

## **“Leave this place now or ya never will”: the bog as a site of resistance in Marina Carr’s play *By the bog of cats...***

### **“Saia deste lugar agora ou você nunca o fará”<sup>1</sup>: o pântano enquanto local de resistência na peça *By the bog of cats...*, de Marina Carr**

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#### **Abstract**

This work offers an analysis of the female protagonist in *By the Bog of Cats...*, by Irish playwright Marina Carr, first premiered at the Abbey Theatre in 1998. I propose in this article a fresh ecocritical reading of the play and its female protagonist, Hester Swane, by arguing that the natural force which drives and impulses her throughout the theatrical text is not simply resorted to as a means of conveying or representing the so-called “female nature”, but that it is first and foremost used for reinforcing binary positions, mainly related to gender and nature. In these terms, the ecocritical focus is informed by Dereck Gladwin’s and Timothy Clark’s works, whereas I also refer to the concept of female agency in the terms discussed by Judith Butler and Lois McNay, for a thorough analysis of this protagonist’s coping mechanisms in face of a set of constraining elements which might have impaired her of fully achieving her individual capacities.

#### **Keywords**

Irish Theatre. Marina Carr. Ecocriticism. Agency.

#### **Resumo**

Este trabalho analisa a protagonista de *By the Bog of Cats ...*, da dramaturga irlandesa Marina Carr, que estreou no Abbey Theatre em 1998. Proponho neste artigo uma leitura ecocrítica do texto teatral e de sua protagonista, Hester Swane, argumentando que a força natural que a impulsiona na peça não é somente empregada como um meio de transmitir ou representar a sua suposta “natureza feminina”, mas que também pode vir a corroborar posições binárias, principalmente no que tange questões de gênero e natureza. Os trabalhos de Dereck Gladwin e Timothy Clark respaldam o enfoque e a análise dos elementos da ecocrítica. Ademais, faço uso do conceito de agência feminina nos termos discutidos por Judith Butler e Lois McNay, para uma análise mais aprofundada da protagonista e de seus mecanismos para enfrentar o conjunto de elementos restritivos que poderiam impedi-la de alcançar plenamente seu potencial individual.

#### **Palavras-chave**

Teatro irlandês. Marina Carr. Ecocrítica. Agência.

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<sup>1</sup> *By the Bog of Cats...* (2005, p. 276). Tradução livre da autora.

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*"Humans arguably dwell in two landscapes:  
internal and external."  
William Howarth<sup>2</sup>*

## Introduction

Ireland has commonly been apprehended, in the European context, as a rural country. Heading to modern Ireland, more specifically the years that followed the partition between the north and the south, such a state of affairs would not have a great change in the Republic, especially for government policies from the Emergency period – during the Second World War – and onwards explicitly depicted the State's willingness to maintain the country in position of isolationism. Outer influences, especially that of England, came to be demonized in all sort of ways. The church exerted its influence on the predominantly Catholic newly-partitioned Free State, holding close relations to leading politicians which ended up arousing the conditions of great hardship for the ones who were not so privileged, namely the non-Catholic and women. This must be said simply to set the tone of a crucial question: to what extent does this inward movement which took place throughout the twentieth century served the purpose not only of bringing Irish people to their supposed homeland, the pastoral and untouched "Mother Ireland", to a condition of awareness as regards the country's profound *liaison* with nature? To what extent such an effort on the part of public institutions provided the Irish the possibility of raising awareness as regards this past that, so much connected to the issues of colonialism and exploitation, could also bring about a highly conscious demand in terms of how society could reestablish a relation to nature which did not disown its conflicted history but reconcile with it?

Seemingly, this mid-century endeavor conducted by the State did not have much of a practical effect upon the understanding and practice of a more active social positioning towards a conscious and respectful attitude to the environment. Not that this was the government's primary concern nor that the State was even aware that such an outcome could emerge. In terms of an ecocritical perspective, Ireland has only recently been denoting such a move – far behind other nations. In Europe, the country has been ranked close to the bottom in environmental questions, becoming – for instance – one of the most car-dependent countries in the world (WENZELL, 2009, p. 1). The situation has gotten way more out of control with the economic boom brought

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<sup>2</sup> Some Principles of Ecocriticism (1996, p. 70).

about during the so-called Celtic Tiger years, from the mid-90s to the mid-00s, when Irish people lived the “economic miracle” and experienced changes in the “social ethos” of the Republic (KEOGH, 2012, p. 333), especially due to the high concentration of international investment in various sectors in the country. The Republic was, then, finally entering the hall of industrialized nations, relegating its culture and history, confining its landscape to the form of an urban sprawl, turning its once ever-present nature to a “topography of pavement” (WENZELL, 2009, p. 1). Not surprisingly Tony Lowes, co-founder of Friends of Irish environment, has declared that there was the need “to save Ireland from the Irish” (WENZELL, 2009, p. 1).

Although the Celtic Tiger years are mostly well-known for the impressive number of immigrants entering the Republic, which was by itself an unprecedented event in Irish history, and for its outstanding economic development, it is substantial to take into account the other side of the coin: since the partition, in the 1920s, there has been an extensive work done by the State for establishing a sort of national cohesion in terms of identity, enhancing the sense of Irishness. Thereby, Irish people have been thought and guided to recognize themselves in very specific terms, mainly related to whiteness and Catholicism. In what concerns Irishness, Steve Loyal explains that the “processes of nation state formation invariably invoke homogeneous narratives of ethnicity and national identity. In Ireland, this narrative was originally predicated upon the idea of a white Celtic people, defined in opposition to British colonisers. Irishness in this sense leaves no room for non-white, non-Celtic people or for those who cannot participate in its collective historical experience” (LOYAL, 2003, p. 83). In these terms, it is unsurprising that those who somehow subverted such an order would suffer sanctions, be that in legal or social terms. Regardless of the official propaganda which sold Ireland as the nation of the “one thousand welcomes” (LOYAL, 2003, p. 74), people’s strongly-rooted sense of nationhood presented a challenge to the accomplishment of a more plural and respectful society:

The hegemonic sense of Irish identity established during the 1920s and 1930s has been severely challenged by the rise of the Celtic Tiger. The two main pillars and regulators of Irish identity and conservatism since the foundation of the state – the Catholic Church and Fianna Fáil<sup>3</sup> – have both been partly undermined by economic growth and various media discourses referring to clerical and political scandal. In addition, the assumption of shared values and experience so central to the Celtic imaginary has been challenged by the recent increase in foreign immigration.

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<sup>3</sup> Fianna Fáil, translated from the Irish, means “Soldiers of Destiny”, and has been the dominant political party in the Republic of Ireland since the 1930s.

Migrants often expose the social and political fault lines of religion, ethnicity, class, gender and culture, which lie beneath the veneer of any 'imagined community', and Ireland is no exception. (LOYAL, 2003, p. 83)

The "imagined community" could be easily undermined by a class of people who were not newcomers *per se*, although they can be said to be outcasts in their own country: the travelers, a minority population in Ireland which possesses its own language, culture and way of life (HELLEINER, 2000, p. 232) and, in these terms, they are indeed included amongst those who did not sanction the ideal of Irishness. *By the Bog of Cats...*, the theatrical text to be analyzed in this work, addresses precisely the matters of a Traveler woman and the conflicted relation she establishes with the community. Carr's play is not only a contemporary criticism on long-standing troublesome relations, but also an appraisal on how humans' *liaison* to nature is not usually challenged and nearly always used to legitimize forms of discrimination and dislocation.

Premiered at the Abbey Theatre in 1998, right in the middle of the Tiger years, *By the Bog of Cats...* proposes the discussion of several of the arguments aforementioned: the position of minorities within a very constrictive and stifling society, ruled by religious precepts; the nature and/versus community relation; the troublesome connection of the past as one wants it to be and as it was in fact. For Dereck Gladwin, Carr's play "underscores cultural, environmental, and psychological forces that have gathered on the peripheries of contemporary Irish life" (2011, p. 387). In this paper, I propose a fresh ecocritical analysis of *By the Bog of Cats...* by arguing that the natural force which drives and impulses the female protagonist, Hester Swane, is not simply used as a means of conveying that as a symbol of her "female nature", as it has been argued before. My point is to disclose how the natural environment in the play might be apprehended and used to reinforce axiomatic binary positions, such as female versus male and nature versus culture, whilst its role – in fact – comprises and deploys a much broader view on social intercourses. Since nature embeds all these actions and is the main focus of this study, the terms "nature", "natural" and "naturally", nonetheless, ask for problematization once they have been thoroughly used to legitimize and corroborate social constructions of hierarchy and power. To do so, I rely – mainly – on the essays "Nature" by Stacy Alaimo (2016) and "Nature, Post-Nature" by Timothy Clark (2013). As regards criticism on Marina Carr's play, I make use of Dereck Gladwin's account on her work, "Staging the Trauma of the Bog in Marina

Carr's *By the Bog of Cats...* (2011) and Melissa Sihra's "A Cautionary Tale: Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats...*" (2000). As a secondary resource, I also refer to the idea of agency so as to disclose the female protagonist's strategies for coping with the strict social construction she is inserted in and to the stifling environment which is the result of a very constrictive hierarchical logistics in turn of the century Republic. In these terms, my reading on female agency is informed by the works of Judith Butler and Lois McNay, respectively: "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988) and "Agency" (2016).

### **The bog as a site of resistance**

*By the Bog of Cats...* is a modern tragedy. Read by several scholars as the Irish version of Euripides' *Medea*, Carr's play tells the story of Hester Swane, a Traveler, whose life has been spent on the bitter hope for her mother's return and the troublesome relationship with Carthage Kilbride, with whom she had a daughter – Josie Swane. Set in the Irish Midlands, more specifically in the fictional *Bog of Cats*, the plot discloses Hester's profound relation to the bog landscape, which for her works simultaneously as a source of liberation and entrapment. The bog, as a marginalized and demerited site, functions as a symbol for Hester Swane's own displacement from the community cosmos. Holding very strong relations to the bog and everything connected to it, Hester ends up being ostracized by the ones who see them both as useless and disposable matters. The female protagonist's primary and unbidding *liaison* to the bog comes from the memories related to her mother, who abandoned her when she was a child:

Ya know the last time I seen me mother I was wearin' me Communion dress too, down by the caravan, a beautiful summer's night and the bog like a furnace. I wouldn't go to bed though she kept tellin' me to. I don't know why I wouldn't, I always done what she tould me. I think now – maybe I knew. And she says, 'I'm going walkin' the bog, you're to stay here, Hetty.' And I says, 'No,' I'd go along with her, and made to folly her. Ans she says, 'No, Hetty, you wait here, I'll be back in a while.' And again I made the folly her and again she stopped me. And I watched her walk away from me across the Bog of Cats. And across the Bog of Cats I'll watch her return. (CARR, 2005, p. 297)

This excerpt turns explicit the elements which are the source of the protagonist's and the community's main conflict, since Hester's few memories of her mother are strictly connected to what that community dismissed the most: the caravan, which symbolizes her family's origin as Tinkers, a term used to refer to the travelers,

those who are “unsettled,” and the bog which – being a less solid form of landform (GLADWIN, 2011, p. 390) – represents Hester’s unfixity, mobility and the movement of past and present matters. Sihra states that “Hester wishes to remain on the Bog of Cats as it affords her the only connection with her mother” (SIHRA, 2000, p. 258). It is – indeed – one of the fiercest reasons for her to stay, as a Tinker, for such a long time in the same location. I would like to go further, however, and argue that not only does the bog present itself as a sparkle of bonding and hope in Hester’s mind, but it also works as a means of confronting those who, for such an extended time, have ostracized her mother and now herself and her daughter. The bog functions as a bridge between Hester’s unresolved past, melancholic present and buoyant future; in accordance with Gladwin: “Hester depends upon the bog to reincarnate the memory of her remote past, in the hope that her mother will indeed come back to her. The preservative qualities of the bog – known as a place to store butter and eggs, as well as to effectively embalm a corpse so that its features remain identifiable for thousands of years – also assuage Hester on the emotional level. She has memorialised her mother by creating an alternative reality of what if rather than what is” (GLADWIN, 2011, p. 393). Once the bog and Hester’s bonding with it functions as a source of trouble for the community’s romanticized existence, and being Hester well-aware of the vexation her very subsistence inflicts on some of these community members, it is indeed a demonstration of active confrontation and mediation on her part towards this community’s narrow-minded and prejudicial demeanor. Hester’s very presence is, in fact, an act of resistance: both Hester and the bog subvert an idealized social order.

There are two ecocritical features in *By the Bog of Cats...* which are strictly connected to the issue of resistance above mentioned: first, nature as landscape, as that which is “opposite to culture” (CLARK, 2013, p. 75) without human agency – thus, the bog – and nature as one’s mood, as a “defining characteristic” (CLARK, 2013, p. 76), in this sense, Hester’s nature; second, the so-called “Social Darwinism”, or “the view that all life is essentially a competition/struggle” which could underwrite various forms of crimes (CLARK, 2013, p. 76). In the play, such questions are intrinsically associated: the ones who present the greatest challenge for Hester to fully achieve her goals, to stay in the Bog of Cats and assure her matrimony to Carthage Kilbride, are precisely those who look down on her for her supposed wild and untamed nature as a Tinker and that, as a result, ends up arousing her anger and somehow rebellious side. The provoking and prejudicial treatment received is acknowledged by Hester herself



to the locals: “The truth is you want to eradicate me, make out I never existed” (CARR, 2005, p. 315).

Mrs Kilbride, Carthage’s mother, and Xavier Cassidy’s, Carthage’s future father-in-law are the antagonists and the ones who orchestrate the plan to dispossess Hester of what was left of her life, namely her daughter and the house Carthage had built them to live as a family. Seemingly, the only thing which they cannot destroy is Hester’s uncanny bonding to the Bog of Cats, which ends up turning her – also – into an unexplainable natural force, impacting the lives surrounding that space. Whilst she struggles to construe and form an identity, since she never overcame her mother’s absence, she also fights the feelings of abiding by the community’s idea that she is an incomplete, abnormal individual. Being an outsider who is rejected by the locals, Hester encounters in the bog landscapes the balance between the past which she cannot reconcile with and the future hopes which she nurtures within. Thus, Hester does not conform with social plots and conventions and allies with the axiomatic force of nature in a *volte-face* of revenge, whereas demonstrating a high state of consciousness as regards her position within that social *milieu*. In the night of Carthage’s wedding to Caroline Cassidy, Hester – before killing herself – ends up murdering Josie, her daughter, so as not to leave her as she had spent her entire life: waiting for someone who would never return.

Hester’s final words to Carthage depict how fiercely connected to the bog in all levels she was: “Ya won’t forget me now, Carthage, and when all of this is over or half remembered and you think you’ve almost forgotten me again, take a walk along the Bog of Cats and wait for a purlin’ wind through your hair or a soft breath be your ear or a rustle behind ya. That’ll be me and Josie ghostin’ ya” (CARR, 2005, p. 340). Once again, she makes clear the strength of her connection to the bog landscape, for not only has she lived by the bog waiting for her mother to return, but by the bog she will stand ghosting those who did not apprehend her real nature. The idea of ghosts and bogs is grounded on the fact that being bogs constituted by a different landform which can accommodate and preserve other matters (even corpses), bogs also have the power of bringing about issues of the past as well as accommodating questions of the present. I must agree with Gladwin when he states that “Hester is the human counterpart to the bog” (2011, p. 394).

Notwithstanding Hester Swane’s overt empowerment when bonded to the bogland, it also brings into question the problems of gauging women by their

supposedly natural relation to nature on its untamed and unconceivable terms. It turns out to be extremely problematic when critics, for instance, understand the bog and Hester as resources to be “owned and dominated” by the male figures within the plot, namely Xavier Cassidy and Carthage Kilbride (GLADWIN, 2011, p. 392). Such a statement reinforces gender binary positions and leaves no space for the problematization of other figures in the narrative, such as Mrs. Kilbride, whose demeanor is as poisoning as the men’s, if not more.

The acts of resistance which are explicitly shown through Hester’s demeanor towards most of the members of the Bog, mainly concerning her unwillingness to fit into their tiny box of socially accepted behaviors, portrays one of the many sorts of agentic potentials women may resort to when immersed in regulatory and constraining environments: agency as resistance. A substantial work on the topic is Butler’s “performativity” theory, which leads to an account of agency as resistance that goes beyond the prior understanding of the concept in the spectrums of voluntarism – that has to do with the understanding of agency as the quality of the “sovereign actor”, an autonomous and “fully rational” individual who is able to overcome constraining events in quite a heroic mode – and determinism, that sees agency merely as a response to an external condition. Hence, resistance can be seen as “empowered agency” for it does not need to represent an “outright rejection of oppressive norms (BUTLER, 1988, p. 522)”. Instead, it works through the subject awareness of such repressive mechanisms, generating a “displacement from within (BUTLER, 1988, p. 522)”. Accordingly, McNay recognizes that the view of agency related to resistance is helpful to perceive the various forms in which individuals can have their emancipatory potentials constrained and how constructed social relations of power and hierarchies related to gender, class, and race interfere in one’s response to external events:

Resistance moves feminism beyond the adjudicative mode of some of its formulations of agency as autonomy toward more open-ended and experimental forms of politicized ethics. Freedom is not about stipulating the way individuals “ought” to live but rather encouraging them to interrogate the limits of what appears to be natural and inevitable in present forms of identity and attempting to go beyond them. (MCNAY, 2016, p. 45)

Although Hester does depict a confrontative behavior, her trump card is precisely the unshakeable belief in who she is and in the substantiality of her roots. The rejection to and denial of social mores, which is a remarkable feature of her



character, works a complement for her active mediation in face of the ever-present and threatening *status quo*, rather than a major feature of her personality. It might even be said that Hester's outright disturbed and unstable spirit might be employed by her as a mask, a defense mechanism whilst her real subversion relies on the very fact that she insists in existing and sharing the same space as the other community members: "as such an extension of the landscape, Hester asserts her position. Instead of a preserved body dug from the bog, she represents a living bog body connected to the land on which she was born and on which she will die" (GLADWIN, 2011, p. 391).

Certainly, Carr's narrative development might also be interpreted as an essentializing view of women as related to nature, being them taken as supernatural forces which cannot be controlled. However latent in the play, such a view is also simplistic regarding the social critique presented by the author in diverse instances: gender conventions, minority groups and society's demeanor towards the natural world. The problematization of measuring women's so-called nature to nature itself has caused a wide discussion amongst feminists, but it has also raised awareness on how such an essentializing view could turn into a means of freeing women from social mores, once "both the feminist flight from nature and the feminist excursion to nature as an undomesticated ground seek to release women from gendered scripts, roles, and values" (ALAIMO, 2016, p. 534). When, for instance, Hester states "I can't leave the Bog of Cats" (CARR, 2005, p. 315), she is simultaneously externalizing her wills to resist society's pressure and reassuring her entanglement not only to the bog landscape, but to that which the bog brings about within her being: memory, identity and history. Whilst the bog landscape constitutes a place of belonging for Hester, it is also a place of estrangement to the community which cannot apprehend its meaningfulness apart from its role as "sacrifices to the global economy" (GLADWIN, 2011, p. 395). That is, seemingly, a sign on why the bog and Hester wander at the fringes of society, for is when, where and how "the unseen has become visible, the absent has become present" (CERQUONI, 2003, p. 181).

#### **"I have memories your cheap talk can never alter"<sup>4</sup>: some final words**

Memory is an abiding presence in *By the Bog of Cats...* To start with, there is Hester Swane's struggle not to forget the few memories she has left of her mother,

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<sup>4</sup> *By the Bog of Cats...* (p. 330).

Josie Swane. The Catwoman's storytelling is also a representation of memory, as well as Xavier Cassidy's and Mrs. Kilbride's talk – these, however, are not that sympathetic as regards the reminisces about Big Josie. The antagonists' approach to memory can be seen much more in the sense of social forgetting than that of raising awareness to past events. They would rather – and I will use Hester's word – eradicate the memory of those who they so much ostracized. The bogland, also at the margins, does not assist them in the endeavor of burying these memories; on the contrary, through Hester Swane and her ever-present longing, the bog is always resurrecting what they would prefer had never existed: "the harshness of landscape itself becomes a backdrop, at the very least, for human/political drama, revealed through the crossing of Ireland's mapped borders, the transition from cultivated civilization to untamed nature" (WENZELL, 2009, p. 30).

The dichotomy "cultivated civilization" versus "untamed nature" is what sets the tone of the play's tragedy. Unable of harmonically coexisting with Swane, the outsider, the Tinker, the individual wandering about the fringes of society, the community settles for hostility, in an attempt of annihilate Swane's existence through the abolishment of the individual's consciousness. The situation renders untenable, once Hester is highly aware of her condition and of what the community is resorting to, it certainly puts her in a more active position within the narrative than has been discerned, and corroborates Alaimo's idea that, however problematic the commonsensical linking of women and nature might be, we can also revisit and reinhabit nature as an "undomesticated, liberatory space" (ALAIMO, 2016, p. 534).

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