

UNCONVENTIONAL FEMININITY IN PORTIA COUGHLAN

Article Particulars

Received: 6.9.2017

Accepted: 11.9.2017

Published: 30.9.2017

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Abstract

This research paper mainly demonstrates the universal issues such as unconventional femininity, incest, sexual tension, domestic violence and rape through postmodernist aspects. Marina Carr's plays reflect the social realities of this world. She carries the problems of contemporary women onto the stage. The Mai, By the Bog of Cats and Portia Coughlan, the protagonists of these plays have rejected the traditional, cultural rules of family and do not care their children and husband. Portia Coughlan is bitchy, self-centered, lazy, alcoholic, depressive, destructive, and neglectful of her three kids. This play is a brutal and passionate drama of family relationships and personal disintegration.

Keywords: *Incest, Sexual tension, domestic violence, Rape.*

Introduction

Portia Coughlan is one of the most interesting plays by Marina Carr. This is a mystery play that suggests the spectator several variations of the plot development. Portia presents as both victim and heroine, the play eventually opts for a mechanistic, causal explanation of her suffering, creating certain dramatic benefits but extracting it from the very cultural throes that signalled audience identification in the first place. She is not a natural mother; despises her husband, and feels the life being sucked from her by the society in which she lives. Portia Coughlan is bitchy, self-centered, lazy, alcoholic, depressive, destructive, and neglectful of her three kids. She is a very desirable lady to every man in Belmont Valley. It is a brutal and passionate drama of family relationships and personal disintegration. She has celebrated her thirtieth birthday and she is showing mental anguish by the ghost of her twin brother Gabriel, who died tragically fifteen years earlier. It is exactly fifteen years since her twin brother Gabriel died in the Belmont River. On her thirteen birthdays, she was totally in an unconscious situation.

The protagonist Portia is a troubled and disillusioned woman who is continually haunted by her dead twin. In the opening scene of the play, she wears a nightdress and a sweatshirt. Portia comes on stage dishevelled and barefoot, drinking alcohol in the morning, which suggests her dissatisfaction with her life and her isolation. Gabriel is described as a handsome, soft-spoken, gentle, and feminine child, while Portia is seen as being exceptionally powerful and sexually active for a female. Her husband Raphael (Laverty) is having achieved fame, wealth, or social status and presents her with a diamond bracelet worth £5,000. He is a patient man by nature, but his patience is being tested, as Portia continues to drink, and is totally neglectful of their three children. She does not love her family, spends nights away from home and often in the company of a couple of local studs Damus Halion (McErlean) and Fintan Goolin (Drew). Portia's Aunt Maggie May Doorley (Ní Neachtain) and her sweet natured husband Senchil (Carney) offer some moments of relief, while Stacia Doyle (Murphy), perhaps her only real friend, tries valiantly to make the depressive. Murray calls her "a discontented, sexually-liberated married woman capable of articulating in violent language her disillusion with men, children and marital responsibilities." (Murphy, 238)

After having married Raphael, she has never left the valley. Her narrow experience and grief over the suicide of her twin brother Gabriel, Portia takes refuge at the Belmont riverside, land she fiercely claims as her family's own and the scene of Gabriel's suicide fifteen years ago. Carr expresses sympathy for those who commit suicide, "I used to think suicide was a valid option... But I don't think so any more. I think it curtails what Kierkegaard calls 'eternity's claim' and I think part of that is about complete surrender to whatever that claim is, from beyond." (23)

Portia denies excepting all traditional role: she repeatedly cheats on Raphael; she can't live or love her children and frequently leaves them with either her husband or her friends. She can't spend her life like a traditional or typical house wife.

The story of incestuous relationship is repeated itself in Marianne and Sly's children, Portia and Gabriel. Portia and Gabriel have a strong sexual relationship, at the age of fifteen, she begins an affair with Damus Halion and Gabriel stops talk to her. Now, though, she rejects Damus Halion. Then, in a state of desperation, she makes a date with the local man. She rejects him, too, for "he was useless, just as I knew he would be" (222); he could not distract from the Belmont either. Portia makes several relationships. For Portia, Gabriel's loss has rendered existence meaningless, whilst his return has made her acknowledge the torment of the claim of eternity. In the absence of Gabriel, she loses all senses. For her, this world is meaningless; she neglects her own sons, hates her parents, and is moved intentionally to kill Raphael's love for her. Her verbal attack on him reflects a painful self-awareness, "Portia ... G'wan cry away, breache yar heart Raphael Coughlan, ud'll hale, don't worra, ud'll hale, an' ah'll go guarantor for you that wance ud's haled there'll be natin' under sun or moon thah'll ever lance ud's tough hide agin." (Carr, 57) Portia's incestuous relationship with Gabriel

is very strong because both are twin and shared childhood experience. Her emotional bond with her brother makes her present life unbearable. Due to the absence of her twin, she forgets her life, use the high quantity of alcohol to remove her childhood memories.

Carr imbues her piece with reference to the world of Irish mythology. Thus, the relationship of the siblings has been strong from birth. They never live separate, always together, describes as if you asked them a question they'd answer at the same exact time with the same exact answer. Their relationship was so odd because they don't have any dignity in their relationship. Fifteen years after Gabriel's death, the people of the town still consider the unnatural relationship of the two.

Carr's female characters are strong but struggle against their fate and confused about personal realities. For example, Portia explains her destiny with Maggie:

Portia: What ya think it mean, Maggie May? Are our lives followin' a minute and careful plan designed on high or are we just flittin's from chance to chance.

Maggie: Personally I prefer to believe that everythin' I've done is planned be someone else down to the last detail. I'm a fat auld hood with bad legs, **Portia**, and I'd hate to have to lay the blame of everthin' on myself. (3)

Moreover, Portia is confused about her own identity in this world. She has lost everything since Gabriel has drowned in the river.

Now, Carr gives a beautiful description of Raphael, Portia's husband, is a hardworking, financially successful, honest, forgiving, Christian man who has the respect of the town. He is a saint of sorts, right down to his angel name. In the play, Carr calls him the crippled saint of rescue, in the motifs, ' person with one foot, god with one foot, and angels as rescuer. He is regarded as a metaphoric horse and chariot in Portia's life and the gift from Maggie and Senchil. He is a reliable person in this play. Carr is described as a faithful husband and responsible father. Meanwhile, Portia's poor husband, Raphael Coughlan, keeps trying to comfort his wife. But her perpetual disdain towards him highlights his own twisted tendency to seek out cruel and unusual punishment. Especially when it becomes obvious that during their thirteen year marriage, Portia has never been truly happy.

The play starts on Portia's thirtieth birthday. After two days, she defying her wifehood and motherhood with thought, word, and action. When she refuses all feminine roles, her thoughts are focused on her dead brother (Gabriel) and their complicated relationship. In the starting of play, Portia is in a liminal state. She is deeply connected with ghosts through her relationship with her dead brother Gabriel; she hears his song and talks to him all the time. Portia has a deep connection with the mythical world because she is already a ghost of sorts. According her grandmother, Blaize she wander half alive around Belmont Valley. Blaize gives a beautiful description of Portia's haunted soul " To Portia in the murky clay of Belmont graveyard where she was headin' from the day she was born, because when you breed animals with

humans you can only bring forth haunted monsters who've no sense of God or man. Portia and Gabriel (Carr,45)" Carr presents some charming lines of unconventional femininity in the play when she denies her social obligation as a mother, wife, and other community member. Her state of mind is like a mad man because of her twin brother Gabriel who has died. She does not able to take decision for her life, children, parents, and her husband. Portia presents a full negative role for her kids.

Moreover, she openly discusses her negative and harmful thoughts about her children with Raphael. She does not like their toys and says that these toys are like weapons for me. She removes herself from her social obligations as a wife by declaring her loathing for Raphael and refusing to accept the traditional, cultural, and household tasks like cooking and cleaning.

Carr mentions that Portia's house looks like a dirty place because she never clean her house. She feels suffocation in her own house because she has not love relationship with her family members, even her kids. She is totally different from other women in the society. She rejects all rules of society. Portia drinks and smokes at all hours of the day. She does not care where her kids and her husband are. Carr also mentions that Portia is not a faithful lady to her husband. Before her marriage, she involved in a relationship with Damus Halicon who is a very handsome and educated man. He loves Portia whole heartily but unable to marry with her because her father does not interested in this relationship. On her birthday, he gives her flowers, kisses, and admires her beauty. While Portia thinks about Gabriel. They fight because Damus thinks about Portia and Portia thinks about Gabriel.

The situation does not favorable for marriage. After that Portia got married with Raphael. Carr says honestly that she loves faithfully to her twin. She does not ready for marriage to Gabriel. She has again relationship with her lover Damus Halion in broad daylight, even though she is married; her relationship is so public. Her father sees her with Damus and tells "put a halter on that wayward arse of yours(30)". From her luminal state, Portia is able to understand and analyze the reality of the addictive society. As Carr describes, "Portias can't get her act together, but she has a sharper intelligence than the rest of them. She has a much finer sensibility than they have, than they're aware of (153)". Portia presents her finer sensibility when she tells the worst reality of women in the society. Portia explains Marianne:

read subtext, Mother, words dropped be accident, phrases covered over, sentences unfinished, and I know the topography of your mind as well as I know every inch and ditch and drain of Belmont Farm, so don't you bluster in here and put a death wish on my sons just because you couldn't save your own. My sons'll be fine for if I do nothin'else I leave them alone and no mark is better than a black one(210).

Marianne became shocked and asked how you know the reality of the society. From this vantage point, Portia is able to distinguish the truths about the addictive society that no one else can see.

Further, the first truth is that Portia can see the worst reality about the addictive system. She depicts that the generation of women before her had surrender their personal power in order to gain a modicum of acceptance. When Portia looks at her grandmother Blaize and a brazen women and explains about Blaize , “ And I told you I spent the first eight years of me life holdin' me tongue, fuckin' and blindin' into the pillow, and if God sees fit to give me another eighty they'll be spent speakin' me mind foul or fair (212)”. Now, Marianne is a very violent lady in the society and her way of living is different from other's lady. But Maggie May, Marianne's sister explains that “she wasn't always, Portia. Me and her had great times together, we'd paint the town regular. Between your father and his auld mother they beat everythin' worth beatin' out of her, that and losin' her son” (199). The result of Marianne's beating is her submission to the society and the surrendering of her personal power. This beating transforms Marianne into a normal woman who fulfills traditional roles as a mother and wife. The second truth is that this addictive society has a selective and distorted memory.

The third truth that Portia can see about the addictive system is that “keeps us unaware of what is going on inside us. We do not have to deal with our anger, pain, depression, confusion, or even our joy and love, because we do not feel them, or we feel them only vaguely” (Schaefer 18). Portia depicts this emotionless world when she describes her relationship with Raphael:

These days I look at Raphael sittin' opposite me in the armchair. He's always tired, his bad leg up on a stool, addin' up the books from the factory, lost in himself, and I think the pair of us might as well be dead for all the joy we knock out of one another. The kids is asleep, the house creakin' like a coffin, all them wooden doors and floors. Sometimes I can't breathe any more (207).

In these lines, Portia recognizes the lack of feeling with her husband and kids, even when he cannot see it himself. Carr states that Portia is continually battered and pressured to join the addictive society and its system. Portia's father initially forces her into the addictive society when he compels her to marry Raphael. While she was totally against her father's decision but that time was not favorable for Portia. Thus like her mother, Marianne, and the generations of women before them, Portia is obliged to give up her dreams and goals to assume her position in society as a normal woman. Marianne continues to try to force Portia to stay in the addictive society. Since Portia has a sharp mind and realizes that she does not want to be part of the addictive society in which she lives. After some time she has discovered that she has nowhere to go, a truth in which she admits to Damus Halion.

Carr says that she does not want to cross the threshold and join the addictive society. She is unable to spend her life according to society's rules and tradition. The suffocating intimacy of these characters is reinforced not only by language, claustrophobic spaces, and Portia's inextricable association with her native soil, but by

incest. Carr uses this amazing character to tell a story in which dark family secrets, the spirit of the earth, and ghosts from the past all haunt the present. Her memories of the womb produce a deep psychological exploration.

Physical violence is most excessively expressed in Portia's fight with her mother Marianne, and has violent words of illegal and wrong and betrayal with both parents. At this time, the situation has reached crisis point because of unconscious communications. Portia open the consequences of Marianne's inability to be a mother. Portia's conflict with her parent's moves around the blame they place on each other for Gabriel's death and the parents' inability to comprehend the twin's relationship. Portia physically attacks her mother, Marianne, and has violent words of accusation and betrayal with both parents in Act 3, Scene 5. She blames clearly that parents are responsible for her incestuous relationship with Gabriel.

Moreover, in this play, Carr discusses another issue of women who do not ready to take the responsibility of mother. Portia does not love her own children and not ready to live with them because her full concentration on her true love. Portia cannot accept the role of wife, admits to her mother her true motive for marrying was not money but his name and fame. Portia explains:

Portia

The stillness and the sureness that came off of you was a balm to me, and when I asked who ya were and they said that's Raphael Coughlan, I though, how can anyone with a name like that be so real, and I says to me self, if Raphael Coughlan notices me I will have a chance to enter the world and stay in it, which has always been the battle for me. (255)

Her mental situation does not fine, living under depression. All the times, Portia thinks about Gabriel. She was totally attached (mentally, physically, and emotionally) with her twins. She explains Raphael, her physical relationship and childhood experiences with Gabriel.

Belmont River plays an important role in the play. It always is visible on stage, even when the action is occurring inside Portia's house. Sihra says “, Sites of water occur with remarkable frequency in plays by Irish women” (Sihra, 13). Rivers, wells, lakes and the sea are the givers of life and livelihood on island of Ireland, but they can also be the takers of life and the scenes of tragedy. Like, Belmont River is the drowning place of both Gabriel and Portia, a meeting place both for Portia's affairs and for the incestuous relationship between Gabriel and Portia, Gabriel's haunting place. As the location of Gabriel's suicide, the river has a seductive and magnetic quality for Portia as 'an erotic and thanatotic channel' (Sihra, 13). The river is Portia's preferred location for her adulterous affair with Damus, her confessional outpouring to her aunt Maggie May, and is the location of her first sighting of her future husband, Raphael. Portia vividly

recollects her memories of the fateful day with her twin died and describes how the river is taking his life. Portia explains Maggie:

I know he was goin' to do it, planned to do it together, and at the last minute I got afraid and he just went on in and I called him back but he didn't hear me on account of the swell and just kept on wadin', and I'm standin' on the bank, right here, shouting' at him to come back and at the last second he turns think' I' m behind him, his face, Maggie May, the look on his face, and he tries to make the bank but the undertow do have him and a wave washes over him (240).

Carr states that Gabriel haunts Portia with his songs and his visible visitation. The element of Belmont River myth concerns Bel's rescue of the girl. In the Irish folktale, the river of god, Bel can be seen 'god of water', while the impaled witch is the folkloric 'river goddess'.

Thus, In *Portia Coughlan*, we find the witch and goddess connection in the Belmont River myth reflects this common folkloric connection between goddesses and bodies of water in Celtic tradition. Carr's all plays connect a watery landscape to the female protagonists. There have been many speculations about the water so prevalent in her settings. Carr states that the water is a source of healing, wisdom, and an entrance to the otherworld. Belmont River is located between Portia's property and the property of her father. It is not only a property boundary but also an emotional boundary between Portia's past and present lives. For instance, Gabriel was drowned in the Belmont River and his death is considered as an emotional death for Portia. Carr compares Portia's Coughlan to the tale of Beira, Queen of Winter. Throughout the play, Carr says that Portia can be found returning to the river for solace, respites, and reconnection with her lost brother.

The playwright clearly says that The Belmont River is the love place for Portia and Gabriel. All memories of their life are connected to the river. She visits river when she feel unhappy, frustrate, and tedious. The Belmont River is the only place which gives her the felling of relaxation. Portia asserts:

Oh I'm sure I'd live through what other folks calls holidays, but me mind'd be turning' on the Belmont River. Be wonderin' was it flowin' rough or smooth, was the bank muckey nor dry, was the salmon beginnin' their rowin' for the sea, was the frogs spawnin' the waterlilies, had the heron returned, be wonderin' all of these and a thousand other wonderin's that river washes over me (Carr207-8).

Futher, similar to Beira's imbibing of the waters of the *Well of Youth*, Portia and Gabriel's drinking of the waters of the Belmont River that in the play ends their lives, is a kind of rebirth out of the world, where they are misunderstood. Beira always visited the Island like Portia. This description of Beira is similar to the witch girl of Carr's myth, in that both women are feared. In associating Portia with both the witch girl of the myth and the goddess of the folktales, Carr says that they share a similar experience. Portia exhibits the anger of Beira through the venomous things she says about her children,

her husband, and generally those around her. Like Beira, she uses a very malicious and spiteful way for her family members. Most of the characters of the play are cautious around Portia and try to avoid her extreme anger, just as the characters of the Beira tale. Portia, like Beira, is generally always in a danger mood, with a biting wit and little patience for those around her.

Carr expresses the sociological, geographical and cultural significance and power of landscape to evoke feelings of belonging, ancestry and memory. Portia's strong affiliation with the natural world leaves her at odds with the human world. The tormented and world frustrated Portia feels such a deep connection to the history of her land that she alludes to her future incorporeality and forewarns her lover, Damus. Portia says her lover, Damus "I come here because I've always come here and I reckon I'll be comin' here long after I'm gone. I'll lie here when I'm a ghost and smoke ghost cigarettes and watch ye earthlin's goin' about yeer pointless days (2003)". In this paper, the troubled woman as outcast, the incestuous family, the brutal father, the haunting by a dead brother, the corrosive climate of the outcast woman's home.

Methods

This research paper deals with exploratory research method where it discusses problems and questions. It deals with qualitative research design because it concerns with human nature and behavior.

Conclusion

In the end of the paper, the result comes out that this play centers on the life of the title character, an Irish woman who is married with Raphael, but is unable to take care of her family due to an obsession with the tragic loss of her twin brother, Gabriel, who drowned in the nearby River Belmont. Portia is quite haunted by her brother, feels that she is being pulled into the spirit world and will die soon herself. Her relationship with her family, friends and the very colorful village characters, reveals a complex woman who, despite her woes, still manages to love, hate and laugh

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