by indulging in petty acts of revenge or in extravagant spending; their daughter grew up conscious of their despair. In this way, the novel points up the dilemmas posed by the patriarchal gendering of society, and what Rich has described as ‘the institution of heterosexuality, with its social rewards and punishments, its role-playing, and its sanctions against “deviance” (Rich 1995:219). While spurious shows of ‘femininity’ were demanded of the wife and mother, equally spurious shows of ‘masculinity’ were demanded of the husband and father. Benjamin’s act of entrapment of a young wife in a marriage contract he could not fulfil would have received more social approval than an openly gay life. On the other hand, if Mimi had left her marriage and her child, she would have been viewed as an errant wife and an ‘unnatural’ mother.

Even between Mimi and Grace, the pretence of a normal, if unhappy, marriage was kept up, and it is shown that they both find it hard to let the pretence go. When she tells Grace she has never missed Benjamin, Mimi immediately says – ‘I don’t
intend to belittle him in any way.’ (Johnston 1998:19). She and Grace cannot talk about Benjamin’s attitude to Mimi. When Mimi says Benjamin would not have cried if she had died, Grace says – ‘Mimi, I hate this sort of talk’ (Johnston 1998:123) and insists that Benjamin had loved Mimi. Her mother can only mumble to Grace – ‘If it hadn’t been for you I might have run away from all that hatred’ and then dismiss that statement as ‘just a foolishness’ (Johnston 1998:188). Even though such a late stage in Mimi’s life has been reached, the truth of the matter is never shared between mother and daughter. The novel reflects the norm in the earlier days of the Irish state, when society was unable or unwilling to confront or discuss sexuality except in prescriptive terms. When divorce was prohibited, and homosexual acts criminalised, secrecy, silence and a veil of propriety over such conditions were the universally required responses. Societal attitudes, which were harsh enough towards extra-marital sex, were many times more intolerant of any expression of homosexuality. Acceptable responses to sexual difficulties would have been like Benjamin’s, to become ‘obsessed with rules, with outward appearances’ (Johnston 1998:193), and like Mimi’s, to keep up appearances of normality, despite her husband’s recourse to drunkenness and prayer, and perhaps clandestine sexual encounters. The novel shows the situation where society valued silence more than sincerity or authenticity: it also reflects the changes in attitude occurring in Ireland over the years. Grace’s divorce, Polly’s openly sexual relationship with Paul, and Charlie’s sexual orientation are all accepted facets of life in the novel. In Mimi’s earlier days they would all have been causes for scandal and social opprobrium or for attempts at the strictest secrecy and dissimulation.
Religion is the one major aspect of her life with Benjamin in which Mimi is shown to have offered resistance, and to have used an irreverent and reductive wit against it. She confesses to having stopped believing in God, but never discussed the matter with anyone, since she considered it nobody else’s business. She had declined to pray in any of the churches across Europe that Benjamin had ‘dragged her to.’ (Johnston 1998:44). In her recollections, she reveals herself as having hoped that Benjamin wouldn’t feel diminished in the sight of God by her ‘disobedience,’ (Johnston 1998:90) but she is insincere in this; she knew it was an issue of great importance to him, but faith was something her husband could not compel. Johnston does not advert to Mimi’s and Benjamin’s marriage being religiously ‘mixed’, but the probability of this is implied in the text when the cleaning-woman, Mrs. O’Brien, alludes to Protestant churches of Mimi’s community being ‘cold places’ (Johnston 1998:172), or when Grace inadvertently repeats a Latin prayer, suggesting evidence of a Catholic education, but not of Catholic practice or faith. The theme of Mimi’s silent rebellion can be seen, therefore, in the context of the oppressive national and religious ethos of the founding years of the Irish state, and not just in terms of her own religious beliefs, although Johnston’s handling of the theme is tentative. The Ne Temere decree of the Catholic Church in Ireland, which received the tacit support of the Irish state, was exercised in a very repressive fashion towards Irish Protestants in cases of religiously mixed marriages – all of which provides evidence of the difficulty of living ‘outside history’. Mimi’s silent rebellion is representative of the Protestant population that kept their heads down after Irish independence in the face of repressive religion-based ideologies; Grace’s departure from Ireland represents another.
Religion is also shown to have been used as a weapon by Mimi at the time of Benjamin’s death: when she examines her own motives for not sending for a priest for him, she wonders was she getting her own back by withholding the possibility of eternal life, and hopes ‘that she is not so cruel.’ (Johnston 1998:170). In this she can be said to be in denial of her motives: reception of the last rites was probably the only thing that would have eased Benjamin into eternity; knowing he believed in heaven and hell, that he feared eternal punishment, her refusal to arrange for the last rites was an exercise in a secret, silent revenge. Even towards the end of her own life, she asserts that she doesn’t feel guilty – just curious about her motive, because Benjamin had created a prison for her, had ‘wanted to bind her to him and then not love her.’ (Johnston 1998:170). Mimi says it hadn’t occurred to her at the time that he might have preferred to have someone else with him at his death, but she doesn’t admit who she thinks he might have wanted. As a woman, Mimi is reduced by her mean and petty gestures in the wake of years of Benjamin’s oppression, exercising what agency she attains to in covert ways that she cannot not be made to suffer for. Small wonder that Grace, in adolescence, had found her parents to be ‘so diminished by despair’ (Johnston 1998:60) and undisclosed sufferings that she preferred to leave home at the earliest opportunity. And so, compounding Mimi’s unhappiness in her marriage was the fact that Grace, her beloved daughter, was lost to her also.

Most mother-daughter narratives concentrate on the effect of the mother’s influence on her daughter – very often to the detriment of the mother in the story, as is pointed out by Hirsch (1989). Johnston’s novel provides a space from which the mother can tell her own story, and set out how she has been affected by her daughter’s behaviour. As Mimi relates, it was not just that Grace went to England and made a life
for herself as an actress that made Mimi realise that she was gone from her: it was the totality of her commitment to that life. Mimi realised that Grace could ‘disappear’ into her roles as completely as her father had ‘disappeared’ into the music he loved. She defines her daughter’s commitment to acting when she tells Bonifacio:

She falls so easily into the rhythm of working; those voyages she makes. I don’t mean physical voyages, though she makes them too, I mean each part she plays. … The whole pattern of her life exists in that world (Johnston 1998:206).

Mimi also says

I watched her move away out of my world with sadness… I don’t mean when she moved away from Ireland, but when I realised that neither Polly, nor I, nor any man could ever mean as much to her as her work (Johnston 1998:206).

With Grace’s detachment from her, Mimi realised with profound sadness that she then had no one who might love her as she ‘wished to be loved’. (Johnston 1998:206). In this relationship, again, Mimi’s focus is on her need for love, not on her desire to love. Such manifest need was instrumental in driving Grace away, but Mimi seems to have no consciousness of this. Early in the novel Mimi suppresses her anger at the thought that ‘Grace did a lot of coming and going. Mostly going really’ (Johnston 1998:3). She refuses to give in to spleen on this account, and also avoids any unpalatable truths by attributing Grace’s desire to leave solely to her long-held desire to become an actor. She never reflects that the household might have been a deeply unhappy environment for an only child.

However, in other ways, Mimi is shown to have a close understanding of Grace, something Grace neither reciprocates nor demonstrates in her relationship with
her own daughter. Mimi states that she was aware from the start that Grace and her husband were not suited; she quickly realises that Polly and Paul are not suited either, and she is immediately awake to the tension between Paul and Grace; she comes very swiftly to the notion that Grace may have a new lover, even though she does not suspect it might be Paul. Mimi is aware that Grace, despite her freedom, and the fulfilment of her career, is not truly happy; she is afraid that satisfaction of Grace’s ambition will make it necessary for her to go into care. Yet this close understanding never leads to shared confidences between the two women, both because of Mimi’s diffidence, and because of Grace’s refusal or inability to speak openly of personal matters.

Suppressed anger is probably key to the stories of both Mimi and Grace. If, as Hirsch writes, ‘To be angry is to claim a place, to assert a right to expression and to discourse, a right to intelligibility’ (Hirsch 1989:169), then to suppress anger is to cede these claims. Mimi has already been shown as never having succeeded in claiming a place for herself, but as having lived most of her life under paternalistic or patriarchal control. Hirsch also writes that ‘anger may well be what defines subjectivity whenever the subjective is denied speech’ (Hirsch 1989:170). I have posited childhood anger on the part of Mimi at feelings of exclusion from what she believed to be the charmed circle of her parents’ romantic relationship, or from a sense of abandonment by her mother. In battling against her husband’s rejection, in the suppression of her own loving nature, and in suffering his domination, the novel makes clear that instead of claiming the right of expression, Mimi resorted to silence, hypocrisy, demeaning covert rebellions and self-diminishing forms of revenge, all signs of secret anger. Mimi’s loss of Grace – the loss of the daughter to the mother –
the first act of what Rich describes as ‘the essential female tragedy’ (Rich 1995:237) was endured with ‘sadness’ but with no great outbursts of grief or rage. That Mimi can be seen at the end of her life, in the opening part of the novel, to contemplate this loss with splenetic humour, testifies to the depth and endurance of her sense of loss. Hirsch claims that ‘To be angry is to create a space of separation, to isolate oneself temporarily’ (Hirsch, 1989:170). As the novel shows, Mimi was already filled with a sense of isolation; she was lacking in the courage to challenge the requirements of society that she must relinquish her place in her daughter’s life without outward shows of sorrow at such loss and disconnection.

**Waxing or Waning: Grace’s Story**

As mentioned earlier, the two mothers in *Two Moons* are constructed in complete contradistinction to each other. Whereas Mimi is figured as having been passive and fearful, always wanting to allow life to come to her, Grace is shown to have established her life on her own terms, and to be open to future possibilities. It could be argued that Grace created an identity in opposition to her mother, leaving home as soon as she could because she ‘couldn’t bear’ (Johnston 1998:60) to be in the same house as her parents. But it may also be seen that, in rejection of her mother’s manifest neediness, and her father’s attempts at patriarchal domination, Grace set out to live a life totally independent of either parent. Grace is a professional actor who lives for her art: she is portrayed as having so determinedly devoted herself to her art that she has erected around herself a protective shield that keeps everyone, even those closest in relationship to her at a distance: even her husband and child seem not to have been admitted totally to her heart; while prepared to make some room for people, her work is always paramount. Keeping space for her work was a decision made when
she was young, and is never seen by her as a problem – ‘It’s just the way I am,’ (Johnston 1996:149) she says, as she closes off Mimi, who had been anxious to have a heartfelt conversation with her about the troubling ghostly appearances of Benjamin. It is not, of course, a natural attribute; it is an attitude developed for her own self-protection, and one that has profound implications for all her relationships, most especially for her daughter, Polly.

As a mother in Irish literature, Grace is unusual firstly in that she is a career woman, whose prime emotional investment is shown to be in her acting, not in her family or personal relationships, and secondly, that she is not overtly criticised on this account. She shows no curiosity or concern as to what had gone wrong in her parents’ marriage, and she presumes, somewhat lightly, that she would not have been told if she had asked. She divorced her own husband when she became unhappy in the marriage. She is aware that on the level of mother/daughter relationships she has somewhat failed Polly, that she has not met the emotional expectations or needs of her daughter. She confesses to Paul, Polly’s fiancé – ‘I don’t really know all that much about Polly … I do have to say I was pretty inattentive when she was growing up.’ (Johnston 1998:220). She thinks of her relationship with Polly in terms of there being ‘little islands on which you can stand together’ (Johnston 1998:220). While this may have been sufficient for Grace, it has not sufficed for her daughter. Polly harbours strong feelings of neglect, and claims that she feels ‘divided’ by the break-up in her parent’s marriage, and longs for ‘a normal mother who stayed at home and loved a whole pack of children’ (Johnston 1998:42). As with many of Johnston’s other fictional mothers, maternity and the life of the artist seem to be at odds with one another, and while the tenor of the novel seems to approve of Grace and her choices,
it does reveal that in her relative neglect of Polly she has failed her daughter, and has contributed to the setting up of another cycle of female emotional need and dependency within the family.

Ruddick’s theories in ‘Maternal Thinking’ (1983) are useful when Grace’s maternal practices are put under scrutiny: Ruddick identifies ‘cheery denial’, as an attitude or practice adopted by some mothers in dealing with their children: ‘cheery denial’ is defined as the opposite of the virtue of ‘resilient good humour’, and is something Ruddick believes mothers may be tempted into simply by the insupportable difficulty of passionately loving a fragile creature in a physically threatening, socially violent, pervasively uncaring and competitive world (Ruddick 1997:100).

However, it is fair to say, also, that ‘cheery denial’ may result from maternal failure in ‘maternal thinking’. Ruddick’s concepts emphasise the identification of priorities (Ruddick 1997:107) in the nurture of children; Grace’s narrative relates that her art and her career always came top in her priorities, not her relationships. She, herself has not escaped the consequences which the willed suppression of emotional life and the total immersion in her acting career required. At one stage, Mimi says of Grace – ‘Grace doesn’t ever remember anything. She expunges all memories from her mind. Life is easier like that.’ (Johnston 1998:162). Grace is not shown to dispute this, nor is it countered in the narrative; there are key areas of her emotional life that she trivialises, such as her divorce, and her relationship with Polly, as well as areas that she does not visit, such as the miseries or the facts of her parents’ relationship. She chooses to channel her emotions into her life on stage, but as her constant interior monologue demonstrates, she is, nonetheless, frequently filled with anxiety and guilt.
She is not constructed as hard or totally uncaring, but a self-reflective sequence in the novel provides the information that it is acting that makes her feel alive, that gives her a reason for her existence and therefore, it is acting that she puts first. The patent unhappiness of her parents’ world, something she never dwells on, offers an explanation of her need to find refuge in an imaginary world such as the theatre provides. It is a world she emerges from reluctantly. The case Grace puts for herself is set in urgent interior monologue that reflects her need to keep working, as well as her concerns as an ‘ageing actress’ for the acting parts that theatre provides for mature women.

I want to play Arkadina at the National … if it comes my way. I want to play Medea, I want to play Clytemnestra. I want to immerse myself before it is too late and work and work, because that is when I’m not just another butterfly. That is when I almost believe I understand something about being alive. I live through other people’s words and ideas (Johnston 1998:112).

While acknowledging the limitations on the number of good roles for ‘good’ mothers in western theatre, it may be seen that the roll-call of acting-parts Grace is contemplating is one of transgressive mothers. While her thoughts might be seen to be influenced by her role of Gertrude for which she is in rehearsal, it is, perhaps, also possible to see in them a preference for the role of the ‘bad’ mother of the stage, rather than of the ‘good’ mother that her affections and her sense of duty demand in real life. In her attachment to the words and ideas of others she finds refuge from the real life claims that inhibit her desire for freedom and escape. It is clear that up to the time of the novel, June 1996, everything in Grace’s life has had to be fitted around her acting career. However, as stated, while she is very much involved the role of ‘Gertrude’, the main focus in the novel is on her domestic life and the growing demands of the two people in closest family relationship with her – her mother and
her daughter. Torn between the various demands of her family, and her own need to concentrate on her part, Grace is shown to take refuge in organising activities, in constant self-questioning, and in swimming in a cold sea. Taking upon herself the real life role of ‘good daughter,’ she concerns herself with her mother’s well-being; she cooks and provides treats and outings for her, and arranges for her to be looked after when she must be out of the house for any length of time. In the rather less welcome role of ‘good mother,’ she provides hospitality to Polly and Paul. In the role of ‘bad mother,’ she indulges in a brief, treacherous, quasi-incestuous affair with Paul, the young man her daughter is in love with, and has planned to marry.

In her reading of this novel in terms of Freud’s findings on the ‘uncanny’, Fogarty finds Grace’s decision ‘to enact the part of the betraying, incestuous mother’ as indicative, on one level, of

the difficulty of redefining the female self within the bounds of the traditional family and, on another level, to be an attempt to defy convention and to insist on the validity of female desire (Fogarty 2000:77).

However, it must be admitted that the complications arising from the unsolicited amorous attentions of Paul and from her gradual response to him have implications that extend beyond Grace herself. Through her liaison with Paul, she builds up a sexual secret that her daughter is quite likely to discover in the future, or that will cloud her own relationship with her daughter with guilt and regret. It is true that Grace did not seek Paul’s attentions, but, she does not rebuff him with conviction. The question in the novel is why would she succumb to an unworthy young man – ‘a scumbag’, her daughter’s ex- fiancé? One answer might be the fear, like Mimi’s, that ‘she had then no one to love her as she wished to be loved.’ (Johnston 1996:206).
Another might be that her usual emotional defences had been lowered in the heightened sexual atmosphere created in the play around the character of Gertrude by Hamlet’s accusations of incestuousness and maternal hyper-sexuality. However, Grace’s involvement with Paul is not cast as just a case of defying convention by having a fling with a future son-in-law: the narrative shows her as infatuated with him, perhaps flattered that she could still attract such a young man; there is also a hint of an unspoken rivalry between mother and daughter – she does not welcome Polly’s visit to her bedroom while she is undressed. Nevertheless, while narrated as smitten with Paul, Grace is shown to be always in control, and her handling of the affair is portrayed as characteristically thorough and brisk. Although she sacrifices a long-time liaison with Paul because she does not want to alienate Polly, she is not sufficiently self-sacrificing to deny herself one encounter where their love is consummated. Ironically, the quasi-incestuous affair with Paul raises echoes of the ‘deviant’ affair of Grace’s father and his lover, with consummation even taking place in the same forest glade. Paul is said to see in the forest that Grace is ‘all silver,’ just as Mimi had dreamt of Benjamin ‘trapped in silver.’ It may be claimed that where Benjamin was so far locked into himself that he could not reach out, nor be reached, Grace can still reach out to those she loves, though always on her own terms; in all her relationships she retains sufficient selfishness to look to her own needs.

A constant undercurrent in Grace’s thoughts is Mimi’s physical deterioration, and what looks like increasing mental confusion, plus the dilemma she may face of having to place her mother in care if she is to go on working. However, despite the suspicion that her mother has had a stroke, and is behaving erratically, despite Polly’s distress at Paul breaking off their engagement, and her own growing involvement with
him, ‘the play’s the thing’. Everything else must be put on hold until Grace is ready to
deal with it after the ‘first night’. Her rather brusque advice to Polly, following her
break-up with Paul, probably summarises Grace’s attitude to life –

Have a bath, put on a bit of slap; go to work and pretend nothing’s happened. After a while you’ll mend. Everybody mends (Johnston 1998:138).

The novel shows her to be in denial in this: her mother is proof that not everybody
mends; her own locked-down psyche, and her desire to live through the words of
others rather than deal with real-life emotional or psychological problems demonstrate
that cover-up and pretence serve only to mask, not to cure. Her blunt, pragmatic
approach shows a lack of sensitivity, even an indifference, to Polly’s less robust
personality. Ruddick writes that ‘Our cheery denials are cruel to our children and
demoralising to ourselves’ (Ruddick 2007:100); she claims also that ‘Denying
cheeriness drains intellectual energy and befuddles the will’ (Ruddick 2007:100). In
her denial, Grace may be seen to be like her father who, the narrative informs, became
blind to Mimi’s emotional needs because of his own difficulties, and who reacted with
anger and impatience or drunkenness and religiosity when personal demands he felt
unable to meet were made on him. In this way, the novel suggests that Grace’s forms
of denial are not just a female legacy: her locked-down psyche and her failure to
engage with a world beyond her own chosen arena are as likely to be modelled on her
father’s behaviour as that of her mother, presenting the notions that ‘choosing the
unlived life’ in Two Moons is not just a female prerogative.

Grace’s recollections of her father are always tinged with darkness. She
remembers a forbidding figure supervising her swimming, but not staying to
accompany her home. A darker image occurs in her dream where the sound of her father’s laughter is punctuating the words of Gertrude vowing secrecy to Hamlet – ‘Be thou assured, if words be made of breath, and breath of life, I have no life to breathe what thou hast said to me.’ (Johnston 1998:81). When Grace wonders if her father’s spirit is about the house annoying Mimi, she wonders what bloody awful headaches he must have carried in his head as well as his anger, his piety, his black silence. All the things he didn’t allow himself to think about (Johnston 1998:198).

Then her thoughts instantly go to her gay friend, Charlie, breakfasting in bed in the Shelbourne Hotel, making plans for his future career. The juxtaposition of the two men in her thoughts surely suggests that an intuition or knowledge of Benjamin’s homosexuality was in some recess of her mind that she never accessed. King cites Freud’s ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working Through’ (1914):

> forgetting is mostly restricted to dissolving thought-connections, failing to draw the right conclusions and isolating memories … Forgetting impressions, scenes or experiences nearly always reduces itself to shutting them off. When the patient talks about these “forgotten” things he seldom fails to add: “As a matter of fact I’ve always known it, only I’ve never thought of it” (c.King 2000:20).

When Grace is longing to hear Paul’s voice she prays fervently to a possibly non-existent God to free her from all thoughts of Paul – ‘I do not want to be burdened, as my father was burdened, by a secret that I cannot face’ (Johnston 1998:199). Her acknowledgement that her father was burdened by a secret, and her failure to investigate, suggests that she had some intimation of the truth, but did not wish for confirmation. King cites Christopher Bolas, who has developed the concept of ‘the unthought known’, that is, the situation where something is known, ‘even if this
knowledge has not been elaborated through thought proper’ (c. King 2000:20). This is a concept that may be seen to embrace Grace’s characterisation as a woman who ‘doesn’t ever remember anything’ (Johnston 1998:162).

Although throughout the novel Grace is constructed as the very opposite of the traditional, self-sacrificing maternal figure, by the end of the work that is almost what she has become in respect of her own mother. Recognising that Mimi can no longer be that traditional mother – symbolised in her dropping of the milk jug, Grace is ready to take time off work, and to sacrifice the role of *Arkadina* which she had so longed for, so that she can look after Mimi at home. She comes to this decision out of love for her mother, and her decision is contrasted with the actions of Charlie, her colleague, who placed his mother in a home full of old actors, who would be a source of amusement to him on his visits, and chose to live with the resulting guilt. That she is willing to give up the long-coveted role in an international production in New York signifies a profound bond between Grace and her mother.

The mother/daughter bond as depicted between Grace and Polly is more problematic. As the novel shows, the effect that Polly has on her mother is generally to raise an element of resistance in Grace towards her daughter. Grace’s reaction seems always to contain a fear that she is going to be subjected to demands she will not want to meet. Her reception of Polly and her potential fiancé, Paul, in the days leading up to ‘first night’ is less than half-hearted. She seems unaware of Polly’s sense of isolation since her parent’s divorce, and is detached in her observation that her daughter always makes unsuitable choices in men; her attitude towards Polly on the break-up of her engagement is cavalier to the point of callousness, especially in
view of her own implication in it. Grace is shown to be aware that she has not been
the ideal mother to Polly, but she does not seem to recognise that the desire for
independence and freedom from restriction that has driven her life has had serious
implications for her daughter. She rejects any kind of long-term relationship with Paul
because she ‘couldn’t do that to Polly’, ‘couldn’t build that wall between us,’ and
because ‘there are some secrets that are too debilitating to carry around all your life
with you’ (Johnston 1998:126). True to habits of denial, Grace is failing to admit that,
like her father, she has already set up a debilitating secret that is likely to disrupt
future relationships in an uncanny fashion. This is symbolised in the sly old dog fox
unnoticed in the forest glade, the site of both of their illicit trysts, and which must
surely represent a manifestation of her dead father.

It is possible to state that Jennifer Johnston has provided a re-visioning of the
mother in Two Moons, both in terms of her own literary output, and in terms of the
traditional representation of the mother in Irish women’s literary fiction. In Mimi and
Grace, Johnston has introduced two original heroines – Mimi, the aged mother who,
of course, has been a daughter, and her daughter, Grace, who is, in turn, a mother.
This novel introduces mothers who are liberated from the maternal stereotyping that
has been common in much of Johnston’s own writing, and also from the other forms
of stereotyping that have attached to the mother down through the years in Irish
literary fiction. As a result of the narrative strategies employed – the magic realism,
dialogue, interior monologue and focalisation – the individual stories of both mothers
and also the mother/daughter stories are made available, and their subjective states are
accessed; each casts light on the other, but neither mother character is defined solely
by any other. Nor are these mothers defined solely by maternity; they are presented as
women who are also mothers, and while, in varying degrees, their maternity is crucial to their stories, it is not the sole dimension to their lives, or their consciousness.

Johnston may be also said to have re-visioned the mother in *Two Moons*, to the extent that her maternal characters are not asexual, nor pious, nor emotionally over-invested in their children: mother characters are neither idealised nor demonised, but are presented as complex women, who are shown to love and to need love, to suffer and also to cause pain; to be weak, and to be strong and to show vulnerability in their differing ways. By refraining from over-stating the influence of the mother in identity formation in the cases of both Mimi and Grace, Johnston avoids the resort to ‘mother-blame’ which commentators have found to be frequently a feature of mother/daughter narratives. In situations which may be seen to have worked towards creating identity problems for the maternal heroines in their younger days, both parents are implicated. In the case of Grace and her daughter, Polly, the mother stands indicted; but she is not cast simply as a ‘monstrous mother’; she is also shown in her vulnerable humanity. As has been already noted, most mother and daughter stories privilege the daughter’s point of view: this contemporary intergenerational novel embraces a strategy where each mother is allowed a consciousness and a space from which to define herself, opening up new news way of looking at the mother.

**Conclusion**

The novels examined in this chapter explore the effects on victims of physical violence and mental cruelty. Traumatic memory is a theme of particular importance in both works, exposing how the destructive workings of past injuries traverse the generations, and lay down layers of uncanny family secrets, taboos, and unspeakables.
Both novels also explore the dynamics of maternal/family relationships, and the emotions of betrayal, guilt and responsibility, or of denial and refusal of knowledge, that are engendered within these relationships. Dreams in both works and magic realism in Johnston’s novel function in bringing the secrets of trauma and repressed memory to light. Using Ruddick’s concept of ‘maternal thinking’ makes it possible to see how these themes are related in the fictions to the questions of what might constitute good mothering practices, and as to who might undertake them or, indeed, take the blame for them! Both novels ask questions about maternal love – how much maternal love and what kinds of love are too much, too little? And since both works treat of the mother/daughter plot, the consequences of failings in mother/daughter relationships come under investigation.

Neither novel offers firm resolution to the questions of traumatic memory, or of the rights and wrongs of mother/daughter relationships. In Madden’s novel, while early traumatic memories as well as failings in mothering practices are attributable to the mother’s side, Emily’s tragic experiences provide context for her air of negativity, and her flawed mothering of the youngest daughter, Sally, may be excused somewhat on the grounds of the collusion of the rest of the family. Emily’s self-reflexivity in the course of the novel, and her commitment of welcome and respect for the unmarried Cate and her child in the future, represent positive movements in the fictional representation of the mother. In Johnston’s novel, perhaps because of their more lively representation, there is less temptation towards ‘mother blame’, even though, as revealed through the course of the work, the practices of both mothers fall well short of what might be considered good mothering. Again, context provides reasons for maternal failures, and because the debilitating secret at the heart of Mimi’s unhappiness is her late husband’s, and because Grace’s tendency towards denial and
refusal of knowledge may be seen as a paternal rather than a maternal legacy, the figuring of both Mimi and Grace takes on a positive note, and advances the cause of the re-visioning of the fictional mother.
CHAPTER FOUR

Migrant Mothers
in Kate O’Riordan’s *The Memory Stones* and Lia Mills’s *Nothing Simple*

Introduction

Emigration narratives have, for the most part, left Irish mothers grounded in the home, while their children depart for foreign shores; that is, with the exception, of course, of the potential single mother – the transgressive pregnant woman obliged to ‘take the boat’, who has been the subject of earlier discussion. In contrast to traditional representations of the mother and of emigration, the two novels chosen for examination in this chapter, *The Memory Stones* (2003) by Kate O’Riordan, and *Nothing Simple* (2005) by Lia Mills, offer new paradigms both of motherhood and of migrant mothers, opening up possibilities of a re-visioning of the mother in the terms of my thesis. The stories of mothers and of mother/daughter relationships drive the plots in these fictions and both works place a major focus on the personal developmental trajectories of their heroines and the construction of their identities as women and as mothers. The question raised by Marianne Hirsch (1989:127) as to what plots become ‘speakable’ or remain ‘unspeakable’ between mothers and daughters becomes significant. Significant in this regard, also, are the ‘memory stones’ of O’Riordan’s title: these are flat stones selected from the local beach on which the heroine’s mother, Agnes, was accustomed to record special days, and special walks. Their discovery during the heroine’s first visit home in more than thirty years is instrumental in healing an injury harboured for more than a generation, and in bringing renewal for the daughter, Nell, in her mid-life years. My discussions are

Both O’Riordan and Mills resist identification under such labels as ‘woman writer’ or as a ‘feminist writer’ (Moloney 2003), but both identify with feminism, and it is clear from their works that both write out of a consciousness of feminism. The Memory Stones presents stories of mothers and daughters over four generations, and Nothing Simple reaches across three: since the stories in The Memory Stones are more complex and extensive than those of Nothing Simple, the former work has commanded a more extensive treatment. I have preferred the term ‘migrant’ rather than ‘emigrant’ or ‘diasporic’ to describe the mothers in these novels because the term ‘migrant’ covers returns as well as departures, and is relevant to all of the ‘migrant’ mothers in the novels. Although ultimately very different in approach and treatment, in addition to the disruption of the ‘Irish mother’ stereotypes so common in Irish fiction, both novels display notable similarities in several other aspects: both present pregnant teenage heroines who leave Ireland before giving birth, whose children are raised abroad, and whose migratory trajectories involve a return home. In both novels, the stories open on the cusp of the heroine’s return to Ireland, which facilitates interludes of recall, and of self-interrogation, and introduces issues of personal and, to a limited extent, national identity. Central to both works is the tragic loss, or the threatened tragic loss of a young child. High levels of maternal subjectivity are a feature of both novels, except in the cases of the older mother figures. In The Memory Stones, Nell, the principal mother character, is at the centre of consciousness, while her daughter, Ali, who is also a mother, and who makes the inward journey to Ireland, is to be heard through exchanges of dialogue, although to a large extent, and against
the grain of most mother/daughter plots, as noted by Hirsch (1989), her story is told from her mother’s point of view. Singularly, amongst all the novels studied for this thesis, Nothing Simple is a first-person narrative on the part of the young mother, Ray Graves, who provides an unmediated account of migrations, mother/daughter relationships, day-to-day mothering practices, efforts at community integration, and of threatened marriage disintegration covering the decade of the nineteen-eighties, before her return to Ireland in nineteen-ninety.

As mentioned above, and in line with literary traditions of mother/daughter stories, neither of the originary mothers in these works is granted subjectivity. In The Memory Stones, the story of Agnes’s loss of daughters unfolds through the voices, and memories of a daughter, and granddaughter, each of whom is subject to her own daughterly loss or threatened loss. The character Sylvia, mother of the heroine in Nothing Simple, is defined with little sympathy but some ironic comedy, by her daughter, Ray. At the beginning of the novel, Ray is emotionally lost to Sylvia but the end of the work holds out distinct prospects of improved relationships. Both novels support findings in actual experience, reported by Marianne Hirsch, where in a ‘mother’s group’ composed of assembled feminist scholars, the pattern of behaviour to emerge was that

when we spoke as mothers, the group’s members were respectful, awed, helpful in the difficulties of formulating maternal experiences. When we spoke as daughters, about our own mothers, however, the tone and affect changed and we all giggled knowingly, reverting back to old stereotyped patterns of discussing a shared problem – our “impossible mothers” (Hirsch, 1989:26).

Hirsch goes on to describe how the women in her group could muster sympathy for themselves ‘as mothers’, but found difficulty in transferring such sympathy to their
own mothers. (Hirsch 1989:26). However, in both of the novels under discussion, personal growth on the part of daughters is shown to include the development of a more generous and understanding attitude towards their mothers, attaining what Rich refers to as the ‘double vision’ (Rich 1995:225) of reconciling the persisting need for the mother with the mature understanding of her perceived, or experienced failings.

This chapter is divided into three parts; each novel is examined individually, with Part One devoted to The Memory Stones and Part Two to Nothing Simple, with the same sub-headings used in both parts. Under the heading, ‘Reasons for Travel’, I look at the circumstances that motivate the migrations of the mothers in the novels, and at how the young women figured are shown to negotiate their lives after leaving home, the aim being, of course, to establish if the mother is re-visioned. Julia Kristeva’s book Nations without Nationalism (1993) has proved useful in the exploration of some of the issues affecting the women portrayed in the novels, namely, issues of ‘origins’, of ‘foreignness’ and of finding oneself regarded as ‘other’ or, alternatively, free to disregard, or to belong to different groups. The sub-heading, ‘Entering the Legend’ forms itself around the intricacies of the inter-generational mother/daughter relationships that are featured in both novels. Since, as mentioned above, the tragic loss or the threatened loss of a daughter is central to both novels,

15 Kristeva’s argument is that nations based on homogenous communities and exclusion of the foreigner are a feature of the past, and that the twenty-first century must be a time of transition between the nation state and international or polynational confederations. She writes that fear of the foreigner and fear of this transition causes individuals and communities to regress to hate reactions such as totalitarianism, and to the cult of origins in family, ethnicity, nation, or race. Those of an opposite view may resort to hatred and suppression of their origins, and to believing that fleeing their origins will solve their problems. Kristeva recommends recourse to psychoanalysis since ‘it invites us to come back constantly to our origins … in order better to transcend them’. (Kristeva 1993:4). Ingman makes use of Kristevan theories of nationalism and otherness in her examination of O’Riordan’s The Memory Stones in Twentieth Century Fiction by Irish Women, where she points out that, like a number of other daughters in Irish fiction, Nell rejects her mother’s exclusive identification with one nation by learning to translate successfully between cultures.
issues arising from the crises of maternal and daughterly loss are examined in the context of re-workings of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone which, as pointed out by Randall (2004) has become somewhat paradigmatic of stories of maternal loss and recuperation since Adrienne Rich’s introduction of Greek myth into her discussions in Of Woman Born. Eavan Boland’s poem, ‘The Pomegranate’ which allows the speaker in the poem to ‘enter the legend’ as a child and as a mother (see Appendix II), has provided a useful focus for my discussions in this regard. In Part Three, under the sub-heading ‘Newer Plots,’ I discuss the new maternal paradigms, the changed cultural contexts and alternative plots for the mother as introduced in both novels. Insights from an eclectic number of commentators are used to shed light on the changed cultural and ethical landscapes the novels unfold; and from Hirsch and Rich on the re-writing of maternal and mother/daughter plots.

Part One

The Memory Stones

Reasons for Travel

Nell’s Story

The answer to the frequently asked question, ‘Reasons for Travel?’ at international border controls might once have been ready to hand in the case of the heroine of The Memory Stones: the need to avoid the scandal of becoming an ‘unmarried mother’ in Ireland in the late nineteen-sixties. Kate O’Riordan, in providing a more complex history and identity for the protagonist of her novel, provides a more complicated response to the question. At the same time, she outlines the beginnings of a new era in Irish society, invoked to a major extent by emerging
feminist consciousness, and the development of profound changes in attitude in society at large, and especially on the part of women themselves, towards matters of reproduction and motherhood, both inside and outside of marriage.

When the heroine of *The Memory Stones*, the then fifteen-year old Nell, accidentally pregnant by an unnamed local boy in the course of a somewhat joyless binge-drinking evening in the graveyard, reveals her pregnancy to her mother, she is faced with a look of disappointment she had encountered only once before – at the time her mother, having pulled her safe from mountain lake, showed momentary shock and dismay at the discovery that it was Nell she had saved from drowning, and not her older sister, Bridget, whose red scarf Nell had been wearing. Of the moment of Nell’s confessing her pregnancy to her mother, and the detection of what she believed to be a similar look of profound disappointment, the novel informs that Nell knew with absolute certainty, not in a girlish, theatrical fashion, though this was the stuff of high family drama – but with a visceral clarity that she could never survive that look a third time in her life (O’Riordan 2003:249).

Nell reaches the conviction, also, there and then, that her declared decision to put in her pregnancy with an uncle and aunt in Oxford, and her secret decision never to return home again to live with her mother, are the right decisions for her. Thirty-two years elapse before she ever again sets foot in Ireland, in a return that is not precipitated by the needs of her mother, but by the belief that her adult daughter and her grand-daughter are caught up in a situation that poses immediate danger to their lives.
Nell’s migration narrative does not participate in the Irish tradition of the young girl forced into emigration because of her pregnancy. Her departure is not prompted by poverty, or religious guilt or shame, or by what the neighbours might say; there is no pressure to marry, or to make the boy accountable. An aunt, who is the first to detect her pregnancy, counsels her – ‘You’ve no business marrying him, anyway.’ (O’Riordan 2003:248). On her mother’s part, despite her disappointment over Nell’s pregnancy, there is no question but that her child will be taken into the family. Indeed, it is the fear of such absorption, engendered when Nell’s mother and Aunt Hannah immediately enter into endless plans for the rearing of her child, that drives Nell to the belief that

The rest of her life was being decided, here, at the kitchen table. Already the baby was common property. There wouldn’t be any university. There would be a pub to mind and an infant, in that order. A girl infant: it never crossed her mind that she might be carrying a boy. In time there would be a doting Agnes teaching her granddaughter to play the piano. In time, three generations of women, pulling pints. In time, three sets of memory stones paving three roads to nowhere (O’Riordan 2003:249/250).

In the teen-aged Nell’s decision to leave for England and her intention to stay abroad may be seen her repudiation of her mother, Agnes, and of the traditions and way of life her mother cherishes, of values that she can see being projected into the future and on to the life of her unborn child. These are values and traditions that Nell has every intention of leaving behind her.

While Nell’s depicted lack of identification with home and family may be seen to have affinities with a desire to escape what Breda Gray refers to as ‘the intense familiarities and surveillances that have marked Irish society’ (Gray 2004:1) her decision to leave home may also be seen to be rooted in the earlier events in her life;
to be fuelled, in the first instance, by the conviction that she had always been the less-attractive and less-loved child and, secondly, that her mother had regretted that it was she, and not her sister, Bridget, she had pulled safe from drowning. In addition, as the narrative reveals, it had been necessary for Nell to live with the continued personal grief and guilt caused by the death of Bridget, in whose shadow she had lived. Her mother’s action at Bridget’s funeral, of taking the red scarf that Nell was about to put into the grave, folding it, and putting it through the gap in her coat buttons until ‘it lay across both breasts’ (O’Riordan 2003:244) created the prophetic belief within the surviving child, ‘Now that scarf will always be between us Mammy.’ (O’Riordan 2003:244).

Further burdens, years of bullying at school, suffered at the hands of Bridget’s former friends and victims, now freed by her death from her domineering influence to exercise revenge, had to be borne in silence, and could never be revealed to Agnes, never be permitted to undermine the memory of the ‘golden child’ that was Bridget. A more profound secret, even less capable of being revealed, was the possibility that she had kicked away her sister’s grip on her ankle immediately before their mother’s two hands pulled her from the lake, something that would implicate Nell more directly in her sister’s death, and in depriving Agnes of her more beloved daughter. A chasm in understanding between Nell and her mother that cannot be bridged is acknowledged by both mother and daughter, but the issues between them are never brought fully out into the open, and are never resolved. However, due largely to the existence of Ali, Nell’s daughter, relations between Agnes and Nell never fully break down. With Ali as a conduit, channels are kept open, and contact maintained by Agnes in the course
of visits to Oxford and Paris, and through holidays arranged and paid for by Nell in various parts of Europe, but never back in Nell’s original home.

It is the case, as the novel informs, that for Nell, her birthplace in Ireland never was home territory. In the course of a conversation with Ali, who has reversed Nell’s journey and settled in Ireland, and who now states that she feels absolutely at home in Kerry, Nell remarks, ‘Funny that,’ …‘I always felt a stranger here’ (O’Riordan 2003:90). Nell’s feelings of ‘otherness’ may be understood to have pre-existed the death of Bridget, and to have stemmed from her natural jealousy of the much praised, talented, older sister; to have arisen from her sense of exclusion from the circle of admiration that always seemed to surround Bridget, and from her later experiences at school that were so at odds with the sanctified family memories attaching to the tragic sister. The burden of her possible role in Bridget’s death, never shared with anyone, would alone be sufficient to distance her even further from everything that means home. The novel informs that ‘For years after Bridget’s death, the stranger looked back at her. For years, even the mirrors were dead’ (O’Riordan 2003:293). The sense of ‘otherness’, of existing as a stranger in her own home, and her own home-place, is shown in the novel to have dictated Nell’s migratory trajectory, to have helped create the emotional limitations that she places on herself in her subsequent life; and to have played an important part, also, in the ways in which her choices affected those who needed and wished to be close to her.

In her discussion of the cult of origins in Nations Without Nationalism, (1990) Julia Kristeva, contends that ‘The cult of origins is a hate reaction. Hatred of those others who do not share my origins’. In contrast, she claims,
those who repress their roots, who don’t want to know where they come from, who detest their own, fuel the … hatred of self, but they think they can settle matters by fleeing (trans. Roudiez 1993:3).

Flight of this nature is not how Nell chooses to regard her remove from her origins, and her failure to return for so many years especially for the funeral of her mother. However, significantly, in this latter case, under questioning when she finally re-visits her old home, she is brought to the conclusion that by her failure to return, it was not her mother she was punishing: ‘I think it would be more true to say I was punishing myself’ (O’Riordan 2003:178). But, again, the inwardness cultivated over so many years does not permit her to see just how devastating her choices were for others, and that her actions directed as much harm to those who loved her as to herself.

As the novel shows, Nell’s desire to repress the injuries of her childhood is not expressed just in flight, but in a life of constant and, for the most part, constructive activity, through which she distances herself emotionally from others, and from her own self-scrutiny. She is aware that she removes herself emotionally, that there are gaps between what she admits to, and what she conceals; she knows, also that she doesn’t always face the truths of her emotions – ‘that there resides within her gulfs of muddy darkness she elects to glide across, without looking down’ (O’Riordan 2003:56). In a passage of personal recollection, Nell recalls her earliest days in Oxford: ‘Sixteen, with everything foreign, including the strange-feeling incubus growing in her womb’ (O’Riordan 2003:162). Upon her arrival in England, she had become conscious of her ‘otherness’, that she looked all wrong, her clothes dated and provincial, her hair in the wrong style, tied back, without a parting, when everyone else was wearing it loose: her first actions in her room in her uncle’s house are to let her hair down, and cleave a parting. This action would seem to have been undertaken
not so much to fit into a new community, as in order to create an image that would allow her to ‘pass’ in her new surroundings, without declaring her origins. However, her ‘otherness’ is made clear to her in Oxford in that

When she opened her mouth and people heard the accent, saw her state, the sidelong knowing glances made Nell feel like the caricatured Irish girl forced to come over on the boat (O’Riordan 2003:163).

However, during those early years in Oxford, the protection provided by her middle-class uncle and aunt, and the fact that a talent that would almost certainly never have surfaced had she stayed in Ireland – a superior gift for wine tasting and for the study of wine – shielded her from anti-Irish, or other forms of racist sentiments that were prevalent in the U.K. during the nineteen-seventies. Ingman, commenting on the theme of the foreigner in *The Memory Stones* writes that

Nell’s case is rather different from the norm … Her stay in England opens up new possibilities for her life. She trains to become a wine expert and eventually moves to Paris where she creates a happy and fulfilling life for herself, albeit at the cost of certain emotional repressions (Ingman, 2007:101).

In *Nations without Nationalism*, Kristeva maintains that ‘in the contemporary world … the fact of belonging to a set is a matter of choice’, and that ‘the freedom of contemporary individuals may be gauged according to their ability to choose their membership’ (trans. Roudiez 1993:16). Having rejected her origins, Nell does not embrace new belongings, although the novel reveals that she has secretly played at it while living in Paris: She does this, firstly, through inventing a French family of origin – not the more noble parentage of Freud’s ‘family romance’, but a picture-postcard set of rural parents suitable for a re-invention of her childhood self; or, perhaps, of a conflation of herself with her dead sister, the symbolic ‘red scarf’
figuring in the perfection of an imaginary French village ice-skating tableau reminiscent of Bridget’s approximation of an ice-skating routine on the kitchen table that had caused Nell so much anguish. For Nell, this imaginary French parentage represents ‘A perfect match for the adult image she’s grown into’ (O’Riordan 2003:13). In another scenario, on a Saturday morning’s outing, she reflects with amusement on her current image: – ‘Solitary, well-dressed woman with her miniature dog. To be found all over this city.’ (O’Riordan 2003:12). In the course of an exchange with Nick, her daughter’s English partner, as to why she had never returned to Ireland, she explains – ‘I think we all have to invent a version of ourselves that we can live with. Mine happened to be elsewhere’ (O’Riordan 2003:80). Nell never totally rejects her Irish origins: her friends know she is Irish, and the black transvestite street-vendor, Simone, with whom she is on friendly terms, addresses her as ‘Madame Irish’ (O’Riordan 2003:10), but she never makes any attempt at keeping up her Irish connections. In Kristeva’s terms, Nell’s ‘ability to choose’ grants her the freedom to choose not to belong; this is something she does in personal relationships as well as in terms of national identity.

That the exercise of personal freedoms is not without consequences for others, no matter how isolated one wishes to be, becomes apparent in the course of the novel. Nell’s treatment of her uncle and aunt when she decided to move herself and her daughter, Ali, out and away from their influence after four years was, as admitted by her years later, ‘ruthless’, ‘selfish … and ungrateful too’, but she was afraid she was ‘becoming part of them … part of this accidental family’ (O’Riordan 2003:173-4). The life of her daughter, Ali was disrupted too, especially since Nell was ‘not around a lot of the time what with work and exams’ (O’Riordan 2003:174). A career move to
Paris seven years later, presented itself to Nell as a golden opportunity, even though Ali did not want to leave their home in Oxford or the proximity of her mother’s aunt and uncle. In Nell’s explanation, ‘it was as though I had found the place in life I hadn’t even known I was looking for, and I wanted Ali to be part of that’. (O’Riordan 2003:174). But for Ali, ‘a thin little thing, not very sure of herself’ (O’Riordan 2003:174), life was so miserable in such foreign surroundings that she could not become part of it, and she was sent back to live in Oxford with her mother’s aunt and uncle until she went to college.

Nell’s migrations cause heartbreak for her relatives, and prove psychologically disastrous for Ali, as above all, does Nell’s removal of herself from the realm of her own mother, Agnes, and from everything that Agnes cherishes. But the migration to France provides a most suitable way of life for Nell. Kristeva writes that ‘Nowhere is one more a foreigner than in France’ (trans. Roudier 1993:30), a situation most likely to recommend itself to O’Riordan’s heroine: she is aware of the fact that

She will never be French. No matter how immaculately her tongue wraps round vowels, she is essentially a foreigner (O’Riordan 2003:13).

The seduction for Nell of such a position is revealed in a focalised passage when she returns to Ireland. Observing the Nigerian asylum seeker on the beach, the text informs:

She knows what it’s like to be the outcast, to be other. She is also aware how addictive that otherness can become. To the point of obsession (O’Riordan 2003:225).
Nell’s life is shown to have been lived out in pursuit of such an obsession. When first introduced, although facing into the menopause with some trepidation, she is an independent, well-groomed woman, enjoying a spectacular free-lance career in the wine business; she enjoys the refinements and luxuries of a pristine rented apartment in a good district of Paris, and the comforts of love and an active sex-life maintained over a fifteen-year relationship with a married French winegrower who still lives on the ‘Domain’ he shares with his wife, and who comes to Paris only every second week-end. However, at the beginning of the novel, there are discernable cracks opening up in the apparently semi-detached life-style Nell has created: her lover, Henri, has decided to leave his wife, and shows expectations of a life shared more fully with Nell, even though both are aware that there has been a degree of emotional withdrawal from him on her part over some time. Henri also has new emotional baggage in that his adult daughter is pregnant, but is in an unstable, ‘on-off’ relationship, and in need of support and attention.

Problems in Nell’s relationship with Henri are secondary to her constant underlying, and very legitimate concerns about her own daughter, Ali, whose drug-taking and ‘New Age’ life-style have taken her from crisis to crisis since her early adulthood. The latest threat, which is, yet again, possibly life-threatening, forces upon a panicky Nell the long-delayed journey back to Ireland, conscious of the truth of Henri’s words of warning that ‘the things you left behind will be still there, where you left them’ (O’Riordan 2003:44). Her return does not just confront Nell with ‘the things’ she left behind, or the current and real dangers that threaten her daughter and grand-daughter: this momentous move impels her into the personal inward journey she has been avoiding all her life; she is propelled into a re-evaluation of herself and
of her relationships both past and current and, by the end of the novel, is moved to at least the intention of creating a future of more complete engagement with humanity, and with what Ali describes later on in the novel as ‘the shabby, scabby stuff of other people’ (O’Riordan 2003:287). Nell is driven into contemplating a future in Paris where ‘the change of life’ to be embraced will encompass more than the menopause.

Ali’s Story

For the most part, Ali’s story unfolds through the consciousness, or from the point of view of her mother, Nell, and through exchanges of dialogue throughout the novel. The words most associated with Ali are crisis, fragility, anxiety, dependency, but these are followed by alternative words such as bravery, and struggle. Her characterisation in terms of maternity in the novel sets Ali counter to most paradigms of motherhood, but especially those of Irish literary fiction; it places her, also, into a narrative of migration that reverses the tradition of the outward movement of Irish women to make their homes in the U.K. or beyond, by setting her into the Irish home and the life-style rejected on her behalf by her mother before she was born.

At the time of the novel (nineteen-nineties), Ali is thirty-two years old, the mother of seven-year-old Grace. She is a one-time ‘New Age’ traveller, and recovering heroin-user, who has settled in her late grandmother’s home and pub in Kerry, the home her mother has rejected for most of her life. Ali’s partner, Nick, who is suffering the debilitations of some undiagnosed illness, assures Nell that Ali and himself are ‘not living some kind of druggy life’, although admitting, at the same time that they are still using illegal drugs other than heroin – ‘Bit of weed. We grow our own in the garden’; ‘From time to time, … other stuff. Nothing too heavy,’ …‘She
mixes things a bit’ (O’Riordan 2003:78), and ‘We tried this mushroom. Ali had a bad trip’ (O’Riordan 2003:79); this last to cover up for an incident involving a shot-gun that had precipitated the call on Nell to return to Ireland. While not convinced of the truth of Nick’s words, Nell’s unspoken response to them is a confirmation of her belief that Ali’s life had been spent ‘Always in search of some heightened or, conversely deadened reality’ (O’Riordan 2003:78). Ali’s migratory past is reviewed through Nell’s recollections where she inwardly admits that she is probably unfair in how much she blames Nick for introducing Ali to heroin; for their adoption of a nomadic ‘New Age’ life-style; for the fact that Ali abandoned her once-prized English Literature course at Oxford; for the drug overdosing, and for the aimless and fruitless meanderings as part of a caravan of fellow ‘New Age’ wanderers taking them around the fringes of the U.K. and the fringes of society before their return to Oxford and a drug-free period approaching some sort of normality, prior to the arrival of their daughter, Grace.

Nell does not reflect on what Ali might have been seeking in her migrations, or why her realities were so unpalatable that she could only maintain a life-style that included recourse to some or other sort of drug. A. Giddens, in Modernity and Self-identity (1991), writes about the individual in late modernity being faced with a multiplicity of life-style choices, of ‘living in a post-traditional order’ (Giddens 1991:82), and of opting for alternatives in a world where ‘the signposts established by tradition now are blank’ (Giddens 1991:82). Giddens defines a lifestyle as

a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity (Giddens 1991:81).
Based on her upbringing, Ali may have found herself without any coherent narrative of self-identity. Before she was born, her mother had planned that Ali would be liberated from the bindings of family and national tradition. Ali was to start her life on a ‘blank page’ (O’Riordan 2003:315), expunged of history and of origins other than her mother, Nell. But the blank page planned for her by her mother, on which Ali was to write her own narrative of identity became, as the novel shows, also inscribed with the stories of three alternative mother figures, in three alternative countries, experiencing three alternative cultures, with Ali being used as a conduit between them. Her mother’s life choices dictated that Ali spent much of her childhood being bounced between three women – her mother in either the U.K. or in France, her grand-aunt, an Irish immigrant, in Oxford, and her grandmother, firmly rooted in Co. Kerry. It emerges in the novel that Ali’s great fear in childhood has been that her mother had stopped loving her own mother: ‘The thing is, I used to think, wonder … If you didn’t love her, when would you stop loving me, too?’ (O’Riordan 2003:291). It is apparent that the ‘post-traditional order’ and the ‘blanked out’ signposts for her life did not provide sufficient security of identity or direction to allow Ali to face her realities with any degree of equilibrium.

The narrative informs that Ali’s migration to Ireland is not just another nomadic ‘New Age’ whim: it is, for her, a journey home, the culmination of a search for origins. On the first day of Nell’s long-delayed return, Ali explains how she had planned it years before with Nell’s Aunt Hannah just after Agnes’s funeral, which Nell failed to come home for. In Nations without Nationalism, Kristeva asserts that

The values crisis and the fragmentation of individuals have reached the point where we no longer know what we are and take shelter, to preserve a token of personality, under the most massive, regressive, common denominators:
national origins and the faith of our fore-bears. “I don’t know who I am or even if I am, but I belong with my national and religious roots, therefore I follow them” (trans Roudiez 1993:2).

In this regard, the common denominators of national origin and religion under which Ali seeks to take shelter are also shifting. The certainties that her grandmother’s way of life seemed to point to are a waning force, as is pointed out in Ingman’s study:

Ireland in the 1990s displayed a growing national confidence, economic optimism and cultural sophistication as it entered the global economy. The so-called Celtic Tiger ushered in a period of rapid change: urbanisation and secularisation continued apace. The 1990s also led to an increase in materialism, individualism and general selfishness and not everyone benefited from the new prosperity (Ingman, 2007:22).

However, while the common denominators set out by Kristeva might be failing to grant the needed sanctuary, or the fixed structures of identity, neither are they likely to figure as regressive forces in Ali’s life. Instead, regrettably, her openness to the stranger leaves her without competency in judging the dangers that can accompany the unknown. This openness is shown in the course of the novel to add to her vulnerability in personal relationships and to create dangers for herself, her child, her partner and, eventually, her mother.

The reasons for Ali’s migration to Ireland can be seen in terms of a quest for the mother in the figure of her grandmother whom she very much loved. In complete contrast to Nell, Ali loves the home-place; she has a dream of emulating her grandmother, and, above all, of making a go of the pub. When asked by Nell if it is all she thought it would be, her instant reply is ‘Oh this is it. I’m home.’ (O’Riordan 2003:90). Ali’s journey to Kerry is not simply a reversal of her mother’s outward journey of escape, nor just the desire to find a congenial place in which to live. In
contrast to her mother’s desire to distance herself from her home scene, Ali wants to embrace the history and traditions that were despised by her mother, and that she feels should have been part of her inheritance; she wishes to continue the life that Agnes held out and that Nell refused. Ali believes that through Nell’s refusal to join her during holiday-times in Kerry in her childhood, she missed out on a vital part of her origins and her history; that she was deprived of something vital in not experiencing time spent in the company of both her mother and grandmother in their native place; she regards this as something that would have provided a clearer picture of their relationship for her and that might have better illuminated her own place in the world. She is unaware, of course, that such a lacuna in genealogy is precisely what Nell had wished for her before she was born – that Nell’s desire was that Ali would have a clear chart, ‘a blank page on which to write her own history, unencumbered by the ghostly baggage of her mother’s past’ (O’Riordan 2003:315).

Ironically, the recovery of aspects of this past is what might have aided Ali more than all her migrations, or all of the rescue missions her mother is constrained to undertake during the course of Ali’s drug-taking, crisis-filled years. Adrienne Rich claims that

the need for the mother should not be deemed to be shameful or regressive, but should, rather, be regarded as the germ of our desire to create a world in which strong mothers and strong daughters will be a matter of course (Rich, 1995:225).

As constructed in the novel, Ali seems likely to continue in dependency not just on drugs, but on a strong mother and, perhaps, eventually, on a strong daughter, and the novel offers possibilities that both of these might well be available to her. Possibilities
are held out, also, that the memories of a strong grandmother might continue to heal and inspire the damaged but struggling young mother that is figured in Ali, and that, liberated from her obsessions and addictions, she might find the strength of purpose required to mother her daughter consistently and appropriately.

**Entering the Legend**

**Mothers and Daughters and Granddaughters**

The sub-title ‘Entering the Legend’ derives from Eavan Boland’s poem, ‘The Pomegranate’, a poem that provides a re-working of the Demeter/Persephone myth, a myth that is sometimes useful in working through the intergenerational intricacies of mother/daughter relationships in contemporary literary works, as is suggested by Randal (2004) and Voth Harmin (2004). In the poem, the mother who has, of course, also been a daughter, claims the story as ‘The only legend I have ever loved/ … the story of a daughter lost in hell’; the legend is one of which the poet asserts ‘I can enter it anywhere. And have.’ (Boland 2006:31). As mentioned earlier, in view of the lack of subjectivity afforded to their characters, the originary mothers in the novels under examination, Agnes in *The Memory Stones*, and Sylvia in *Nothing Simple*, are permitted to enter the story only as mothers, and as seen through daughterly eyes. The ‘other landscapes’ of the mother’s story, as referred to by Rich (1995:221), when writing of her own relationship with her mother, remain unrevealed.

**Mother and Daughter: Agnes and Nell**

If Rich’s claim is true that ‘the loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy’ (Rich 1995:237), the story of Agnes
Hennessy is one of double tragedy: the loss of two daughters; one to a tragic drowning accident and one to alienation and self-exile. Agnes’s story is one of legendary proportions: her fatal flaw, that she may have preferred one child over another: her punishment not just the loss of the drowned child, but that she could never recuperate the relationship with the child saved from the water, despite their underlying mutual love. A momentary, involuntary revelation that it was the ‘wrong daughter’ (O’Riordan 2005:360) she had saved, and the ‘red scarf’, symbol of the wilful and vibrant Bridget, pressed across her breasts, could never be called back or atoned for, and remained ‘unspeakable’ between Nell and her mother for the rest of Agnes’s life. A second look of disappointment from Agnes on hearing of her teenaged daughter’s pregnancy confirmed for Nell that she could never face a third such look, and worked towards Nell’s self-exile and the migrations of her subsequent life, depriving Agnes of the company of her daughter in adulthood, and of many of the consolations of grandmotherhood.

In her explication of Kristeva’s work, *Speaking the Unspeakable* (1998) Anne-Marie Smith writes of the ‘unspeakable areas in our personal and collective past’ and of the ‘silence’ that is ‘part of survival and must be broken gently and never totally’ (Smith 1998:96). Agnes and Nell survive to some extent the tragedy of Bridget’s death, and the difficulties caused by Nell’s early pregnancy, but the silences between them are never broken during Agnes’s lifetime, mainly because of Nell’s unwillingness to re-visit or articulate the traumas of her early years. Yet, as Smith’s explication states, ‘the unconscious will make itself known’ (Smith 1998:12) and Agnes’s silence is eventually ruptured, not in speech, but through her writings on the ‘memory stones’ that provide the proofs to Nell of her mother’s love, proofs that were
evident and available all of her life, but that remained undiscovered because of Nell’s sustained disassociation from her earliest years.

Agnes’s persistence in her attempts to rescue the second daughter from the mountain lake, as recalled in Nell’s consciousness, where she dived repeatedly into the icy waters, is replicated in her efforts over the years to rescue and maintain the relationships between herself and Nell, and Nell’s daughter, Ali. The novel reveals that the ageing, previously home-bound Agnes journeyed abroad repeatedly to meet up with them. Year after year, Nell promised to visit in the summer when Ali came to stay, and year after year Nell stayed away, her intention to stay away never articulated, but put down to the demands of her work. Even Christmas home-comings, so valued in the Ireland of emigration, had to be reversed, with Agnes going to Oxford, or Paris, or wherever her daughter and grand-daughter might be located at the time. Like the mythical mother, Demeter, Agnes had to resign herself to compromise, but in this more modern version of the legend, it is the daughter who holds power, and who dictates the terms of their intermittent reconciliations. Randall’s essay ‘Adrienne Rich’s “Clearing in the Imagination”: Of Woman Born as Literary Criticism’ observes that the Demeter and Persephone myth ‘lends itself well to generational tensions in families negotiating for position between two or more worlds’ (Randall 2004:203); this may be seen to be the case in The Memory Stones, with the daughter, Nell, striving to divorce herself and her daughter, Ali, from her mother and her world, and Agnes persisting in her efforts to stave off the loss of a second beloved daughter as well as her only grand-daughter.
Ironically, Nell’s continued failures to respond or relate to her mother’s efforts at reconciliation effect the promotion of Agnes to iconic status in Ali’s imagination and affections; Nell’s stand-offs contribute towards the unspeakable ‘layers’ that she describes as existing between Ali and herself, ‘things we couldn’t get through, and even if we’d known what those things were I doubt we’d have found a way’ (O’Riordan 2003:175). These failures lead, ultimately, to the strained relationship or quasi-estrangement that exists between Nell and Ali. Ali’s desire to identify with her grandmother is not based on idealisation, or simply in opposition to her mother. Her recollections of Agnes’s wake and funeral, which she insists Nell must hear, testify to the wide regard in which Agnes was held, and suggest the kind of strengths that could have been available to Nell and her daughter if Nell had not sealed herself and her emotions off from her mother with such determination. Differing strengths shared, as mothers, daughters and grand-daughter, might have generated powers within them to speak their own, individual, ‘unspeakables’, and to have worked to restore daughters to mothers, and mothers to daughters, allowing each to find her place at the appropriate time in the legend of regeneration.

Mother and Daughter: Nell and Ali

The stories of this mother/daughter relationship emerge for the most part through Nell’s consciousness and actions; they surface, also, in the course of dialogue and in narrative observations throughout the novel. Because the work centres to such an extent on Nell, it is necessary to be mindful of the gaps and omissions in her consciousness, to remember the places within herself she doesn’t look into, ‘the muddy darkness she elects to glide across, without looking down’ (O’Riordan 2003:56) as referenced earlier, and to have regard to the competing points of view that
shed light on the characters of Nell and Ali. At the time of the novel, their relationship seems to be one that operates at a distance; that is skating over past difficulties and differences, and that has little room for questions, let alone answers, as to what might lie at the roots of Nell’s self-isolation and of Ali’s troubled and dysfunctional life. Mother and daughter are depicted as meeting up only periodically (usually in times of crisis for Ali), a situation that contrasts starkly with the type of relationship Nell had envisioned for them during her pregnancy when she was planning their future together: her vision then for Ali was that ‘She would belong entirely to Nell, and in turn Nell would belong entirely to her.’ (O’Riordan 2003:315).

In her poem, ‘Night Feed’, Eavan Boland posits the journey from the bliss of the almost symbiotic relationship between mother and new-born daughter in the lines ‘And we begin/The long fall from grace.’ (Boland, 1989:58). The relationship between Nell and Ali may be seen to have followed such a trajectory: in a focalised passage on the first evening of her return to her Kerry home, there is a description of the love Nell had felt towards Ali in her early years: a love so intense it brought 'A sense of completion, of a part of her own body returning’ (O’Riordan 2003:90) as she scooped her child into her arms; a love so intense that ‘there were times when Nell could have sworn that she was reinventing love’ (O’Riordan 2003:91). Contrast these emotions with the ‘spasm of irritation’ that was her recent experience at the ‘prospect of the long day’s worry about Ali, now that she’s broken through’ (O’Riordan 2003:11); with the recollection of experiencing her adult daughter ‘as an oppressive weight draped across her shoulders’ (O’Riordan 2003:134-5); and with the admission of having looked at her while entertaining the shocking thought, ‘I could live my life without you’ (O’Riordan 2003:135), a thought ‘all the more terrible because she
knows Ali has read it in her eyes, so that she ends up overcompensating to the point of insincerity’ (O’Riordan 2003:135).

The novel discloses that on this evening of Nell’s first visit home to Kerry in more than thirty-two years

Their bodies have listed slightly towards each other, plants towards sunlight, but there is an awkward pocket of air, of turbulence in the gap between them (O’Riordan 2003:60).

There is no instinctive embrace. This latest time of crisis in Ali’s crisis-ridden life provides some reasons for the turbulence: events this time have driven her elderly neighbours to make a small-hours phone call to Nell in Paris, and have propelled her into the journey home, stricken in the belief that her daughter is yet again in mortal danger. In terms of Boland’s poem, ‘The Pomegranate’, and the re-visiting of the Demeter/Persephone Myth, this is the time for Nell to ‘enter the legend’ again, to don the persona of Demeter, a role she has played several times already, and to yet again rush to the rescue of ‘a daughter lost in hell.’ (Boland 2006:31). Nell is aware that Ali will meet her with suspicion – ‘will look at her mother the spy with rage in her eyes’ (O’Riordan 2003:47).

When mother and daughter meet, the atmosphere is one of truce against a background of defensiveness and even suppressed hostility. One of the first things Ali says to Nell is, ‘I’m glad you’re here, Nell. Don’t make me not glad’ (O’Riordan 2003:63); and one of the earliest facts that Nell registers is that ‘Granny is Granny and she is still Nell, and not Mum.’ (O’Riordan 2003:63). The narrative has earlier revealed that the only occasion on which Ali ever called her mother ‘Mum’, was at
the time of her grandmother’s death, an event that had so paralysed Nell with shock, she was rendered incapable of responding to Ali’s desperate call, or to return to Ireland to her own mother’s funeral, a scandalous act of omission in Irish culture, and an issue that at the time of this meeting is unresolved between Nell and her daughter. Nell is unaware that this failure gave credence to the fear held by Ali since childhood that since Nell seemed capable of having apparently given up loving such a wonderful woman as her own mother, she would inevitably reach a stage when she would cease also to love her daughter.

In registering Ali’s failure to address her in maternal terms, Nell seems unaware that in a life of creating different images and identities for herself, she might have failed to create herself as a maternal presence for Ali; as a mother with whom Ali could identify. It is notable that in Nell’s earliest contemplations of Ali, even before her birth, the notion surfaces that ‘to strangers, they might even be taken for sisters’ (O’Riordan 2003:315); a focalised passage describes Nell and Ali walking home from school as ‘For all the world like fond sisters’ (O’Riordan 2003:90-1). Another part of the novel reveals that Nell

has to force herself to remember the little grey-eyed girl, … to remember looking around at the other mothers, who looked like mothers and not someone’s big sister, reaching down, scooping her up, dousing her for brief moments with brilliance (O’Riordan 2003:297).

In terms of ‘Entering the Legend’, it is possible to see the young Nell as creating an identity closer to Demeter the Goddess, as ‘a glittering presence whose luminosity dimmed everything by comparison when she was there, leaving everything dim when she wasn’t’ (O’Riordan 2003:297), than to Demeter, the devastated mother, who must
plead and be ‘ready/to make any bargain’ (Boland 2006:31) in order to keep her daughter with her. The novel also depicts Nell with her hand groping air behind, searching for Ali’s fingers. So determined to keep moving forward that it simply didn’t occur to her that the frenzied pace might be too fast for a child (O’Riordan 2003:297).

This scenario contrasts starkly with Agnes’s injunction to Nell on their desperate return from the scene of the fatal tragedy to ‘Stay in my sight. Stay where I can see you’ (O’Riordan 2003:355).

The dilution of the ideal of the closest of relationships between Nell and Ali that she had first envisioned emerges in Nell’s own admissions to her Kerry neighbours that she had been happy enough to let her aunt, Mary Kate, take on almost full-time care of Ali as a baby, and that she was youthfully ruthless in breaking that bond when she decided to move out of the ambit of her uncle and aunt. These disclosures are made dispassionately with some regret, but seemingly with only a slight consciousness of how disruptive her move would have been to her small child. The dispatch of Ali back to her relatives in Oxford while Nell was building a life and a career for herself in Paris during what would have been Ali’s most difficult developmental years is reported baldly, with the confession that ‘We seemed to get on better at a distance.’ (O’Riordan 2003:175). If Sara Ruddick’s definition ‘to be a “mother” is to take upon oneself the responsibility of child care, making its work a regular and substantial part of one’s working life’ (c Tuttle Hansen 1997:4) is valid, then Nell’s approach to motherhood and mothering might seem to have been somewhat semi-detached, conveying to her daughter that her mother was not totally
committed to her, and was prepared to pass her into the care of her grand-aunt and
grand-mother whenever that best suited her convenience.

However, despite Nell’s seemingly semi-detached attitude, there is no
evidence in the novel that she ever relinquished the notion of herself as a mother or of
her maternal role in her daughter’s life. Indeed, her repeated missions of rescue over
the years, worthy of a Demeter ever ready to rescue her daughter from hell, indicate
her willingness to continue her type of mothering well into her daughter’s adult years,
with that same willingness and her type of mothering bringing their own problems to
the relationship. There is no reciprocity in this relationship: Nell is always the
Demeter figure, Ali a perpetual Persephone. Maureen Gaffney writes that

Girls like occasionally to mother their mother, to practice the art of nurturing,
so long as they can return to being children when they need to. If they are not
allowed that closeness, they feel pushed away, denied, not well understood.
They may not be able to articulate it, but they may also begin to feel
incompetent, inferior. Although her mother may encourage other abilities,
unless she also validates her ability to be loved, and to love, her daughter’s
core sense of self and of self-esteem will remain fragile and easily shaken.
(Gaffney 1996:199).

Nell is aware of Ali’s low self-esteem; knows that Ali will never be the one to break
the tie between them; that she seems to have a need to fail, and will always want Nell
to see her failing. When considering Nick’s constancy towards Ali in the light of Ali’s
infatuation with Adam, the thought comes to Nell – ‘What could be more potent to a
man with no self-respect than a woman with less?’(O’Riordan 2003:236). However,
Nell is not racked with guilt or self-blame: while she ponders in the abstract the
problem of maternal responsibility for a child’s failure to make something good of the
life given, she reaches the conclusion that ‘Sometimes it seems as if the not given is
the only precinct a child wilfully chooses to remember’ (O’Riordan 2003:135). This is an area she chooses not to visit in the case of herself and her own mother, again confirming Hirsch’s findings of daughterly attitudes to their own mothers, as referenced above. Nell’s criteria for good mothering seem rather less stringent when it is she who is occupying the role of mother in the mother/daughter story: her thought processes go on with somewhat grim humour to address her daughter mentally, and to list a variety of ways in which she might have inflicted cruelties and neglect that would have made Ali realise ‘the good mother you’ve actually had.’ (O’Riordan 2003:136).

Difficulties with inhabiting the maternal role in the early years might be put down to Nell’s very young age at the time of Ali’s birth, but such difficulties may also be seen in terms of her need to remove herself from the passionate emotions associated with motherhood and daughterhood, and to the fear of causing the kinds of conflicts and injuries both she and her mother had endured by way of the mother/daughter bond. At the end of the novel, when Nell has reconciled herself to admitting Henri fully into her life, her thoughts are reported –‘He has made his choice, he has chosen her’, and ‘She thinks she may well be good for him, and will not cause him harm, after all’ (O’Riordan 2003:361). The conjunction of love and of causing harm to the people one loves, is associated with ideas of low self-esteem, and also with notions of ‘survivor’s guilt’. The complications of Nell’s relationship with her own mother, the fact that she did not believe her mother had ‘chosen’ her, mixed, perhaps, with feelings of guilt in connection with the death of her sister, might have planted within her the latent fear that she brought harm to those she loved, leading to her attempts at emotional self-isolation, and to overcompensating in other areas.
Achieving emotional detachment on her own behalf would seem to have led to a blunting of sensitivities, and to a lack of awareness of the degree of damage caused to those in relationship with her.

At one stage in the novel, when resisting Ali’s attempts to decipher her attitude to the losses in her life, Nell claims – ‘Then I took it all in. I took it all inside, and dealt with it. If you live long enough, you lose people. It comes to us all.’ (O’Riordan 2003:128). Nell’s problem in her dealings with those close to her, is that having ‘taken it all in’, she has never dealt with it all, but has elected to ‘glide across’ the unacceptable areas of darkness within her ‘without looking down’ (O’Riordan 2003:56). By the end of the novel, Nell has wrought spectacular, if ruthless, changes to good effect in the household of her daughter in Kerry, and both herself and Ali have moved to a closer understanding, much of it, it must be admitted, achieved in the course of laughing reminiscences at the expense of Agnes, on the lines outlined by Hirsch (1989:26). However, her true reasons for leaving home with such finality are not shared with Ali; it is clear that for Nell, it is necessary to leave these matters in the realms of the ‘unspeakable’. Smith cites Primo Levi in Julia Kristeva: Speaking the Unspeakable – ‘the silence is part of the survival’ (c. Smith 1998:96). It is only when she discovers that her mother ceased to inscribe the ‘Memory Stones’ on the day of her departure, and comes to the conclusion that their ‘walks were a comfort to her, not a torment’ (O’Riordan 2003:368), that Nell is enabled to lay the ghosts she has carried with her for years, most especially in the case of Agnes

To let her spirit rest, content in the knowledge that, at last, her daughter knows that she was loved, though as she was, flawed and human with the capacity to hurt and be hurt – not as the perfect memory they couldn’t help but make of Bridget (O’Riordan 2003:372).
While Nell might have chosen to see herself as eluding the claims of her mother, she is shown to have spent her adult life evading her own issues rather than eluding those claims. For all of the years spent in what might be described as the Demeter mode, she has also, in the terms of Boland’s poem, ‘The Pomegranate’, been occupying the role of Persephone, as ‘a child in exile in/a city of fogs and strange consonants’, (Boland 2006:31), as a child wishing to be rescued, wanting to be ‘chosen’ by her mother. In the case of O’Riordan’s heroine, the novel shows that it is not a quest for the mother that is regressive, but the refusal to admit to what Rich has described as the ‘girl-child still longing for a woman’s nurture, tenderness, and approval’ (Rich, 1995:225) that has been the mainspring of the identities she has worked to create.

**Mothers and Daughters: Ali, Grace and Nell**

As in the case of Agnes, much of Ali’s story emerges through Nell’s consciousness: when Ali speaks, her alternative version of their histories fills the gaps that her mother chooses to glide over. But what emerges clearly from the perspectives of both women is the degree of ambivalence with which each regards the other. While Nell’s views on Ali are presented early in the novel, it is only towards the end of the work that Ali’s views of Nell and of her interventions over the years are voiced: ‘That’s what you do. You come and fix things, and then you go away.’ (O’Riordan 2003:285). Ali acknowledges all the times Nell has turned up to rescue her from her difficulties; the money spent, the clinics paid for; she acknowledges also how ‘remarkably tolerant and patient – and yes, delightful too’ (O’Riordan 2003:286) her mother has been; and admits, when asked by Nell, that she sometimes hates her for it. Relations between Ali and her mother operate at a remove, and on a love/hate basis. Ali declares to Nell
I want to make you proud and then I’m furious with myself for wanting that. Mostly – and I say this with loads of equivocations – I don’t want you to take responsibility for me (O’Riordan 2003:288).

On the other hand, Nell is recorded as having often wanted to say

Let’s make it a good while this time. No contact, no panicky, late-night calls, no long protracted silences to whet my worry, sharpen my apprehensiveness. No you sinking deeper into some new quagmire of your own making, one arm reaching for help while the other thrashes me back (O’Riordan 2003:129-30).

As mentioned earlier, in the terms of the Greek myth, this relationship shows no turning of the seasons. For Ali, Nell is always the goddess Demeter figure, sweeping to the rescue; Ali, in her mother’s, and perhaps in her own eyes, is forever Persephone, lost in an underworld and tempted by its fruits, but at the same time, longing for her mother to come and rescue her.

Grave warnings of yet another crisis in Ali’s life induce Nell to make the long-postponed journey back home. Her surprise arrival in Kerry opens on a note of false cheerfulness on her part, and with an air of defensiveness on the part of Ali, making clear the gulf that exists between them. Although she expresses herself pleased to see her mother, Ali has a lot to be defensive about: it is immediately apparent that something is going terribly wrong in the household. Ali, herself, is skin and bone; Nick, her long-time partner, is ill with some mystery condition; and Grace, their daughter, is louse-ridden and flea-bitten and from Nell’s viewpoint, ‘There is something so deeply, intrinsically unhappy about the child’s posture that Nell has to wait a while longer to compose herself” (O’Riordan 2003:58) before announcing her arrival. The kitchen quarters of the pub are squalid, and the whole house is over-run with cats and kittens.
Nell’s probing into the truth of the situation finally leads Ali to break down and admit ‘I’m making a terrible mess of things. I can see it in your eyes.’ (O’Riordan 2003:73). Subsequent days reveal the fraught workings of the household and, in particular, the haphazard approach to Grace’s nurture and development. Grace, aged seven, thin and unkempt, can be seen to help out in the pub, to prepare her own lunch and get herself out to school – that is on the days she goes to school. She has no friends, her only companions being cats and kittens that have become so numerous they might be regarded as an infestation, and that are, as Nell’s investigations uncover, the cause of Nick’s illness. Further persistent probing on the part of Nell eventually uncovers the nub of the current crisis: it is that Ali has become besotted and sexually involved with a nomadic ‘New Ager’ who has insinuated himself into the pub and the household, and is pressurising Ali to let him have a valuable site adjoining the pub by suggesting he will move on if he doesn’t get it. It is made clear that Ali’s affair is destroying all that she has built up since settling down in Kerry; the event involving the shotgun having evolved because of Nick’s threatened suicide on hearing of Ali’s involvement with Adam.

If a claim by Steven Pinker (2008) that ‘Romantic passion taps the same dopamine system that is engaged by other obsessive drives like drug addiction’ is true, then Nell’s evaluation of Ali’s infatuation with Adam may be correct:

Adam is the drug of the day, and it’s written all over her daughter’s face that he’s brought her to exquisite, heart-piercing highs of self-abasement which heroin merely kissed (O’Riordan 2003:297).

However, in a subtle moment in Nell’s consciousness when pondering over Ali’s willingness to risk everything for a ‘nomadic hustler’ (O’Riordan 2003:297) such as
Adam, Nell associates Ali’s desire to pin him down, ‘to keep him in her sights’ (O’Riordan 2003:297) with the inconstancies and losses in the female relationships of her earlier life, and with her failure to hold on to ‘her own mother, her gran, Mary Kate, endlessly ping-ponging between the houses, between the women’ (O’Riordan 2003:297). This notion is not pursued at the time, but the connection is made between Ali’s disrupted, and almost entirely female, upbringing and her willingness to risk her heart, home and family in order to keep a drifter like Adam grounded. While the finger of ‘mother-blame’ is not pointed, nor is evidence for the concept provided in Nell’s consciousness, the suggestion of maternal responsibility for some of the instabilities of Ali’s life is very close to the surface. Rich writes

As daughters we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours. We need not be the vessels of another woman’s self-denial and frustration (Rich 1995:247).

This intergenerational novel poses alternative questions – what does it mean for the daughter when her mother chooses not to follow the route of self-denial or of frustration? And in what light should one view bad mothering, as opposed to the ‘bad’ mothering that subverts patriarchal codes that feminists discuss? (Tuttle-Hansen 1997:10)

The question of maternal responsibility arises more acutely in connection with Ali’s daughter, Grace. In the first instance, like her mother before her, Grace is used by Nell as a conduit between the generations, mostly as a means of gleaning information about Ali. This is something that is well known to both Grace and her mother, and that impinges on the child’s relations with them both. The narrative reveals that Grace ‘never knows what she is supposed to be hiding, usually on her
mother’s behalf, but she knows that she should be hiding something’ (O’Riordan 2003:67). The novel discloses also that there have been times when ‘a dart of pain’ (O’Riordan 2003:67) has flickered across the child’s face, under the direct questioning of her grandmother, to the extent that Nell had decided six months previously to bring an end to the quizzing. Grace has further difficulties beyond family relationships and her mother’s affair with Adam: while her parents’ chosen life-style consign her to ‘alternative’ patterns of living that ignore many of the conventions of the wider community, including the aversion to fleas, lice, and dirt, Grace is expected to find her place socially on a daily basis within that community in the local primary school; at school, Grace suffers the cruel consequences of being ‘other’ and, according to her teacher, ‘No one wants to sit beside her’ (O’Riordan 2003:273).

Of even larger consequence for Grace, however, is that Ali has been so abandoned in her affair with Adam, that she seems oblivious of its effects on her daughter. The suggestion is made that Grace may have been able to observe Ali’s sexual intimacies with Adam, or at least to overhear them, and the novel certainly has her witness his degrading treatment of her mother in the family kitchen in the presence of Nell. Grace can be seen to be made to suffer not just a cruel dashing of her first childish ‘crush’ on Adam but, more importantly, to experience serious worries about her mother and about how the acceptance of this stranger into the household will affect the family.

Although opinions as to what may constitute child neglect may vary, and may be very subjective, the conditions surrounding Grace’s circumstances sail close to the
terms objectively laid down as neglect by expert opinion in the fields of child psychology and welfare: such criteria include situations where children may be said to be dirty, where they may be viewed as displaying inappropriate knowledge of sexual matters inconsistent with their age or developmental level, where school attendance is poor and where relationships with peers are poor. These are all terms applied to Grace by her teacher when Nell visits the school; they are terms that Nell finds objectionable, but that she cannot refute. It is not the case that Ali does not love her daughter, or is deliberately neglectful or cruel: it is that the life-style chosen by Ali and Nick does not marry with the more conventional life-style that is being set out for Grace, and that Ali’s weaknesses for ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ in her life have taken her over once again, while Grace’s father, Nick, is too incapacitated to intervene effectively.

Ali’s capacities for the role of Demeter are tested when Grace runs away, and is believed to have gone to rescue the cats and kittens that have been purged from the premises in the interests of Nick’s health and transported to the lake (the scene of the earlier family tragedy) for drowning. Ali and Nell set out in search of her, and while at first it seems that Ali is capable of donning the mantle of Demeter, desperate to rescue her daughter from the underworld, the weather, the terrain and the darkness of the night impels the women to delay the search and take refuge in the car until daylight. However, by this time they are operating under Nell’s direction, with Ali ‘allowing her mother to guide her steps away from the edge’ (O’Riordan 2003:349), and Ali repeatedly saying ‘I don’t know what to do.’ (O’Riordan 2003:349). Narrative focus remains on Nell, and it is she who discovers Grace lying under a rock, and has the child brought to safety; Ali is figured as enervated by her drug dependencies, and as incapable of sustaining the Demeter role, even when she most wants to.
Following Grace’s rescue, a turn in the plot sees Nell slipping into daughterly role as, for the first time since she, herself, was rescued from the lake, she breaks down and shares with Henri (who has travelled unexpectedly from France) the impact on her of her mother’s reaction on realising that it was not her older daughter she had recovered – ‘What I was seeing in Mammy’s eyes was the moment she realised she’d pulled the wrong daughter out’ (O’Riordan 2003:360). That moment has scarred and shaped the rest of Nell’s life, and has left within her a needy, daughterly self that, despite her claims to the contrary, has never been ‘dealt with’ (O’Riordan 203:128) even in her adult years as a mother or as successful career woman. It is a moment she never shares with her own daughter: in a somewhat condescending exchange, Ali is left to believe that the difficulties between Agnes and Nell arose from Nell having confessed to her act of self-preservation in kicking Bridget’s hold on her ankle away. The moment remains, in Kristevan terms, ‘unspeakable’, and the ‘silence’ surrounding it remains for Nell ‘part of survival’ that is never broken totally. Nell remains unable or unwilling to display any of ‘the shabby, scabby little things’ (O’Riordan 2003:287) that might have helped Ali to a better understanding of her mother, and of herself. However, hours passed sorting out the inscribed ‘Memory Stones’ left by Agnes, and the shared agreement that Agnes was ‘some woman’ (O’Riordan 2003:371) take Ali and Nell to a level of understanding not achieved before. This ‘entering of an old text from a new critical direction’ (Rich 2001:11) enables Nell to lay her mother’s ghost to rest, to release her from her daughter’s sustained desire.

At the end of the novel, Nell is shown to have reached a new emotional awareness, and to be prepared to open herself up to new risks in love and human
connection by welcoming Henri, and even, perhaps, his daughter and grand-daughter, fully into her life, and into her white apartment in Paris. For Ali, no such golden future is projected. Viewed through her mother’s eyes, she may be able to make do with what Nell regards as ‘the runner-up prize’ (O’Riordan 2003:367) that is Nick, the beautiful and magnetic Adam, having been exposed as a criminal con-man through Nell’s detective work, and purged from the household as efficiently and traumatically as had been Grace’s near-feral cats and kittens. The best Ali can muster, as she looks at the empty space once occupied by Adam’s caravan, is the hope that ‘Maybe’ (O’Riordan 2003:366) she will be all right. A replacement pony for their daughter, a new ‘kindness’ and ‘the gentleness that springs up between people when they have been forced to look over the edge together’ (O’Riordan 2005:367) may provide the bases for renewed relationships and new identities for Ali and Nick and, hopefully, an enhanced sense of responsibility to develop in their ‘alternative’ family situation. Nell’s interventionist tactics on Grace’s behalf – interviewing her teacher, ‘buying’ school friends with promises of gifts from Paris, and her promise of repeat visits to Kerry - are indications that, despite the onset of the menopause, she is not yet ready to cede the role of Demeter; in the expansion of the cyclical plot, the challenger for the role may be foreseen in the grand-daughter, Grace, with Ali again the conduit through whom the inheritance of the strong mother may find expression.
Part Two

Nothing Simple

Reasons for Travel

Ray’s Story

In *Nothing Simple* (2005) the migratory mother is the self-narrating Ray, the late-life daughter of middle-class Dublin parents: an enervated, distant mother, who greeted the arrival of a baby so late in her life with dismay, and an idealised father who succumbed to a sudden stroke when Ray was sixteen. The novel opens in a first-person narrative ten years after Ray’s migration to the U.S.A., and just days before a planned return journey to settle in Ireland again, a move about which she has many reservations. Ray’s subjective narrative opens in the middle of a crisis provoked by the disappearance of her ten-year-old daughter, Hannah, who has purposely gone missing in the hope this will prevent them from leaving Texas. In a moment of reflection during the search for her daughter, Ray expresses some surprise at the woman she now finds herself to be:

I would never in a million years have foreseen myself like this, a big woman, nearing thirty, sitting on a swing in a deserted playground in Houston, Texas, trying to imagine where my angry daughter might have gone to hide from me (Mills 2005:40).

Little more than ten years earlier, Ray’s self-narration presents her as an unconventional and rebellious daughter, with her first flight from her inadequate mother and her home in Dublin, at the age of eighteen, to a rented bed-sitting room, funded by calling in a dare, offered half-jokingly years earlier by the boy next door: an hour in his bed in exchange for a hundred pounds. Somewhat confounded by her
recklessness, we are told, he gave her a contact number for a job in a sleazy Dublin nightclub, where she met Dermot, a once-off customer and computer ‘geek’, and fell instantly and unquestioningly in love with him. With no time wasted on courtship, she immediately moved in to live with him. Ray’s narration states,

“I had never had a friend like Dermot before. … Here was someone I could lose time with, someone to help me unlock the secrets of the city and my own body. It was like being a child again, but this time I had someone to play with.” (Mills 2005:74).

It is clear that migration was not a pre-meditated plan for Ray. She had no notion of leaving Ireland before she met, and fell so unreservedly for Dermot Graves: ‘One minute my life was one thing, and the next it was another, and there was nothing to do but go along with it’ (Mills 2005:73). The novel hints that Ray might have identified Dermot with her late, beloved father: the notion surfaces where she unconsciously registers a similarity in their hands. Freudian theory might suggest that Ray saw a father figure in Dermot; Rich, on the other hand, states that ‘the woman who has felt ‘unmothered’ may seek mothers all her life – may even seek them in men (Rich 1995:242). At the outset of their relationship, Dermot seems to fit into what Hirsch, following Rich, terms ‘the fantasy of the man who would understand’; to be the man who would ‘combine maternal nurturance with paternal power’ (Hirsch 1989:57-58). Dermot takes it as given that Ray will go to America with him when he finds a job there, and this presumption is bolstered by Ray’s unplanned pregnancy. Pregnancy presses her into a precipitate marriage, not for reasons of social or religious conformity, but on account of a high-tech job in Dallas, Texas, that Dermot has been offered, and because emigrating as a married couple will improve their chances of meeting U.S. immigration visa requirements. Still the reckless teenager, Ray never
questions the wisdom of their migration – it’s what Dermot wants and, as she tells her friend, she ‘hadn’t thought further than … Dermot’ (Mills 2005:89). While this narrative might seem like a prelude to a story of ‘living unhappily ever after’, this is not the case. Ray’s narrative never discounts the relationship between herself and Dermot, but her main focus moves to the other important areas of her life, to the birth of her children and to how she copes in the U.S. as migrant and mother.

Like the character, Nell, in The Memory Stones, sudden arrival in a foreign country is experienced as a profound shock. Upon arrival in the U.S., Ray is made conscious of her foreignness by the laconic and impersonal administrators of the U.S. immigration system who, she feels, are making judgements on her pregnant state; she is later struck and somewhat intimidated by the cultural and semantic differences in the American usage of the English language, and most strikingly by the suggestion of hostility or, in Kristevan terms, ‘Hatred of those others who do not share my origins’ (trans. Roudiez 1993:16) directed at them by the owners of an American Chevrolet bearing a sticker reading ‘Hungry? Out of Work? Eat your foreign car!’ (Mills 2005:104), that is parked alongside their second-hand Volvo every evening. Sensations of foreignness are increased by the necessities of becoming ‘acclimated’ (Mills 2005:102) to the overwhelming heat, and to the humidity that makes breathing seem to be like drowning. Texas might well be another planet, a new world that makes them both irritable and somewhat foreign to each other: Dermot, ‘snappy and cross like a school teacher’ (Mills 2005:102) is a man Ray has never seen before. Dermot as ‘The man who would understand’ becomes as fugitive as do the heroes in the nineteenth-century novels discussed by Marianne Hirsch (Hirsch 1989:58). However, Ray’s greatest sense of being ‘foreign’ does not arise from differences in
culture or language, or newly discovered aspects of her husband’s temperament: this comes with the realisation that her situation is one of total dependence: her passport bears the information that Dermot is the “principal alien” (Mills 2005:109), making her a ‘dependent alien’. Wherever he goes, she must also go. Her loss of identity is expressed in her words: ‘Somewhere over the Atlantic, I had lost myself. I became a displaced person: dependent, secondary, a wife, soon to be a mother’ (Mills 2005:109).

Weighing the arrival of her daughter, Hannah, and the move to the U.S. against each other as irrevocable, life-changing events, Ray cannot come down definitively on one side or the other. However, soon after becoming a mother, loneliness and a sense of utter isolation, coupled with her husband’s remark that she needs more adult company, drive her to do something she ‘knew my old self would never, not in a million years, have done’ (Mills 2005:116): making a call to a total stranger to ask to join a local mother and baby group. This for Ray was a feared and life-changing step because it seemed to represent a future she had never previously contemplated:

Maybe it was my own future I was afraid of. As if entering that group would be the final, irreversible step. Accepting fate. Surrendering my life to become one of them (Mills 2005:116-7).

The feared step into the unknown is supremely life-changing because it brings Ray to a new consciousness and a new set of values: the myth of America as the ‘Land of the Free’ proves as unfounded for her as had her ideas of her husband as the playmate she had lacked in childhood, or of his being the other half of ‘sharing a self with someone’
(Mills 2005:39) of their earliest romantic days. Dermot becomes the ‘family man’ who has opinions on child-rearing, and reminds her angrily that ‘You have more than yourself to think about now’ (Mills 2005:115), as well as the ‘company man’ tied into the demands of his employers. Over the next three years, during which a second child is born, the family are obliged to move across the south-western states to Los Angeles and back to Texas, each journey dictated by the pursuit by Dermot’s company of the perfect capital funding arrangements, the best tax-breaks, or the newest contracts. The family status as legitimate immigrants is dependent on Dermot’s employment as a cutting-edge computer scientist with the J.P Fischer Company: where they live, and for how long, must be undertaken at the discretion of Dermot’s company – a company he identifies with and is proud to work for. The corporate world of U.S. big business calls for unstinting mobility and flexibility on the part of employees; maintaining a place on the corporate ladder leaves very little time for the requirements of family or, indeed, of personal needs. Sociologists, Beck and Beck-Geirnstein, commenting on the freedoms offered in the individualised society, point to the restrictions and stresses that this type of market-driven society also imposes on family life:

> How individuals find jobs depends on the laws of the market – flexibility and mobility, for instance, or competition and career – which gives very little consideration to private commitments (Beck and Beck-Gernstein, 1995:52).

Choice in ‘belonging to a set’, and the ‘ability to choose their membership’ as set out by Kristeva (trans. Roudiez 1993:16) are denied to both Dermot and Ray by virtue of their foreignness, but are doubly denied to Ray in consequence of her state of absolute dependence on her husband. The consciousness dawns on her that, as migrants and aliens, as worker and dependent, she and her husband are compelled to
operate in parallel worlds: his, the world of computer technology and big business, in air-conditioned offices because ‘The computers need it’ (Mills 2007:137); hers the business of everyday life, of child-rearing, shopping, and house-keeping. However, making the best of what is on offer, during the years of their enforced migrations, whenever they are settled, even temporarily, Ray joins a mother and baby group, and following the birth of her second child, the contrasting values of her world and the individualistic world Dermot operates in are brought home to her, and another, less individualistic, but more appealing, aspect of American life opens up for her. Through the mother and baby clubs network, women barely known to her come and look after her and her family; meals, laundry, child-minding are all taken care of. In her account, Ray states, ‘I let the kindness of strangers wash over us, and felt something inside me flower’ (Mills 2005:120). It is possible to see Ray as thriving personally in this women’s world of care and nurturance because it is one that was not available to her in her early years due to her own mother’s lack of engagement with her. When nurturance is available, Ray responds and grows emotionally and mentally. Her answer to Dermot’s question as to how they will ever repay these kindnesses comes easily; ‘What these women did for us, we’d do for someone else when our turn came’ (Mills 2005:120).

The women supporting Ray in her times of need are not, typically, the ‘sisterhood’ of the feminist movement. The nurturing practices of these women hark from an older, pioneering way of life, when migrating women looked after one another in female solidarity, through Christian charity, or sheer humanity, and performed pragmatically the ‘women’s work’ of the community that has always been taken for granted and that still goes unrecognised beyond the home, especially in the
globalised arenas of corporate business and technological development. A significant point to note in the novel is that although she sometimes resents it, Ray’s exclusion from the public sphere does not result in a loss of self-esteem or in feelings of personal devaluation. Instead, she gains an awareness of the value of community, and of providing nurturance and care, and even more importantly, she reaches the awareness that although Dermot was on track in the world of cutting-edge technology, in her world of domesticity and community ‘was the force that kept the world turning on its axis’ (Mills 2005:121). In asserting a re-evaluation and affirmation of the maternal and the domestic in modern U.S.A. society, the novel is not proffering an endorsement of the conditions that make it necessary to depend on female nurturance and the ‘kindness of strangers’. It is registering appreciation of this valuable work, as is proven in Ray’s narration of personal development and maturation: Ray’s narrative recounts how she reaches out to migrants less fortunate and even less secure in their residential entitlements than she is.

The costs of child-care and her own lack of qualifications would limit Ray’s choices of employment in most societies, but a total prohibition on her taking up any paid employment is enshrined in the U.S. immigration laws that allow her technologically competent husband to work and build his career there, but exclude her from the same rights on account of her status of dependency. As Ray relates, the only form of paid work that is practicable for her – informal arrangements with friends and neighbours to provide unofficial child-minding or after-school care for payment constitute not just a breach of regulations, but a direct threat to the family obtaining permanent U.S. immigrant visas. It is in this constituency that the novel sets out yet another world to be negotiated by the migrant Ray: the world of contemptuous U.S.A.
officialdom that never needs to apologise, never needs to explain. This is the world of the Immigration and Naturalisation Services, where applicants for visas must wait in line for hours in offices that offer few facilities; and where breast-feeding a month-old baby as discreetly as possible is deemed to be ‘causing a disturbance’ (Mills 2005:122), and incurs ejection of the perpetrator from the building by a man wearing a gun. Unlike Nell in The Memory Stones, Ray is not in a position to exercise the democratic freedom to choose which group she will belong to, as discussed in Kristeva’s Nations without Nationalism (trans. Roudiez 1993). However, as a foreigner in the democracy of the U.S.A., she has a choice – she could go home. But her husband won’t leave without first getting the ‘green card’, their true passport to the U.S.A., and to a career that will take him to the forefront in his field in whatever country he might later find himself wishing to live.

Ray’s realisation of this situation provides her with yet another cognitive moment: she is bound to Dermot – ‘This was his future, and that meant it was mine as well’ (Mills 2005:132). Such a conclusion does not denote Ray’s passive acceptance of the role of corporate camp follower; it indicates, instead, her pragmatic decision to make the best of what the life she has entered into can offer in her particular circumstances. This pragmatic decision includes bringing their migrations to a close, and finding a place in which to settle down. Resulting from this decision, still another world opens up for Ray, with the next seven years spent in a suburban back-water in Houston, Texas, where she works at integrating herself and her family into a shifting and sometimes baffling community. Here, being ‘foreign’ or ‘other’ is not unusual – most residents are from out of town, but here, also, not just her foreignness, but also her insularity and lack of life experience are frequently exposed and exploited, and
her good nature and friendship sometimes betrayed. However, at its best, this community, especially the community of women, also provides support, friendships and space for Ray and her family in which to expand and grow.

Ray’s return to Ireland, like her outward migration, is not of her own choosing. It is, instead, dictated by economic recession, by the latest demands of her husband’s career, and by his penchant for making large life-changing decisions without consulting her. By this time, she is the mother of four children, and the journey to be undertaken will be made less in hope and anticipation, than in wisdom, and a new sense of maturity gained in the course of a serious breach in their marriage, and through the mercifully brief disappearance of their elder child, Hannah. The contention of Jessie Bernard in *The Future of Marriage* (1972) that there are two marriages in every marital union – ‘his’ and ‘hers’ – and that the husband is generally the greater beneficiary from marriage, are seen to be borne out in material terms in Ray’s story. However, while the novel shows that the ten years in the U.S.A. have exposed Dermot to cutting-edge technological skills and to business experience in the multi-national corporate world that is likely to be highly marketable in Ireland in the final decade of the twentieth century, it also points up a lack of development in emotional intelligence or sensitivity on his part. Those same years show Ray to have been immersed in home-making, child-rearing and community interaction, none of which activities will command great rewards either economically or socially on her return home. On the other hand, her experiences in the management of scarce finances, of the vagaries of social interaction, particularly in the Texan climate and, above all, of the rearing of four young children in such foreign surroundings without the benefit of family support, point to the achievement of worthwhile personal
capabilities that should equip her well in negotiating a fresh start in a burgeoning and increasingly individualistic Ireland.

**Entering the Legend**

**Mother and Daughter: Sylvia and Ray**

‘By the time I was born, Sylvia had had enough of being a mother’ (Mills 2005:43) is Ray’s introduction to Sylvia, the somewhat cursorily and unsympathetically-drawn mother of the narrating heroine, Ray (or Renee, to her mother), in *Nothing Simple*. Almost a perfect fit for the ‘Moaning Mammy’ category of stereotypical mother figure identified by McCarthy (2004:97), the account given of Sylvia is of a petulant and self-centred woman who had believed she was finished with all the mess and bother of babies and young children, until Ray arrived, and who took to her bed every afternoon during Ray’s childhood, leaving her daughter to occupy herself, and free to roam the streets unsupervised. Sylvia’s abdication of her parental role, especially after the death of her husband, meant that it was then left to Ray to run the household. Her neglect and inaction left Ray’s school fees unpaid, the public exposure of which during class, led to the rebellious daughter leaving school and home at the same time, and facing, totally unprepared, into the underworld of Dublin’s sleazy night life, her mother’s protests ringing in her ears ‘But you’ve no skills, no training. You’re good for nothing’ (Mills 2005:48). Sylvia’s comments on Ray’s precipitate marriage are equally crushing – ‘It’s a relief, frankly. You’ll be someone else’s responsibility from now on’ (Mills 2003:91).
These words encapsulate the unwillingness of the ‘originary mother’ of this novel to accept responsibility for her daughter’s nurture over the years, but the narrator, Ray, never looks for reasons for her mother’s lack of interest in her. In total contrast to her mother, it seems to be part of Ray’s pragmatic temperament not to agonise over past deficiencies, but to deal with circumstances as they present themselves to her. Ray’s account of her relationship with her mother is a narrative of the absence of any shared regard, let alone love, until the day of her departure for the U.S.A. when, to her surprise, Sylvia sobs into her shoulder and whispers ‘If this doesn’t work out for you, you come straight home’ … ‘I’ll send you the money. No questions asked’ (Mills 3005:97). Sylvia’s words seem to shatter a never-named barrier between them – Ray refers to ‘shards of glass’ that might come out instead of words. (Mills 3005:97), but does not linger on the exchange. In terms of the Demeter myth, this incident may be seen to record a turning in the seasons: for the first time, Ray sees her mother as ‘thin, old. Defeated.’ (Mills 3005:97), while she, herself, is blossoming into maternity; she has never before thought of her mother in terms other than those of hostile opposition. Her account of her attitude towards her mother tells that after her father’s death she ‘took pride in not being like her’ (Mills 2005:46).

Sylvia’s character in this novel is drawn totally from a daughterly point of view: to a great extent, she is a figure of wry amusement, again confirming Hirsch’s findings on daughterly attitudes to mothers, as referred to earlier in this chapter. However, through a tautness of tone, the somewhat stereotypical representation of Sylvia avoids ‘matrophobia or ‘mother blame’, with Ray’s pragmatism and resilience playing a major part in this. In addition, during a visit that Sylvia makes to Houston, a more mature and empowered Ray puts an early stop to her mother’s habit of constant
complaining, and stymies her projections of victimhood. As a result, there emerges a more mellow, and amenable Sylvia, who can be seen to be making the effort to come to terms with this new world of which Ray has become a part: she plays with the children on the beach, forges a bond with her grand-daughter, and produces a welcome moment for her daughter when, in order to make amends for earlier expressions of disparagement, she praises the way in which Ray deals with her children. Unexpectedly for Ray herself, words of praise from her mother for the life that she is creating for her family render her ‘ready to forgive her everything’ (Mills 2005:228), presenting a possible reformulation of the Demeter myth, with the daughter, rather than the mother, eager for reconciliation, if not quite ‘ready to make any bargain to keep her’ (Boland 2006:31) as in Boland’s poem.

A consistent, though muted, theme throughout the novel is the need for connection that surfaces between mother and daughter: the phone calls made home by Ray in desperation, or the ones that are made by Sylvia with what seems like uncanny timing in times of crisis, not all of which are always to beneficial effect. In discussing the mother/daughter relationship, Rich urges women to ‘confront and unravel’ (Rich 1995:225) the paradox of the complementary feelings of resentment and need that exists between many mothers and daughters, and by the end of the novel both Sylvia and Ray show signs of reaching a new accommodation. On hearing of their plans to return, Sylvia keeps phoning to give warnings of the difficulties they will face, which Ray interprets as really her way of saying how pleased she is at the prospect of their coming home – ‘… I knew what she meant. At last, I was beginning to understand the furious, helpless rage of motherhood’ (Mills 2005:349).
Mother and Daughter: Ray and Hannah

The narrative of this mother/daughter relationship is limited to the first ten years of Hannah’s life, and is presented from Ray’s point of view. These early years are, of course, for most mothers, the years in which she has the opportunity to exercise the greater degree of control in the relationship; they are also the years when the early seeds of identity are sown, when as Rich has claimed, the ‘first knowledge’ any woman has of ‘warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality’ (Rich 1995:218) is acquired. According to Ray’s account of her relationship with her own mother, her own ‘first knowledge’ may have been lacking in these most positive qualities. However, as Katherine Woodward writes, in Identity and Difference (1997), ‘Motherhood is not only about having children. It is about having a mother; that is, about being mothered too’ (Woodward 1997:243). She cites Jean Radford’s claim that

\[\ldots\] the desire for motherhood is also about the past. It’s the desire to relive my childhood with the mother I desired to have rather than the mother I actually had. Is it the lost child or the lost mother I want to regain? (Radford c.in Gieve 1989).

Perhaps it is in a context such as this that Ray can be seen to enter into motherhood: the birth of her daughter shows her entering into what might be called her ‘Earth Mother’ phase; when she calls for her new-born daughter, her voice sounds strange to her – ‘Hoarse and rough, full of silt and gravel’ (Mills 2005:114). Ray seems to reach the level of the transmission between mother and daughter of a ‘knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal’ as posited by Rich (Rich 1995:220) in her narrative that ‘There were so many miraculous things about that baby, I wouldn’t know where to start talking about them’ (Mills 2005:115). Elements
of Kristeva’s *choral* semiotic also seem to be present in Ray’s recollection of her blissful feelings of union with her baby daughter:

Her voice was music to me. She called to me in a series of sing-song notes and I called right back to her, echoing her pitch. We were like whales, beached on that sofa, making a series of soundings no one else could understand (Mills 2005:115).

Again, Boland’s poem ‘Night Feed’ (1989:58) may also be applied to Ray’s relationship with her baby daughter, where she moves on to an awareness of time – an awareness that ‘This is ‘dawn,/ … The moment daisies open,’; to a knowledge that ‘This is the best I can be’ and to a consciousness that this moment leads into a life where ‘we begin/The long fall from grace’. In her narrative, Ray moves on from the symbiotic phase, and can be seen to bring what Sara Ruddick refers to as ‘maternal thinking’ (Ruddick 2007:96) to her mothering activities. Unlike many accounts of the mother/daughter relationship, this novel takes us close to Ray’s ‘mothering practices’, that is, to her day-to-day strategies not just in nurturing her daughter (as well as three additional siblings), but in assisting her to become ‘the sort of adult that she can appreciate and others can accept’, (Ruddick 2007:98). These practices are referred to in the narrative by Ray as

the co-ordination it took to keep everything going, or the exhaustion, the effort to balance what everyone wanted and needed (Mills 2005:312).

These traditionally devalued, or under-rated ‘mothering practices’ include the negotiations necessary to counteract the influences of Hannah’s devious ‘best friend’, while treading a careful line for fear of incurring the wrath of that child’s mentally
unsettled mother and, at the same time allowing Hannah some freedom in her choice of friends in the multi-cultural community of which she is a part.

At the opening of the novel, Hannah is ten years old, and the close mother/daughter relationship built up by Ray is already on the cusp of change, something that Ray is aware and fearful of: ‘I never got on with my own mother, I can’t bear the thought that Hannah might feel the same way about me’ (O’Riordan 2005:6). Hannah’s underlying unhappiness at having to leave Houston is brought to crisis point when she discovers the family dog has had to be placed with strangers rather than friends. What starts in childish cries of resentment and rage on her part as she runs out of the house shouting wildly at her mother, quickly takes on the prospect of a calamity when she fails to return as darkness sets in, and searches fail to locate her. While trying to cope with the sickening possibilities of the loss of her daughter, Ray registers the possibilities of a lifetime of maternal guilt following a momentary maternal lapse:

The single thing that I will never be able to change is that moment when I stood up, turned away from my daughter and went back inside the house (Mills 2005:28).

Although her confidence in her maternal powers is somewhat shaken with the realisation that Hannah has been ‘practising how to hide from me, and not just physically’ (Mills 2005:357) for some months past, it is through Ray’s maternal experience and her intimate knowledge of her daughter’s thinking so far, that Hannah is located after a mercifully brief period. It is worth noting that when the tearful Hannah emerges from her hiding-place in her absent friend’s house, she does not immediately run to Ray’s outstretched arms, compounding Ray’s consciousness that
‘This girl in front of me is someone I don’t know anything like I thought I did’ (Mills 2005:377). In terms of the Demeter story, and of Boland’s poem, ‘The Pomegranate’, Ray is in the happy position of the mother whose daughter ‘has come home and been safe/and ended the story and all/our heart-broken searching’ (Boland 2006:31); but there is a new awareness of the women whose daughters won’t come home safe. Ray comes to the realisation also, that the days are numbered until Hannah will want to take her own steps into womanhood, and that it will be up to her mother to assist the breach from childhood dependency that development and growth demands, and to accept that ‘The legend will be hers as well as mine’: (Boland 2006:32).

Part Three

Newer Plots

At the beginning of this chapter I suggested that, in contrast to traditional cultural and literary representations, the two novels chosen for examination, The Memory Stones (2003) and Nothing Simple (2005) offered new paradigms for the literary representation of the mother, and of the mother in the context of emigration. I believe that my examinations above justify these opinions, and that it may be said of these novels that they both display a re-visioning of the mother. The two main factors in bringing about such re-visionings in these novels are, I believe, firstly, writings that register the mother’s active participation in the profound social and cultural changes that were brought about in Ireland during the latter part of the twentieth century, many of them resulting from a feminist consciousness and, secondly the use of plots that do not sideline the mother, as in the traditional heterosexual plot, but that, instead, recognise the cyclical nature of the mother/daughter relationship, and place that
relationship at their core while, above all, admitting maternal subjectivity into the narrative.

Although the first-generation mothers in these novels are figured as conforming, in the main, with traditional ideologies, the second and third generation mothers, the ‘migrant mothers’ figured, are shown to eschew the *mores* and beliefs that informed the behaviour of earlier generations. In the novels, the lives of these more modern mothers are not circumscribed by the patriarchal ideologies of religion, state, or of femininity, that traditionally governed Irish life in the years before any degree of feminist consciousness took hold in Irish society. However, while presented as being either heedless of, or devoid of Catholic or other religious scruples, it is not the case that these fictional mothers are shown to be without subjective, ethical consciousness. Tom Inglis, describing Irish society as just emerging from a culture of ‘poverty, scarcity and self-denial’ (Inglis 2002:23), makes the claim that

> Many young people have torn up the Catholic guide map to living a good life. They have, instead, turned to a more ancient Greek notion that it is up to each individual to construct an ethical life based around duties, responsibilities and pleasures. (Inglis 2002:25).

While it is possible to view some of the principal mother characters as acting in this light, many of their moral choices may be viewed, also, in terms of situation ethics, that is, as approaching ethical problems with some general moral principles, rather than adherence to fixed dogmas or socially accepted norms of behaviour. In the cases of the mothers granted subjectivity, namely, the younger mother characters, Nell and Ali in *The Memory Stones*, and Ray in *Nothing Simple*, where moral failings are registered in their consciousness, notions of religious guilt are absent, compliance
with state laws seems to be contingent on personal conviction or prevailing circumstances, and the ideals of patriarchal femininity such as female passivity or pre-marital chastity are conspicuously absent. In terms of lifestyle, however, all of the younger mothers in these novels might be said to be closer to the Greeks than to the situationists: Inglis notes that ‘For the Greeks, not paying attention to one’s pleasures was as unethical as not fulfilling one’s duties and responsibilities’ (Inglis 2002:25).

As is shown in the novels, important aspects in the representation of Nell and Ali, in *The Memory Stones*, and of Ray in *Nothing Simple*, lie in the role that attention to pleasure plays in their lives, as do the ways in which they deal with the consequences of such pleasures: pragmatism rather than penitence wins the day.

Motherhood envisioned in such new terms affects the traditional narrative of migration. In *The Memory Stones*, although not guilt-free, Nell is never shown to be visited by the kind of religious guilt, or fears for the social consequences likely to ensue from her pre-marital pregnancy, or from her long-term relationship with a married man, such as would likely have occupied the consciousness of a character created in a novel by Kate O’Brien, or Edna O’Brien. Nor are Nell’s activities punished in the novel: it is through her migrations to Oxford and to Paris that her special talents in the wine business emerge, and her successful career is launched. The end of the work sees her rewarded by an adult re-appraisal and recognition of her mother’s love for her, improved relations between herself and her daughter, Ali, and a deepening of her relationship with her lover, Henri, plus the promise of future personal growth within a union that operates outside of any category of gendered or patriarchal endorsement.
In the case of the third-generational mother, Ali, her personal life seems to be conducted, whether happily or unhappily, outside of all patriarchal codes, and without any indications of feelings of guilt. Not entirely credibly, in view of her capacities for crisis and recurring need for rescue, she claims the right to take responsibility for her own mistakes, for her own mothering practices, her choices of sexual partners, and her recourse to illegal substances. Ali’s attitude towards religion is shown to be a matter of pragmatism: it is not a spirit of faith that inspires her newly-expressed interest in the Psalms of the King James Bible, but the misguided hope that familiarity with them will help her daughter to fit in at the local primary school. An indication of the level of social and cultural change arrived at in Ireland is that Ali’s ‘alternative’ family and lifestyle are shown to present no barriers to her acceptance into the rural community where many of the traditions of her grandmother’s times seem to linger, and where, in earlier years, her life-style choices would have seen her shunned and isolated, if not run out of the parish.

In *Nothing Simple*, Ray’s early sexual adventures are impulsive and unconventional; prior to her marriage, she is shown as living her life without regard for family, religious or traditional social strictures, and her civil marriage is entered into for reasons of legal convenience, not in the causes of church compliance or social acceptance. However, as a migrant mother in the U.S.A., Ray is shown as trying to live an ethical life: she is open and honest in personal dealings and relationships; she is free of racist or homophobic prejudices and is ready and willing to help friends and strangers alike, even when it is to her own disadvantage; and she can be seen to work at passing on such values to her children. Some elements of moral relativism are exposed when she discovers that when she encouraged her friend to ‘Go for it’ (Mills
in embarking on an extra-marital affair, it was her own husband who was the man in question.

While the novel shows Ray achieving personal growth and wide acceptance in a volatile and disparate community over her ten years in the U.S., unlike the mothers in O’Riordan’s novel, she is not financially independent; she is constrained, therefore, to operate within various forms of patriarchal domination. Youthful besottedness with Dermot having rendered her blind to the patriarchal aspects of his character, her circumstances of legal and financial dependency in the U.S., plus her genuine attachment to her husband and to the integrity of their family, place severe limits on the choices available to her. Pinker (2008) claims that

Social life is a series of promises, threats and bargains; in those games it sometimes pays to sacrifice your self-interest and control. (Time [online].

As figured in Mills’s novel, the pregnant and infatuated Ray finds it imperative to make such compromises: she must live under both Dermot’s casual style of domination and American custom and regulation. As the wiser and more mature young mother of four children returning in nineteen-ninety to live in an Ireland that is renewing itself, she is figured as ready to insist on a better deal: while she has agreed to return to Ireland with her husband, she has not promised she will remain in the marriage.

The representation of the mother is enhanced in the novels examined above because the plots do not sideline the mother but, instead, sideline the heterosexual romance plot: the stories of the originary mothers, both of whom are widowed and celibate, and told from their daughter’s or grand-daughter’s point of view, do not
depend on the heterosexual plot; their stories are of intergenerational feminocentric conflicts and reconciliations. Neither do their narratives leave them abandoned or stranded passively at home as in many narratives of the emigration of daughters as, for instance in Jennifer Johnston’s *The Christmas Tree* (1981), or Deirdre Madden’s *One by One in the Darkness* (1996). The novels examined here record continuing interaction between mothers and migratory daughters, with the travels of older mothers frequently working towards the complication or advancement of the plot: Agnes is recalled as having made repeated journeys to the U.K. and other parts of Europe in order to maintain the connection with her daughter and grand-daughter, and Sylvia’s tortuous journey to an even more alien Texas can be regarded as having only that same purpose in mind.

In the cases of the younger, migrant mothers, while they are sexually active and even sexually-adventurous women, their plots do not depend on male intervention, and the men in their lives are relegated to places in the sub-plots. As is the case in Alice Walker’s story “Everyday Use” discussed by Hirsch (1989), the triangle in the relationship between Nell and her mother in *The Memory Stones* is with the sister, not the father or lover, and ‘no heterosexual intervention is needed for the inception of plot’ (Hirsch 1989:190). The reasons for the tensions between Ali and Nell are not absolutely clear-cut; their contesting views are provided through Nell’s subjective recollections and in the course of Ali’s conversations, but the conflicts between mother and daughter hinge on their individual temperaments and personal limitations and choices, and not on heterosexual intrusion. In *Nothing Simple*, although her deceased father has played the major role in Ray’s young life and her passion for Dermot seems to be influenced by a somewhat vague similarity between
them, the hostility between Ray and her mother, as told by Ray, stems from Sylvia’s unwillingness or inability to provide nurture and care for her daughter, not from Ray’s choice of husband. The plot in _Nothing Simple_ is driven by Ray’s personal story of growth through motherhood from ignorance and innocence to mature understanding and appreciation of life; her marital relationship, although important, forms part of the sub-plot.

**Conclusion**

Although the stories in _The Memory Stones_ and _Nothing Simple_ turn on maternal loss and intergenerational breaches and tensions, they also make space for recuperation, for renewed relations and for amended understanding between mothers and daughters. It is for these reasons that both novels lend themselves to interpretation in the light of Eavan Boland’s poem, ‘The Pomegranate’, which offers the opportunity of ‘entering an old text from a new critical direction’ (Rich 2001:11) as recommended in “When We Dead Awaken” and to take a modern stance on the Demeter/Persephone myth, where the mother may change places, and take a subjective approach as either mother or daughter. Situating the heroines of these novels in subjective mode is not to claim that these mothers afford the ‘truths of motherhood’, or even the truth in mother’s accounts: in the accounts provided in Nell’s consciousness, the cosmopolitan career-woman may be seen to be self-serving, and self-deceiving, as well as self-revelatory; her daughter Ali’s dialogues expose her weaknesses as well as her strengths and the ambitions she holds, and her words often have the power to re-align or illuminate the areas left dark in her mother’s version of their histories. In Mills’s novel, the first-person narrative provides a frank and fresh account of motherhood and of migration undertaken and lived under sometimes oppressive, but never defeating circumstances. Ray’s account shows her to have lived her life more pragmatically.
than self-reflectively up to the time of the novel, and to have learnt the significant lesson from the temporary disappearance and recovery of her daughter that a whole new life-cycle is just about to begin. Her willingness to learn from the mistakes of the past provides evidence of a change from what Fogarty refers to as ‘mother/daughter plots that force women in Irish society into antagonistic rivalries or trap them in endless cycles of duplication’ (Fogarty 2002:103), and place her in the category of revisioned mother.

Finally, the elderly neighbour, Julia, in *The Memory Stones*, provides a new paradigm of the older mother, and an emphatic rebuttal of the ‘broken-hearted mother’ waiting passively for the return of her sons. Julia e-mails her sons, who are long-term residents in the U.S., every day, and speaks to them on the phone once a week; she admits that she and her husband have always fancied the idea of their two sons coming home, but now that they want to come back from the U.S. with their wives and children, and build two enormous houses nearby, she can’t say that the prospect fills her with delight. She confides to Nell

… you get a taste of freedom and you don’t want to give it up. All their youth your children want to be free of you. It never occurs to them that a time might come when you want to be free of them too (Mills 2003.180).

Julia’s statement need not be seen as a repudiation of motherhood, or of the ties and responsibilities that motherhood entails. Rather, it may be seen in the light of Kristeva’s thinking in *Nations without Nationalism*, as an articulation of a claim for the ability and the freedom to choose the set to which she wishes to belong; as a desire to move beyond what Kristeva describes as ‘the origins that have assigned to us biological identity papers and a linguistic, religious, social, political, historical place’,
(trans. Roudiez 1993:16), and to live out the latter years of her life in a space and identity of her own creation. A minor character in the novel, Julia is represented as a woman very much in tune with the times, and with notions of choice: she is shown as active and caring, and non-judgemental, and through her hospitality towards Nell, as both conscious of and capable of enjoying the fruits of a modest prosperity; her statement shows her to be unwilling to sacrifice the achieved equilibriums of her life. If for no other reason, by the articulation of her sentiments about motherhood frankly and without dissimulation, Julia must be admitted to the ranks of the re-visioned mother in contemporary Irish women’s literary fiction.
CONCLUSION

In the contemporary novels examined for this thesis, the mother may be seen to have been released from the ‘almost obsessively reproduced’ stereotyping deplored in Aine McCarthy’s essay on the mother in Irish literature (McCarthy 2004:96). For the re-visioned mothers of the novels examined, doctrines, dogmas or religiously inspired guilt have ceased to dominate in shaping their lives, and the mythologies and ideologies of motherhood, whether sponsored by church or state, are contested, countered or, to a large degree, discounted. The ‘re-visioned mother’ journeys beyond patriarchal controls in matters of religion, marriage and sexual activity: her life-choices and career choices are less influenced by notions of self-sacrifice and service to others; personal fulfillment is a legitimate goal, even if not easy of attainment. Where the ‘demononised’ mother common to much of earlier Irish women’s writing makes an appearance, she is usually relegated to an earlier generation, as with ‘Granny Kelly’ in One by One in the Darkness – a textual strategy identified by Ingman in Kate Cruise O’Brien’s novel, The Homesick Garden, as possibly portending an end to the era of the ‘phallic castrating mother’ (Ingman 2007:84) of so much of Irish women’s writing. What I wish to look at in this concluding part of my thesis are some reconfigurations of family figures that arise in the context of the ‘re-visioned mother’, and that show signs of the changing perspectives emerging in Irish women’s literary fiction. My discussions are grouped under three headings – ‘The ‘Independent’ Mother’; ‘The Dependent Daughter’ and ‘Figuring the Father’.
The ‘Independent’ Mother

Arising in two of the novels is the figure of the ‘Independent’ mother, that is, the woman opting to mother independently, outside of traditional marriage patterns and with minimum input or influence in her life or her child’s life on the part of the child’s father. While the ‘widowed mother’, the ‘unmarried mother’ and the ‘deserted wife’ have long been a feature of fictional representation, the mother who *opts* for motherhood outside of marriage is a relatively recent model of motherhood in contemporary Irish women’s fiction. Cate’s openness in *One by One in the Darkness*, to become pregnant by a friend because she wants ‘something real’ (Madden 1996:93) in her life reflects a very radical social change taking place in women’s lives in recent decades and, as mentioned earlier, has been deemed worthy of being styled ‘a radical re-writing of the Irish family’ by Kennedy Andrews 2003:157). A choice of this nature is not completely new in Irish women’s writing,\(^{16}\) but it has not been a feature in sagas of the traditional Catholic family such as Madden’s novel is deemed to be. Along with Cate in this novel, Nell in Kate O’Riordan’s *The Memory Stones*, who never informs the father of her child of her pregnancy, and who never meets him again following the fateful encounter when Ali is conceived, may be considered under the category of ‘independent mother’.

Self-identification of the ‘Independent’ mother as a category is discussed in Jane Duffer’s chapter, ‘Domestic Intellectuals: Freedom and the Single Mom’ (2006); Duffer refers to an organisation, ‘Single Mothers by Choice’ founded in the U.S. in 1981 which defines the single mother by choice as

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\(^{16}\) Jennifer Johnston had already introduced the topic in *The Christmas Tree* (1981).
a woman who decides to have or adopt a child, knowing she will be her child’s sole parent, at least at the outset. Typically we are career women in our thirties and forties. The ticking of our biological clocks has made us face the fact that we could no longer wait for marriage before starting our families (c.Jane Juffer 2007:727)

Juffer notes how this group distances itself from notions of financial dependency on the state and how it places emphasis on feelings of empowerment rather than victimhood claimed to be experienced by group members. She writes that

Single mothers are the exemplars of the shifting American family, showing that women can raise children in nonpatriarchal households. They are also the representatives of the neoliberal dream of self-sufficiency (Juffer 2007:728).

Kathryn Woodward discusses the construction of the ‘Independent’ mother as a new figure of popular U.K. women’s magazines in the nineteen-nineties, selecting for analysis an edition which relaunched ‘She’ magazine on 22nd March 1990. In the magazine, ‘motherhood is constructed as not only central to women’s lives but a key choice’ (c.Woodward 1997:267) and again, in this construction, the financially successful career woman, the woman who may or not be in a current heterosexual relationship, with the father of her child, or another man, is highlighted. This is a construction that does not accommodate the single mother who is poor or disadvantaged – the woman who is frequently regarded as causing a social problem or as making claims on the public purse. The construct of the ‘Independent’ mother, in Woodward’s view, offers the fantasy of the ‘woman who can have it all’, but not everyone is invited to participate: ‘the She mother is white and affluent’ (Woodward 1997:271), and is built on excluding and marginalising other women. However, even taking such factors into consideration, Woodward considers that
She’s editor presents new ways of thinking about motherhood as an identity which can be negotiated and “a place from which mothers can speak”. Dependence on a man is not presented as the solution to the problem of single parenthood (Woodward 1997:271).

The ‘Independent’ mother differs significantly from the marginalised mother discussed earlier in my thesis, and certainly would exclude ‘the girl who had to take the boat’ of earlier Irish life and fiction, the construct that Nell, in *The Memory Stones* is recorded as conscious of being identified with when she first goes to live in Oxford. However, since the fantasy of the ‘Independent’ mother is open to negotiation, Nell comes to qualify by virtue of the circumstances that she develops herself in an up-market career, and dictates her life-paths outside of patriarchal control, even if her raising of her child single-handedly is a somewhat hit-and-miss affair.

The ‘Independent’ mothers figured in the novels under examination are career women who, as mothers, would distance themselves from social distress and female victimhood and, again, social class and financial security play a big part in their construction. Woodward writes that ‘The independent mother looks like a contradiction in terms’ (Woodward 1997:270); she points out that while the figure of the ‘working mother’ has gained increasing acceptance in society, “working” allied with motherhood does not quite offer the autonomy and freedom associated with “independence”(Woodward 1997:271). Notions of contradiction attaching to the figures of the ‘Independent’ mother in the novels in my thesis raise some questions for consideration as to who is best served by the choice of independent motherhood; how does this choice affect the children of the ‘Independent’ mother; and just how independent is independent motherhood shown to be?
In *One by One in the Darkness*, it is Cate Quinn, who is shown to be ‘choosing life’ who is the chief beneficiary of her option for single motherhood; she is also the most dynamic of the three Quinn sisters, and the one most approved of in the novel. For Cate, a successful career woman who has not succeeded in cementing a firm relationship in marriage or other long-term arrangement in London, the prospect of a child offers hope of ‘something real’ in her world when the gloss has gone from her fast-track city life following the murder of her father. A feature of Cate’s option is that her thoughts do not take her much beyond her pregnancy, or what the future might hold in practical terms for her or for her child. In the week in which the novel is set, her concerns centre on the impact the news of her pregnancy will have within her traditionalist family; the novel records no anticipation or trepidation as to how her career might be affected, nor any thoughts as to how a career such as she enjoys might impact on the raising of a child single-handedly. Cate is spared the criticism or imprecations that might have been heaped upon her in earlier generations, a sign, perhaps of acceptance of the concept of the ‘independent’ mother that would not have been available in earlier years. Her mother, Emily, is also served, as she is brought to a new resolution that she will never cause suffering to her daughter or her child whenever they come to visit in the future, despite her disappointment that Cate can produce no husband or father for her child. While Cate’s older sister, Helen, wounds her with her reflective remark, ‘Imagine …Imagine never having had a father’ (Madden 1996:145) the prospect of Cate’s baby is the one light in the darkness enveloping the lives of the Quinn family in the Troubles of the Northern Ireland state, and is something that is so welcomed by Sally, the third sister, that she is afraid to articulate it. The question of whether a single child is to be well served in such
exclusively female surroundings and amid such heightened expectations remains an open question.

Nell, in *The Memory Stones*, does not commence her maternal life as an ‘independent’ mother, and because she grows up in an all-female household, she never suffers the impact of domestic patriarchal controls: the local boy by whom her child is conceived carries no more culpability than does she for the drunken escapade in the graveyard and he, indeed, suffers total erasure from the story. Nell’s problems are with her maternal legacy, and she believes that her interests and those of her daughter, Ali, are served by taking an independent stance, and isolating herself and Ali from her maternal and national origins. Nell envisions a two-person relationship consisting of herself and Ali, affording Ali the opportunity to create her own identity, free from the burdens of Nell’s own troubled relationship with her past. Part of the notion of the ‘independent mother’ is that of choice: Nell chooses to put herself beyond the ambit of her relatives, to relocate herself and Ali to Paris, and to work for advancement in her career. Ali is not served by her decisions, and the narrative reveals how the failures of some of these objectives damage her. Nell, along with the traumas of her younger life, carries a weight of guilt on her shoulders as Ali fails to thrive in young adulthood, and needs repeated rescuing from self-inflicted dangerous situations throughout her adult years.

While it might seem that O’Riordan’s novel is making a case against independent motherhood, the independent mother as figured in Nell makes the case that it is Nell’s personal failures in self-scrutiny and awareness that creates feelings of inadequacy or rejection in the child of the independent mother, not her mother’s
career. Nell’s locked-in energies, resulting from the traumas and unhappiness of her childhood, fuel the will and creativity to succeed in her chosen career, but her failures to connect, and her capacities for moving away from close relationships without adequate or observable cause, set up the scenarios that make for the uncertainties of identity that damage Ali, and for the resulting constantly challenging relations between them over the years. Nell’s and Ali’s relationship is never reciprocal; Nell always retains ascendency, a situation that opens up the question of the benefits of a significant third party in family relationships. No-one in Nell’s wider circle is served by her ambivalences towards family support and her mistaking of emotional distancing for independence.

Another aspect of the ‘independent mother’ construct to arise from the novels is the measure of independence that is possible when raising a child single-handedly and, at the same time, building a successful career. Based on the characters in the novels, it seems somewhat limited; Cate’s contribution to independent mothering at the time of the novel has gone no further than choosing the right man at the right time for her required purpose. The ready availability of reserves of support suggested by the reception of the news of her pregnancy at home, and her close identification with her extended family opposes the notion of mothering independently. In addition, Cate is awake to the dangers of a too-close fusion between mother and child, as is reflected in her memories of the almost symbiotic mother and child duo observed in London, when she considered the implications of emotional over-investment within the two-party relationship of mother and child. Woodward points up the possibilities of ‘having it all’ – career, financial independence, child with or without a male on permanent stand-by, as one of the fantasies peddled in women’s magazines in the late
twentieth century. Cate figures in the novel as one of the purveyors of the fantasy; the narrative ends before the fantasy is put to the test.

As related in O’Riordan’s novel, Nell’s insistence on independence is somewhat ambivalent: she asks for, and accepts the hospitality readily extended to her by her uncle and aunt in Oxford, and repays it with her aptitude for the wine trade, and her application to her studies in this field. However, her abrupt and cruel move out of their home does not grant her independence of mind, because she fails to come to terms as an adult with her own heartbreak and the traumas of her early years. Nell’s cherishing of her early injuries makes her impervious to the hurt she causes others regardless of their feelings for her. Many of her actions throughout her life are reactions to demands she does not wish to meet, not the independent decisions of the autonomous woman she aspires to be: her daughter is not raised single-handedly as her career and her personal life advance. On the other hand, Nell remains responsive to her daughter Ali’s troubles and crises over many years; she takes responsibility for her and exercises agency on her behalf in dangerous situations. In Nell’s characterisation is demonstrated the ambiguities that attach to motherhood and the impossibility of categorising under one stabilising label the multiple identities open to the mother. In the course of the novel, Nell is seen to play with differing images and identities, a course that, according to Woodward, is offered in the fantasy of the ‘Independent’ mother. That Nell sometimes succeeds in that role is indicative of the contradictions that enrich her construction as a re-visioned mother in the terms of my thesis. However what this discussion also demonstrates is how maternal desire, first expressed in female or feminist action, can be packaged and sold as a consumer product, and be used to create a new myth in the ideologies of motherhood. Like all
maternal myths, the myth of the ‘Independent’ mother occludes the realities of the lived experience of mothering as, for instance, in who does the caring while the ‘Independent’ mother is working and socialising? Furthermore, in concentrating on the mother/child dyad, the construct omits the consideration that the mother is not simply in relationship with her child; she must necessarily live within multiple relationships, as should the child. The ‘Independent’ mother must include, or often rely on these relationships in raising her child, or else deprive it of significant relationships that it is entitled to. As the novels examined in my thesis show, the mother/child relationship is not necessarily always of the most benign or nurturing nature, and attempts at creating an exclusive mother/child relationship, as with Irene in *Mother of Pearl*, and Nell in *The Memory Stones*, can be seen to be even more damaging.

**The Dependent Daughter**

Mother-blame has been a constant theme in feminist discussions of motherhood and of the mother/daughter relationship. Adrienne Rich, exploring her own relationship with her mother, writes of ‘anger’, of ‘mother blame’; and of ‘matriphobia’ (Rich 1995:235). Paula J. Caplan, in her chapter ‘Don’t Blame Mother: Then and Now’ (Caplan 2000; 2007), finds that from her initial investigations into ‘mother-blame’ in the early nineteen-eighties to the end of the twentieth century, despite some gains made by feminism, ‘there are still miles to go before we can relax in the knowledge that mother blame has been eradicated’ (Caplan 2007:599). Mother blame has played a big part in Irish women’s writing, as discussed at the opening of this thesis: literary critiques of Irish women’s writing (Owens Weekes, Fogarty, McCarthy, Ingman) point to the constant characterisation in fiction of the ‘smother
mother’ and the mother who won’t let go, and a welcome recent trend where the fictional daughter is figured as seeking to understand her mother’s perspective or as trying to recover her mother’s narrative from silences that have rendered her unknowable, has also been noted by Fogarty (2002:113) and Ingman (2007:84).

Against all of this, there seems to be no concept abroad of ‘daughter blame’. Many daughters in fiction are figured as acting irresponsibly and even criminally, yet frequently escape negative characterisation. Inclusive of my own examinations, findings of fictional daughterly behaviour as errant or dysfunctional almost inevitably lead to efforts at tracing transgressions, errors and omissions back to the ‘imprint’ of the mother or to maternal absence, or to some other ‘system failure’ in the life of the daughter. Intergenerational stories such as the novels studied for my thesis enhance the likelihood of ‘mother blame’ trails being set up. My point here is that many of the fictional daughters in the contemporary novels studied seem to be afforded unusually protracted terms of emotional adolescence, and to be figured as cherishing the grief of childhood well into adult life: acts of total selfishness, neglect and cruelty on the part of daughters are figured as resulting from identity damage created through parental failures or adverse conditions in childhood. Without wishing to allocate ‘daughter blame’, what I wish to do in this section is to look at a number of situations in the novels where the rhetorical question posed by the father of Rita Spain in *Mother of Pearl* might be asked – ‘When will that girl ever grow up?’ (Morrissy 1996:189).

In *Mother of Pearl*, Rita Spain’s stance shows that she never moves from the position of dependent daughter in relation to her father. His only role is that of provider and he is never seen by his daughter as having needs of his own. It is to her
father’s home that she brings her young husband, the objectionable Mel, following her pregnancy and their rushed marriage; it is her father’s money that provides the new house that represents ‘a big step up’ (Morrissy 1996:182) for Rita, socially, and where, in Mary/Pearl’s account, her grandfather sat ‘strangely defeated’ (Morrissy 1996:182) in the back parlour of the house where Rita feels free to entertain friends in Saturday night drinking sessions. Rita’s grief when he dies is briefly sketched, but throughout the novel she is never shown to display any emotion deeper than a sort of teenage hostility towards him. Given the troubles and losses of Rita’s life, and given also that it is part of the novel’s post-modern approach to put family affections under challenge, her neglect and cruel attitude towards her father fades out of the narrative as does he, and the novel shows that ‘that girl’ never really grows up.

In Two Moons, Grace, the middle-aged daughter, lives with her eighty-year old mother in her mother’s house in Dublin, having returned from London following her divorce. From the opening of the novel, there are notable manifestations of Mimi’s increasing debility, something of which Grace seems unaware. In her commentary on the novel, Fogarty remarks on Grace’s lack of caring capacities, and writing of Mimi’s angel companion, Bonifacio, comments, ‘As an efficient and skilful friend, nurse and confidant, he fulfils the caregiving functions that Grace can never satisfactorily supply’ (Fogarty 2000:77). As a daughter, Grace’s emotional inhibitions prevent her from empathising with Mimi’s fears, or from approaching the truths underlying her parents’ unhappiness thereby blocking communication between herself and her mother when Mimi most needs to talk. Fogarty notes that Grace ‘appears to be a locked psyche who engages in an uninterrupted, internal self-dialogue as a means of combating her frustration’ (Fogarty 2000:77). The bond between mother and
daughter is not discounted in the novel, and Grace’s decision to take time out from her career in order to look after her mother saves her from indictment as totally selfish and uncaring. However, at the time of the novel Grace is fifty; her late awakening to her mother’s terminal needs in the weeks before the opening of Hamlet in which she has the part of Gertrude predicates a reluctance to yield the identity of daughter and a degree of emotional immaturity touching on arrested adolescence in her attitude to her mother.

Writing about mothers and daughters, Adrienne Rich claims that

The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities (Rich 1995:246).

As represented in Two Moons and in The Memory Stones, daughters do not always appreciate or experience the sense of expansion opened up for them by mothers who attain success in the wider world. In Johnston’s novel, Grace’s adult daughter, Polly, is figured as a conventional young woman, very dependent on her mother’s approval, still bearing resentment over the break-up in her parents’ marriage. Her choice of an actor as a future husband seems designed to please her mother (something that is ironically and clandestinely fulfilled in the novel), rather than to find the type of man who would be a suitable husband for her. Polly is not impressed by her mother’s successful acting career, and confides to her fiancé that she would rather have had a ‘normal ordinary mother who loved a whole pack of children and Dad’ (Johnston 1998:41-2). Polly is figured also as lacking in understanding of the demands that Grace’s acting makes upon her: the new fiancé is brought over from London without prior notice right in the middle of Grace’s rehearsals for her latest role; neither has she
any understanding of the ‘first night’ nerves that afflict her mother. Exposure to culture and art by means of Grace’s success seems not to have engendered within Polly any sense of limitless female possibilities; instead, she harbours feelings of resentment towards her mother’s ambitions that hamper her own intellectual and emotional development, even when she is in ignorance of the full extent of her mother’s betrayal.

In *The Memory Stones*, Ali, the daughter of Nell, and grand-daughter of Agnes, is figured very sympathetically, despite the fact that, objectively, she is a drug user/grower, a mixed-up ‘New Ager’ and neglectful mother who is indulging in a destructive affair with a random stranger and is putting herself and her family at risk. Following the ‘blame trail’, Ali’s deficiencies may be traced to the unhappiness of her childhood, when her mother’s career ambitions and disregard of her own mother, created an unsettled home-life for Ali, and left her with the fear that her mother was likely to stop loving her without cause. Yet, again objectively, Ali’s life has been one of privilege and good fortune: her mother’s career success in the wine trade has certainly projected ‘an expansive vision of life and its possibilities’ (Rich 1995:246); her education has been such that she could gain a place at Oxford, and her mother’s inheritance in Ireland has been signed over to her. Yet Ali is shown to have been unable to make anything of these advantages and lives her life in recurrent states of crisis and subjects her child to neglect and danger. The future projected for Ali in the novel is for repeated cycles of similar destructive behaviour that will situate her always in states of dependence, with her best chance of survival resting in her idea of emulating her grandmother, Agnes, and rejection of her mother’s way of life.
Releasing the mother in Irish fiction from the confines of patriarchal domination and stereotypical representation allows for re-writing of the mother/daughter relationship. When mother is no long powerless, pious or asexual, or when she is simply more absorbed with her own concerns than with the concerns of her family, responses of daughterly indifference, as in the case of Grace, in Two Moons, or hostile rejection of the mother’s point of view, as with Polly in Two Moons and Ali in The Memory Stones, take on aspects of immaturity, or of jealousy and ingratitude. Rich’s call to mothers, part of which is cited above, also urges them ‘To refuse to be a victim: and then to go on from there’ (Rich 1995:246). Rich’s suggestion opens up a point from which the mother/daughter script might be re-written. As stated earlier, Fogarty (2002:113) and Ingman (2007:113) have both noted signs of rewriting of the mother/daughter story in Irish women’s literary fiction, and exchanges between Edie and her daughter, Bridie, in Room for a Single Lady, and between Emily and her daughters in One by One in the Darkness also show such signs. I believe that what emerges in some of the novels is that while space is being provided for the mother’s story, women writers do not always relinquish the daughterly point of view: while granting a more positive and extensive story to the mother, the daughter is positioned in dependent mode rather longer than in earlier fictions. In Nothing Simple, Lia Mills does re-write the mother/daughter script, and allows for the relationship between Ray and her mother, Sylvia, to move from mutual hostility to respect and affection as a result of frank exchanges and mature choices; creating thereby positive constructs of both mother and daughter.
Figuring the Father

In the concluding paragraphs of her book, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women*, Heather Ingman writes

There is space too for discussions on the way in which Irish women’s writing portrayed the father. If the mother-daughter relationship has been under-discussed, the same could be said of the father-daughter relationship (Ingman 2007:184).

Obviously, discussion of the father-daughter relationship is for another study; what I aim to do here is to provide a brief review and evaluation of the representation of the father in the novels examined in my thesis. In the first instance, it must be said that no panoply of powerful father figures parades through these novels. The sole stereotypically violent, drunken Irish patriarchal father represented is a minor character, the father of Irene in *Mother of Pearl*, who disappears almost immediately from the text, imaged as ‘a wounded beast howling at the water’s edge’, imagined by his daughter as ‘a hermit in a craggy tower’ and evoking from her ‘a fearful pity’ (Morrissy 1996:5). As mentioned earlier, Ingman has registered the relegation of the ‘demonised’ mother of Irish fiction to an older generation as perhaps signalling the end of the era of the ‘phallic, castrating’ mother in Irish women’s fiction; her suggestion gives rise to the hope that the relegation of the ‘brutal, drunken patriarchal father’ to an older generation in *Mother of Pearl* might be taken as carrying a similar connotation. Throughout the novels, widely differing characterisations of the father figure are provided. Much like the mother figures of earlier realist fiction discussed by Marianne Hirsch (1989), fathers are frequently characterised by absence, with several who are dead, or who die in the course of the novels; Benjamin, father of Grace in *Two Moons*, makes his presence felt only in dreams or in ghostly form. Trivialised, comic and ineffectual figures also feature, and a significant few are anonymous, and
remain in ignorance of the fact that they have fathered a child. In *One by One*, Cate’s friend is informed of his prospective paternal role simply as a courtesy. The ‘good’, idealised father, whose early death shapes the identity of the daughter, and whose absence probably influences her choice of husband, as with Emily in *One by One in the Darkness*, and Ray in *Nothing Simple*, also feature.

Absence is the characterising feature of many of the fictional fathers: in *Mother of Pearl*, as already noted, the brutal William Rivers suffers almost instant erasure. The narrative informs that Alfie Spain, the father of Mel, who becomes the young father of Mary/Pearl, simply disappeared, becoming for Mel ‘all absence, the vacant place at the table, the man who never materialised as the nameless body in the morgue’ (Morrissy 1996:108). On the night of the premature birth of his child, Mel is foiled in his bid to convert himself into a similar absence by taking the boat to the Mainland as rumour claims his father had done. Mel suffers an early death in the course of the novel, shot dead in a case of mistaken identity, never knowing himself to be a cuckold in respect of Rita’s second daughter, or to have been part of Rita’s bargain with God for the restoration of his abducted first child. Eventually, the rapacious Mel is sentimentalised into ‘Just a boy’ (Morrissy 1996:184) in Rita’s fabrication of his lived presence. Two other fathers in the novel are characterised by silence and absence – Walter Golden, as discussed earlier, accepts passively all the troubles brought through his daughter’s liaison with Mel Spain, depriving Rita of the opportunity to rail against him: ‘She had expected anger, what she got was defeat’ (Morrissy 1996:100). And Mr. Forte, ball-room dancing teacher and prize-winning partner to Rita, to whose ‘mute and agonised veneration’ (Morrissy 1996:145) she surrenders just once (giving rise to the birth of Stella); returns to Italy without ever
knowing he has fathered a daughter, and takes with him to his early grave his untold story of the ‘impossible love which had afflicted him’ (Morrissy 1996:147).

Two further male figures in *Mother of Pearl*, rather than providing father figures, are feminised and, perhaps maternalised: Sinead McDermott notes that ‘Granitefield provides an alternative mother figure for Irene in the form of the nurturing Dr. Clemens’ (McDermott: 2003:271) and, as I have argued earlier, Irene’s husband, Stanley, may also be construed in terms of the maternal. However, as is consistent in Morrissy’s narrative approach, both fictional constructs, whether in terms of nurturing maternity or paternal protection, are undermined: Dr. Clemens is associated with medical technology expressed in terms of sexual invasiveness, as noted in McDermott’s paper (McDermott 2003:270), and Stanley Godwin perpetrates rape and physical violence against Irene when she claims falsely to have given birth to the baby she has brought home, before he goes to tend to the needs of the daughter he knows cannot biologically be his. In common with traditional maternal characters in fiction, their stories terminate when the daughter, Irene in the case of Dr. Clemens, and Pearl in that of Stanley, moves out of their lives.

Eugene Rafferty, the principal father figure in *Room for a Single Lady*, is mildly satirised as the sham-patriarchal father of three daughters. Most of his parental rants and moral diktats are shown to produce a sense of bewilderment rather than moral probity in his daughters as they grow to adulthood. He is not without courage in facing up to tasks construed in his world as ‘masculine’ – it is he who must take on the drowning of unwanted kittens; who takes on the eviction of the lodger who refuses to use the bathroom and fills her room with jars of urine, and he who calls the
milkman to account over his cavorting with the fourteen-year-old Kitty, only to be faced down by him. Diminished and deprived of the role of *pater familias* by unemployment, Eugene is figured as an immature, ineffective and insecure man, as one who might well fit into the ‘mock father’ category, if such were available. The comic possibilities of his paternal characterisation are fully exploited, but with his frailties come also certain decencies, and he is not a figure of total absurdity. Paraphrasing Ingman’s comment on the novels of Molly Keane, (Ingman 2007:76), it may be stated that, in Eugene, the novel endorses the view of the father as someone to be grown out of.

The one fully-realised, idealised father figure in any the novels is Charlie Quinn in *One by One in the Darkness*, whose murder two years prior to the time of the novel is at its centre. Charlie seems to be truly endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit – he is shown to be wise, understanding, courageous; he displays judgement and shares knowledge; he shows reverence, and lives in the spirit of his Catholic beliefs. And while he tries to pass these tenets on to his daughters, he is tolerant when they make their own decisions. It seems hardly possible to represent such a paragon in human terms, but this is achieved in the novel, because Charlie is an everyman, a father raising his family in times of violent historical change, while remaining loyal to his principles and his people. Through Charlie’s murder, Madden’s novel shows the devastation that accompanies the loss of a father in such tragic circumstances, and the suffering that blights his daughters as they try to re-orient their lives in the changed context of his absence.
While it might seem from the novels that the only good father is a dead father, two ‘good-enough’ father are also brought to the novels: Ali’s partner, Nick, in *The Memory Stones*, is presented as an ineffectual, but loving father, intent on staying around in order to protect his young daughter, Grace, even in the event of a break-up between himself and Ali. In *Nothing Simple*, Dermot, the husband of Ray, and father of their four children, is represented in ambiguous terms: Dermot is young and self-centred, and a ‘fun dad’ when he is not working; but his dedication to his career and his vulnerability to the feigned neediness of his boss’s wife threaten his marriage. Reconciliation in the marriage is based on Ray’s conditions which are, in turn, based on her memories of her own rebellious girlhood, and the belief that Dermot’s fatherly presence is likely to be needed in the stormy years of adolescence their elder daughter is facing into.

As with the mother figures in these works, easy categorisation of fathers is not possible: the only totalising theme identifiable is that social change in Irish society is registered in their characterisation, especially the changes wrought by heightened feminist consciousness from the middle of the twentieth-century on. Re-visioning of the fictional mother in these contemporary fictions has necessitated a reconfiguration of the father figure. In many of these novels, the fictional father may be said to occupy a role similar to that permitted to the mother in traditional forms of literature – to provide context and depth for someone else’s story; in terms of my thesis, this is the story of the mother, or the mother/daughter story. Western culture has long accepted the necessity for the prior death of the father in order for the story of the son/mother to emerge as with ‘Oedipus’ or ‘Hamlet’ and, as Hirsch has shown, nineteenth century and later literature has accommodated the elimination or
suppression of the mother in order for the story of the daughter to be told. The story of
the mother does not demand the elimination, or the silencing of the father or of any
other family figure in order for it to be told: what is required is that the fictional
mother features in her own subjectivity, and be given space to articulate her own
thoughts, desires and objectives as occurs in many of the novels, and most particularly
in *Nothing Simple*, and in *The Memory Stones*.

Finally, a topic I have not touched on in this concluding piece is the treatment
(both in the physical sense and in literary terms) of babies and children throughout the
novels. Perhaps it is not surprising, as Anne Enright puts it, ‘in a country obsessed
with reproduction’ (Enright: 2010.) that so many births, stillbirths, and miscarriages; a
baby swop, a case of baby stealing, and a self-induced abortion should form part of
the narratives examined, and that children, the raising of children, the tragic loss and
threatened loss of children should so preoccupy thoughts and minds in these works.
Depressing features of many of these works are narratives of deep unhappiness in
childhood; in some novels, neglectful and cruel treatment is represented with
distressing realism. Narratives of child cruelty and neglect are not new in Irish
women’s literary fiction, but as a people we are only beginning to come to terms with
the reality of it, or with the dark element in us that allows us to turn our eyes from it.
There is room for a study on this latter aspect of the matter – one not to be undertaken
by the fainthearted.
Reference List

Primary Texts


Texts Consulted or Referred To


Appendix I

The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*

Translated by Helene P. Foley

Demeter began to sing, the fair-tressed awesome goddess, herself and her slim-ankled daughter whom Aidoneus seized: Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced, gave her, without the consent of Demeter of the bright fruit and golden sword, as she payed with the deep-breasted daughters of Ocean, plucking flowers in the lush meadow - roses, crocuses, and lovely violets, irises and hyacinth and the narcissus, which Earth grew as a snare for the flower-faced maiden in order to gratify by Zeus's design the Host-to-Many, a flower wondrous and bright, awesome for all to see, immortals above and for mortals below. From its root a hundred fold bloom sprang up and smelled so sweet that the whole vast heaven above and the whole earth laughed, and the salty swell of the sea. The girl marveled and stretched out both hands at once to take the lovely toy. The earth with its wide ways yawned over the Nysian plain; the lord Host-to-Many rose up on her with his immortal horses, the celebrated son of Kronos; he snatched the unwilling maid into his golden chariot and led her off lamenting. She screamed with a shrill voice, calling on her father, the son of Kronos highest and best. Not one of the immortals or of humankind heard her voice, nor the olives bright with fruit, except the daughter of Persaios; tender of heart she heard it from her cave, Hekate of the delicate veil. And lord Helios, brilliant son of Hyperion, heard the maid calling her father the son of Kronos. But he sat apart from the Gods, aloof in a temple ringing with prayers, and received choice offerings from humankind. Against her will Hades took her by the design of Zeus with his immortal horses - her father's brother, Commander- and Host-to-Many, the many-named son of Kronos. So long as the goddess gazed on earth and starry heaven, on the sea flowing strong and full of fish, and on the beams of the sun, she still hoped to see her dear mother and the race of immortal gods.
For so long hope charmed her strong mind despite her distress.
The mountain peaks and the depths of the sea echoed
In response to her divine voice, and her goddess mother heard.
Sharp grief seized her heart, and she tore the veil
on her ambrosial hair with her own hands.
She cast a dark cloak on her shoulders
and sped like a bird over dry land and sea,
searching. No one was willing to tell her the truth,
not one of the gods or mortals;
no bird of omen came to her as truthful messenger.
Then for nine days divine Deo roamed over the earth,
holding torches ablaze in her hands;
in her grief she did not once taste ambrosia
or nectar sweet-to-drink., nor bathed her skin.
But when the tenth Dawn came shining on her,
Hekate met her, holding a torch in her hands,
to give her a message. She spoke as follows:
"Divine Demeter, giver of seasons and glorious gifts,
who of the immortals or mortal men
seized Persephone and grieved your heart?
For I heard a voice but did not see with my eyes
who he was. To you I tell at once the whole truth."
Thus Hekate spoke. The daughter of fair-tressed Rheia
said not a word, but rushed off at her side
holding torches ablaze in her hands.
They came to Helios, observer of gods and mortals,
and stood before his horses. The most august goddess spoke:
"Helios, respect me as a god does a goddess, if ever
with word or deed I pleased your heart and spirit.
The daughter I bore, a sweet offshoot noble in form-
I heard her voice throbbing through the barren air
as if she were suffering violence. But I did not see her with my eyes.
With your rays you look down through the bright air
on the whole of the earth and the sea.
Tell me the truth about my child. Have you somewhere seen who of gods or mortal men took her
by force from me against her will and went away?"
Thus she spoke and the son of Hyperion replied:
"Daughter of fair-tressed Rheia, mighty Demeter,
you will know the truth. For I greatly revere and pity you grieving for your slim-ankled daughter. No other of the gods was to blame but cloud-gathering Zeus,
who gave her to Hades his brother to be called
his fertile wife. With his horses Hades
snatched her screaming into the misty gloom. But, Goddess, give up for good your great lamentation. "You must not nurse in vain insatiable anger. Among the gods Aidoneus is not an unsuitable bridegroom, Commander-to-Many and Zeus's own brother of the same stock. As for honor, he got his third at the world's first division and dwells with those whose rule has fallen to his lot." He spoke and called to his horses. At his rebuke they bore the swift chariot lightly, like long-winged birds. A more terrible and brutal grief seized the heart of Demeter, angry now at the son of Kronos with his dark clouds. Withdrawing from the assembly of the gods and high Olympus, she went among the cities and fertile fields of men, disguising her beauty for a long time. No one of men nor deep-girt women recognized her when they looked, until she came to the house of skilful Keleos, the man then ruler of fragrant Eleusis. There she sat near the road, grief in her heart, where citizens drew water from the Maiden's Well in the shade - an olive bush had grown overhead - like a very old woman cut off from childbearing and the gifts of garland-loving Aphrodite. Such are the nurses to children of law-giving kings and the keepers of stores in their echoing halls. The daughters of Keleos, son of Eleusis, saw her as they came to fetch water easy-to-draw and bring it in bronze vessels to their dear father's halls. Like four goddesses they were in the flower of youth, Kallidike, Kleisidike, fair Demo, and Kallithoe, who was the eldest of them all. They did not know her - gods are hard for mortals to recognize. Standing near her, they spoke winged words. "Who are you, old woman, of those born long ago? From where? Why have you left the city and do not draw near its homes? Women are there in the shadowy halls, of your age as well as others born younger, who would care for you both in word and in deed." They spoke, and the most august goddess replied: "Dear children, whoever of womankind you are, greetings. I will tell you my tale. For it is not wrong to tell you the truth now you ask. Doso's my name, which my honored mother gave me. On the broad back of the sea I have come now from Crete, by no wish of my own. By force and necessity pirate men
led me off against my desire. Then they
put into Thorikos in their swift ship, where
the women stepped all together onto the mainland,
and the men made a meal by the stern of the ship.
My heart did not crave a heartwarming dinner,
but racing in secret across the dark mainland
I escaped from my arrogant masters, lest
they should sell me, as yet unbought, for a price overseas.
Then wandering I came here and know not at all
what land this is and who lives here.
But may all the gods who dwell on Olympus
give you husbands to marry and children to bear,
such as parents wish for. Now pity me, maidens,
and tell me, dear children, with eager goodwill,
whose house I might come to, a man's
or a woman's, there to do for them gladly
such tasks as are done by an elderly woman.
I could nurse well a newborn child, embracing it
in my arms, or watch over a house. I could
spread out the master's bed in a recess
of the well-built chamber and teach women their work."
So spoke the goddess. To her replied at once Kallidike,
a maiden unwed, in beauty the best of Keleos' daughters.
"Good mother, we mortals are forced, though it hurt us,
to bear the gifts of the gods; for they are far stronger.
To you I shall explain these things dearly and name
the men to whom great power and honor belong here,
who are first of the people and protect with their counsels
and straight judgments the high walls of the city.
There is Triptolemos subtle in mind and Dioklos,
Polyxenos and Eumolpos the blameless,
Dolichos and our own lordly father.
And all these have wives to manage their households.
Of these not one at first sight would scorn
your appearance and turn you away from their homes.
They will receive you, for you are indeed godlike.
But if you wish, wait here, until we come to the house
of our father and tell Metaneira our deep-girt mother
all these things straight through, in case she might bid
you come to our house and not search after others'.
For her only son is now nursed in our well-built hall,
a late-born child, much prayed for and cherished.
If you might raise him to the threshold of youth,
any woman who saw you would feel envy at once,
such rewards for his rearing our mother will give you."
Thus they spoke and she nodded her head. The girls
carried proudly bright jars filled with water and
swiftly they reached the great house of their father.
At once to their mother they told what they saw and heard.
She bade them go quickly to offer a boundless wage.
Just as hinds or heifers in the season of spring
bound through the meadow sated with fodder,
so they, lifting the folds of their shimmering robes,
darted down the hollow wagon-track, and their hair
danced on their shoulders like a crocus blossom.
They found the famed goddess near the road
just where they had left her. Then to the house
of their father they led her. She, grieved in her heart,
walked behind with veiled head. And her dark robe
swirled round the slender feet of the goddess.
They soon reached the house of god-cherished Keleos,
and went through the portico to the place where
their regal mother sat by the pillar of the close-fitted roof,
holding on her lap the child, her young offshoot. To her
they raced. But the goddess stepped on the threshold.
Her head reached the roof and she filled the doorwa
Reverence, awe, and pale fear seized Metaneira.
She gave up her chair and bade the goddess sit down.
But Demeter, bringer of seasons and giver of rich gifts,
did not wish to be scared on the shining seat.
She waited resistant, her lovely eyes cast down,
until knowing Iambe set out a well-
built stool
for her and cast over it a silvery fleece.
Seated there, the goddess drew the veil before her face.
For a long time she sat voiceless with grief on the stool
and responded to no one with word or gesture. Unsmiling, tasting neither
food nor drink,
she sat wasting with desire for her deep-girt daughter,
until knowing Iambe jested with her and
mocking with many a joke moved the holy goddess
to smile and laugh and keep a gracious heart-
lambe, who later pleased her moods as well.
Metaneira offered a cup filled with honey-sweet wine,
but Demeter refused it. It was not right, she said,
for her to drink red wine; then she hid them mix barley
and water with soft mint and give her to drink.
Metaneira made and gave the drink to the goddess as she bid.
Almighty Deo received it for the sake of the rite.
Well-girt Metaneira spoke first among them:
"Hail lady, for I suppose your parents are not lowborn, but noble. Your eyes are marked by modesty and grace, even as those of justice-dealing kings. We mortals are forced, though it may hurt us, to bear the gifts of the gods. For the yoke lies on our necks. But now you have come here, all that's mine will be yours. Raise this child for me, whom the gods provided late-born and unexpected, much-prayed for by me. If you raise him and he comes to the threshold of youth, any woman who saw you would feel envy at once, such rewards for his rearing would I give you."
Rich-crowned Demeter addressed her in turn:
"Hail also to you, lady, may the gods give you blessings. Gladly will I embrace the child as you bid me. I will raise him, nor do I expect a spell or the Undercutter to harm him through the negligence of his nurse. For I know a charm more cutting than the Woodcutter; I know a strong safeguard against baneful bewitching."
So speaking, she took the child to her fragrant breast with her divine hands. And his mother was glad at heart. Thus the splendid son of skillful Keleos, Demophoon, whom well-girt Metaneira bore, she nursed in the great halls. And he grew like a divinity, eating no food nor sucking [at a mother's breast]; [For daily well-crowned divine] Demeter anointed him with ambrosia like one born from a god and breathed sweetly on him, held close to her breast. At night, she would bury him like a brand in the fire's might, unknown to his own parents. And great was their wonder as he grew miraculously fast; he was like the gods. She would have made him ageless and immortal, if well-girt Metaneira had not in her folly kept watch at night from her fragrant chamber and spied. But she shrieked and struck both thighs in fear for her child, much misled in her mind, and in her grief she spoke winged words. "Demophoon, my child, the stranger buries you deep in the fire, causing me woe and bitter cares."
Thus she spoke lamenting. The great goddess heard her. In anger at her, bright-crowned Demeter snatched from the flames with immortal hands the dear child Metaneira had borne beyond hope in the halls and, raging terribly at heart, cast him away from herself to the ground.
At the same time she addressed well-girt Metaneira:
"Mortals are ignorant and foolish, unable to foresee destiny, the good and the bad coming on them. You are incurably misled by your folly. Let the god's oath, the implacable water of Styx, be witness, I would have made your child immortal and ageless forever; I would have given him unfailing honor. But now he cannot escape death and the death spirits. Yet unfailing honor will forever be his, because he lay on my knees and slept in my arms. In due time as the years come round for him, the sons of Eleusis will continue year after year to wage war and dread combat against each other. For I am honored Demeter, the greatest source of help and joy to mortals and immortals. But now let all the people build me a great temple with an altar beneath, under the sheer wall of the city on the rising hill above Kallichoron. I myself will lay down the rites so that hereafter performing due rites you may propitiate my spirit"

Thus speaking, the goddess changed her size and appearance, thrusting off old age. Beauty breathed about her and from her sweet robes a delicious fragrance spread; a light beamed far our from the goddess's immortal skin, and her golden hair flowed over her shoulders. The well built house flooded with radiance like lightning. She left the halls. At once Metaneira's knees buckled. For a long time she remained voiceless, forgetting to pick up her dear only son from the floor. But his sisters heard his pitiful voice and leapt from their well-spread beds. Then one took the child in her arms and laid him to her breast. Another lit the fire; a third rushed on delicate feet to rouse her mother from her fragrant chamber. Gathering about the gasping child, they bathed and embraced him lovingly. Yet his heart was not comforted, for lesser nurses and handmaids held him now. All night they tried to appease the dread goddess, shaking with fear. But when dawn appeared, they explained to wide-ruling Keleos exactly what the bright-crowned goddess Demeter commanded. Then he called to assembly his innumerable people and bid them build for fair-tressed Demeter a rich temple and an altar on the rising hill.
Attentive to his speech, they obeyed at once and did as he prescribed. It grew as the goddess decreed. But once they finished and ceased their toil, each went off home. Then golden-haired Demeter remained sitting apart from all the immortals, wasting with desire for her deep-girt daughter. For mortals she ordained a terrible and brutal year on the deeply fertile earth. The ground released no seed, for bright-crowned Demeter kept it buried. In vain the oxen dragged many curved plows down the furrows. In vain much white barley fell on the earth. She would have destroyed the whole mortal race by cruel famine and stolen the glorious honor of gifts and sacrifices from those having homes on Olympus, if Zeus had not seen and pondered their plight in his heart. First he roused golden-winged Iris to summon fair-tressed Demeter, so lovely in form. Zeus spoke and Iris obeying the dark-clouded son of Kronos, raced swiftly between heaven and earth. She came to the citadel of fragrant Eleusis and found in her temple dark-robed Demeter. Addressing her, she spoke winged words: "Demeter, Zeus, the father, with his unfailing knowledge bids you rejoin the tribes of immortal gods. Go and let Zeus's word not remain unfulfilled." Thus she implored, but Demeter's heart was unmoved. Then the father sent in turn all the blessed immortals; one by one they kept coming and pleading and offered her many glorious gifts and whatever honors she might choose among the immortal gods. Yet not one could bend the mind and thought of the raging goddess, who harshly spurned their pleas. Never, she said, would she mount up to fragrant Olympus nor release the seed from the earth, until she saw with her eyes her own fair-faced child. When Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced, heard this, he sent down the Slayer of Argos to Erebos with his golden staff to wheedle Hades with soft words and lead back holy Persephone from the misty gloom into the light to join the gods so that her mother might see her with her eyes and desist from anger. Hermes did not disobey. At once he left Olympus's height and plunged swiftly into the depths of the earth. He met lord Hades inside his dwelling,
reclining on a bed with his shy spouse, strongly reluctant through desire for her mother. [Still she, Demeter, was brooding on revenge for the deeds of the blessed gods]. The strong Slayer of Argos stood near and spoke: "Dark-haired Hades, ruler of the dead, Father Zeus bids me lead noble Persephone up from Erebos to join us, so that her mother might see her with her eyes and cease from anger and dread wrath against the gods. For she is devising a great scheme to destroy the helpless race of mortals born on earth, burying the seed beneath the ground and obliterating divine honors. Her anger is terrible, nor does she go among the gods but sits aloof in her fragrant temple, keeping to the rocky citadel of Eleusis."

Thus he spoke and Aidoneus, lord of the dead, smiled with his brows, nor disobeyed king Zeus's commands. At once he urged thoughtful Persephone; "Go, Persephone, to the side of your dark-robed mother, keeping the spirit and temper in your breast benign. Do not be so sad and angry beyond the rest; in no way among immortals will I be an unsuitable spouse, myself a brother of father Zeus. And when you are there, you will have power over all that lives and moves, and you will possess the greatest honors among the gods. There will be punishment forevermore for those wrongdoers who fail to appease your power with sacrifices, performing proper rites and making due offerings."

Thus he spoke and thoughtful Persephone rejoiced. Eagerly she leapt up for joy. But he gave her to eat a honey-sweet pomegranate seed, stealthily passing it around her, lest she once more stay forever by the side of revered Demeter of the dark robe. Then Aidoneus commander-to-many yoked his divine horses before the golden chariot. She mounted the chariot and at her side the strong Slayer of Argos took the reins and whip in his hands and dashed from the halls. The horses flew eagerly; swiftly they completed the long journey; not sea nor river waters, not grassy glens nor mountain peaks slowed the speed of the immortal horses, slicing the deep air as they flew above these places, He brought them to a halt where rich-crowned Demeter waited before the fragrant temple. With one look she darted like a maenad down a mountain shaded with woods,
On her side Persephone, [seeing] her mother's [radiant face], [left chariot and horses] and leapt down to run [and fall on her neck in passionate embrace], [While holding her dear child in her arms], her [heart suddenly sensed a trick. Fearful, she] drew back from [her embrace and at once inquired:]
"My child, tell me, you [did not taste] food [while below] Speak out [and hide nothing, so we both may know.] [For if not], ascending [from miserable Hades], you will dwell with me and your father, the dark-clouded [son of Kronos], honored by all the gods.
But if [you tasted food], returning beneath [the earth,] you will stay a third part of the seasons [each year], but two parts with myself and the other immortals, When the earth blooms in spring with all kinds of sweet flowers, then from the misty dark you will rise again, a great marvel to gods and mortal men, By what guile did the mighty Host-to-Many deceive you?"
Then radiant Persephone replied to her in turn: "I will tell you the whole truth exactly, Mother, The Slayer of Argos came to bring fortunate news from my father, the son of Kronos, and the other gods and lead me from Erebos so that seeing me with your eyes you would desist from your anger and dread wrath at the gods. Then I leapt up for joy, but he stealthily put in my mouth a food honey-sweet, a pomegranate seed, and compelled me against my will and by force to taste it. For the rest - how seizing me by the shrewd plan of my father, Kronos's son, he carried me off into the earth's depths- I shall tell and elaborate all that you ask. We were all in the beautiful meadow-- Leukippe; Phaino; Elektra; and Ianthe; Melite; Iache; Rhodeia; and Kallirhoe; Melibosis; Tyche; and flower-faced Okyrhoe; Khryseis; Ianeira; Akaste; Admete; Rhodope; Plouto; and lovely Kalypso; Styx; Ourania; and fair Galaxaura; Pallas, rouser of battles; and Artemis, sender of arrows-playing and picking lovely flowers with our hands, soft crocus mixed with irises and hyacinth, rosebuds and lilies, a marvel to see, and the narcissus that wide earth bore like a crocus. As I joyously plucked it, the ground gaped from beneath, and the mighty lord, Host-to-Many, rose from it
and carried me off beneath the earth in his golden chariot much against my will. And I cried out at the top of my voice. I speak the whole truth, though I grieve to tell it."

Then all day long, their minds at one, they soothed each other's heart and soul in many ways, embracing fondly, and their spirits abandoned grief, as they gave and received joy between them. Hekate of the delicate veil drew near them and often caressed the daughter of holy Demeter; from that time this lady served her as chief attendant.

To them Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced, sent as mediator fair-tressed Rheia to summon dark-robed Demeter to the tribes of gods; he promised to give her what honors she might choose among the gods. He agreed his daughter would spend one-third of the revolving year in the misty dark and two-thirds with her mother and the other immortals. So he spoke and the goddess did not disobey his commands.

She darted swiftly down the peaks of Olympus and arrived where the Rarian plain, once life-giving udder of earth, now giving no life at all, stretched idle and utterly leafless. For the white barley was hidden by the designs of lovely-ankled Demeter. Yet as spring came on, the fields would soon ripple with long ears of grain; and the rich furrows would grow heavy on the ground with grain to be tied with bands into sheaves. There she first alighted from the barren air. Mother and daughter were glad to see each other and rejoiced at heart. Rheia of the delicate veil then said: "Come, child, Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced, summons you to rejoin the tribes of the gods; he has offered to give what honors you choose among them. He agreed that his daughter would spend one-third of the revolving year in the misty dark, and two-thirds with her mother and the other immortals. He guaranteed it would be so with a nod of his head. So come, my child, obey me: do not rage overmuch and forever at the dark-clouded son of Kronos. Now make the grain grow fertile for humankind."

So Rheia spoke, and rich-crowned Demeter did not disobey. At once she sent forth fruit from the fertile fields and the whole wide earth burgeoned with leaves and flowers. She went to the kings who administer law, Triptolemos and Diokles, driver of horses, mighty
Eumolpos and Keleos, leader of the people, and revealed
the conduct of her rites and taught her Mysteries to all of them,
holy rites that are not to be transgressed, nor pried into,
nor divulged. For a great awe of the gods stops the voice.
Blessed is the mortal on earth who has seen these rites,
But the unitiate who has no share in them never
has the same lot once dead in the dreary darkness.
When the great goddess had founded all her rites,
the goddesses left for Olympus and the assembly of the other gods.
There they dwell by Zeus delighting-in-thunder, inspiring
awe and reverence. Highly blessed is the mortal
on earth whom they graciously favor with love.
For soon they will send to the hearth of his great house
Ploutos, the god giving abundance to mortals.
But come, you goddesses, dwelling in the town of
fragrant Eleusis, and seagirt Paros, and rocky Antron,
revered Deo, mighty giver of seasons and glorious gifts,
you and your very fair daughter Persephone,
for my song grant gladly a living that warms the heart.
And I shall remember you and a new song as well.
The only legend I have ever loved is
the story of a daughter lost in hell.
And found and rescued there.
Love and blackmail are the gist of it.
Ceres and Persephone the names.
And the best thing about the legend is
I can enter it anywhere. And have.
As a child in exile in
a city of fogs and strange consonants,
I read it first and at first I was
an exiled child in the crackling dusk of
the underworld, the stars blighted. Later
I walked out in a summer twilight
searching for my daughter at bed-time.
When she came running I was ready
to make any bargain to keep her.
I carried her back past whitebeams
and wasps and honey-scented buddleias.
But I was Ceres then and I knew
winter was in store for every leaf
on every tree on that road.
Was inescapable for each one we passed.
And for me.

It is winter
and the stars are hidden.
I climb the stairs and stand where I can see
my child asleep beside her teen magazines,
her can of Coke, her plate of uncut fruit.
The pomegranate! How did I forget it?
She could have come home and been safe
and ended the story and all
our heart-broken searching but she reached
out a hand and plucked a pomegranate.
She put out her hand and pulled down
the French sound for apple and
the noise of stone and the proof
that even in the place of death,
at the heart of legend, in the midst
of rocks full of unshed tears
ready to be diamonds by the time
the story was told, a child can be
hungry. I could warn her. There is still a chance.
The rain is cold. The road is flint-coloured.
The suburb has cars and cable television.
The veiled stars are above ground.
It is another world. But what else
can a mother give her daughter but such
beautiful rifts in time?
If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift.
The legend will be hers as well as mine.
She will enter it. As I have.
She will wake up. She will hold
the papery flushed skin in her hand.
And to her lips. I will say nothing.