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Betwixt and Between: Hester Swane as a Liminal Symbol of Irish Identity

This paper examines the character of Hester Swane in Marina Carr's By the Bog of Cats (1998) as a powerful liminal representation of the intricacies of Irish identity through cultural, historical, and social transitions. Drawing on Euripides' Medea and theoretical frameworks on liminality by Victor Turner and Michel Foucault, it investigates how Hester's life is suspended between past and present, tradition and modernity. The analysis will follow how Hester struggles to come to terms with her mother's abandonment, unpredictable landscapes, and social isolation and how they serve as manifestations of the broader Irish experiences. Hester's defiance reveals that liminality is not a transition but an ongoing condition that determines her agency, identity, and fate. Finally, the paper argues that Hester's tragic finale highlights the never-ending tension in Irish society, challenging notions of progress, belonging, and continuity of traditions.

Keywords: liminality, social change, Irish drama, tradition and modernity, *By the Bog of Cats*

Introduction

In *By the Bog of Cats* (1998), Marina Carr situates her play within a liminal space, bridging the past and present by reimagining and recontextualising the mythic and tragic frame of Euripides' *Medea* and introducing *Medea* as Hester Swane in the Irish midlands. Hester and *Medea* are

both abandoned by their men and rejected by society, yet they exist in cultures at very different temporal points in their respective histories. Carr, while focusing on the universality of Medea's fights, grounds Hester's in the reality of modern Ireland. This setting intertwines tradition and modernity, as well as realism and myth, establishing a realm where both Euripides' Medea and Carr's Hester coexist. Mary Trotter recognises a 'Yeatsian fascination with the transcendent, liminality, spirituality, myth, and the occult'¹ in Carr's work, emphasising the play's rootedness in thresholds—between worlds, identities, and times. *By the Bog of Cats* follows Hester Swane, a Traveller woman living in the bleak Bog of Cats, as she struggles to come to terms with her past and the betrayal of her lover, Carthage Kilbride, who is marrying a younger woman. Hester struggles to keep her home and maintain a connection with her daughter, Josie, as she grows increasingly desperate and isolated. The play tragically culminates when Hester, unable to see a future without her daughter, kills Josie and then takes her own life.

This essay examines the various ways in which the liminal spaces of Hester Swane—informed by Euripides' *Medea*—correspond with the transitional experiences of the Irish individual. The liminality Hester Swane symbolises positions her in a condition of marginalisation and weakness while going through her rites of passage. Not entirely existing in either the world she is from or the one she attempts to fit into, Hester becomes a displaced character. Her broken identity reflects the broader struggles the Irish face due to the overlap between cultural and personal identities, which are intertwined and constantly evolving. Irish dramatists, including Carr, recognise that identities are interwoven with actualities. They have consistently sought to reconcile the tension and fluid nature of their cultural heritage and the influences of modernity and tradition.

¹ TROTTER (2000: 168).

Hester's liminality

The first convergence in which *By the Bog of Cats* intersects with *Medea* is within adaptation studies. Julie Sanders describes adaptation as 'celebratory of the cooperative and collaborative model of creativity'.² In this collaborative space, both the original text and the adaptation engage with each other, stepping out of their original frames and blending elements from distinct cultural and temporal contexts. This exchange parallels anthropologist Victor Turner's argument in his 'Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality' that during periods of intense social change, some of the societal sacred objects and rituals emerge from the secrecy of lodges and become part of the public movement. Prophetic leaders employ them to rally the populace against invaders or rulers who threaten their cultural traditions.³ In other words, sacred rituals and deep-seated cultural practices dominate the plot in both *Medea* and *By the Bog of Cats*. When faced with deep individual crises and severe social changes, these elements emerge from the background and become central to their actions and struggles.

Secondly, Victor Turner further defines liminality in his 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage' as betwixt and between, neither here nor there, no longer a child and not yet an adult. During this period of transition between states, symbolic themes characteristically concern death and decomposition, or gestation and parturition, referring to the culturally defined person the initiate has been and will become. Because of the economy of symbolic reference, the opposed states – having been and the becoming – may be represented by a single object, act, or phrase.⁴

² SANDERS (2016: 6).

³ TURNER (1979: 470).

⁴ TURNER (1970: 96).

Turner describes the ritual preceding liminality as 'being initiated',⁵ a process involving separation from one's initial mindset, transitioning to a liminal space where the symbolic reference disintegrates, merging the old and new spaces. According to Michel Foucault, such spaces are heterotopias whence 'all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality'.⁶ Hester Swane's journey into the realm of liminality is not simply set in motion at the play's onset but rather commences long before that, with the abandonment of her mother during her childhood. This early event casts Hester into an 'in-between' space, where she is raised in a state of limbo, unable to connect to her past or establish her future. In her play, Carr deliberately introduces the bog, a place of fluid boundaries that 'dissolve[s] our myths and sterilize[s] the lyricism of our sentences'⁷ as Hester's place of birth to highlight its significance in Hester's rite of passage. The bog disintegrates both Hester's and the people of the bog's identities, in a space that is 'other', capable of juxtaposing multiple realities and treating them as a site of deviation and reflection.

The once-familiar Bog of Cats is now a heterotopia, a place of metamorphosis where Hester experiences a loss of identity and a distorted perception of time and space. Foucault describes heterotopias as 'capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible'.⁸ The bog has a physical and symbolic significance that collocates Hester's past with her estranged present. Although Hester had relocated to live with Carthage and they had welcomed their daughter Josie into the world, she still finds it difficult

⁵ Ibid. 95.

⁶ FOUCAULT – MISKOWIEC (1986: 24).

⁷ FOUCAULT (1994: 15)

⁸ FOUCAULT – MISKOWIEC (1986: 25).

to break free from the allure of the bog. In fact, she often finds herself drawn back to it during the nighttime while Carthage looks after their child.

Hester's profound bond with the bog is evident in her passionate conversation with Monica following her meeting with the enigmatic Ghost Fancier, as she tries to refute his prophecy of her death, Hester shouts:

Think yees all Hester Swane with her tinker blood is getting' no more than she deserves. Think yees all she's too many notions, built her life up from a caravan on the side of the bog. Think yees all she's taken a step above herself in gettin' Carthage Kilbride into her bed. Think yees all yees knew it'd never last.⁹

Later, Hester asserts herself as master of her liminal world and what it contains, she objects, 'I'm the one who chooses and discards, not him, and certainly not any of yees. And I'm not runnin' with me tail between me legs just because certain people wants me out of their way'.¹⁰ This act of defiance not only shows her resilience but also acknowledges the function of the bog as a space of transformation in which Hester reconstructs herself despite the social and individual chaos surrounding her.

Liminal or transitional spaces are often characterised by themes of 'death and decomposition, or gestation and parturition',¹¹ much like Foucault's interpretation of 'other spaces' like jails and cemeteries. He argues that cemeteries turned into 'other cities,' spaces segregated from the living, symbolising both the containing of death and life.¹² The bog serves as an analogy to such heterotopias, which reflect and negate so-

⁹ CARR (1998: 15).

¹⁰ Ibid. 16.

¹¹ TURNER (1970: 96).

¹² FOUCAULT – MISKOWIEC (1986: 25).

cietal norms, both within and outside the dominant order. At the same time, it carries within it memories of the past, buried bodies, and unresolved histories (Joseph's murder) while disturbing the present by refusing to comply with the logic of progress and stability. We see Hester Swane attempting to bury the dead black swan, which turns out also to be connected to the Ghost Fancier's prophecy of Hester's death. Carr foreshadows Hester's death in the first scene of the first act of the play to show the audience that death is only a part of transitioning; it is instead the state of the 'un-dead'¹³ enveloping Hester and the bog that matters. Hester becomes a transitional being where 'the structural "invisibility" of liminal *personae* has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified',¹⁴ dual beings in their nature.

Hester's presence embodies a state of ambiguity, placed on the edge of societal rejection because of her distinct roots, yet holding onto her Traveller lineage with devoted determination. Her state of liminality is evident, amongst many other incidents, in her determination not to leave the bog, even though the Ghost Fancier and the Cat Woman both prophesise that she will die or bring destruction to the bog and herself by the evening. The Cat Woman tells Hester, 'Dreamt ya were a black tarin motorin' through the Bog of Cats and, oh, the scorch off of this tarin and it blastin' by and all the bog was dark in your wake, ya even quenched the jack-a-lantern and I had to run from the burn. Hester Swane, you'll bring this place down by evenin''.¹⁵ This forewarning symbolises the inevitable connection between Hester's identity and the bog—a place of both refuge and doom. Through my argument, I propose that Hester's state of liminality peaks upon receiving the death warning from the Ghost Fancier. Within the limited one-day timeframe, she has the

¹³ TURNER (1970: 96).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ CARR (1998: 20).

opportunity to examine and reflect on her society. Turner argues that 'liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection'¹⁶ and Hester reflects on her society in that period only to realise that she's unable to change or integrate into her new reality; therefore, she commits suicide.

Before her tragic decision to commit suicide, during the ceremonial event of Carthage and Caroline's wedding, Hester confronts her society and questions their double standards. Upon Mrs. Kilbride's speech about the defined rules she always lived honouring and adhering to, Hester explicitly challenges Mrs. Kilbride: 'What rules are they? Teach them to me and I'll live by them. Yeese don't know what it's like, to be flung on the ashpit and you still live'.¹⁷ As Hester defiantly proclaims her refusal to abandon the bog, her curious question about the rules underscores her precarious position - caught between her past customs and the ambiguous future. Her explicit reference to being flung on the ashpit indicates her transformative status, which is shown in several examples throughout the play, trapped in a liminal state between destruction and survival. The source of her reluctance to embrace change lies in her deep sense of comfort within the bog's familiar surroundings coupled with her lingering anticipation of her absent mother. Hester's familiarity with the bog is apparent in her knowledge of it: 'I know every barrow and rivulet and bog hole of its nine square mile. I know where the best bog rosemary grows and the sweetest wild bog rue. I could lead yeese around the Bog of Cats in me sleep'.¹⁸ This close familiarity with the bog is not merely geographical but also emotional, as it becomes both her refuge and her jail, a place of deviation, according to Foucault. It is a realm she cannot leave, and within her intimate knowledge of it, Hester is unable to step across the threshold into a new world, reasserting her liminality.

¹⁶ TURNER (1970: 105).

¹⁷ CARR (1998: 55).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 56.

When Hester tries to embrace her new surroundings, she faces rejection in this new social circle, being pushed away due to her outsider status. Carthage tells her to go away and leave the bog, Mrs. Kilbride tells her, 'We'll burn ya out if we have to', Xavier Cassidy shouts, 'We've had enough of your ravin', Swane, so take yourself elsewhere and let us try to recoup these marred celebrations'.¹⁹ Carthage, Mrs. Kilbride, and Xavier's harsh remarks signify her lack of acceptance within their community. Struggling to fit in, Hester ultimately decides to confront Carthage and retreats to the chaotic but comforting confines of the bog. In the bog, she rediscovers her authentic self and finds again a sense of belonging. It is a place where she can be herself, 'People can "be themselves," it is frequently said, when they are not acting institutionalized roles'.²⁰ Hester defies her predetermined societal role and boldly pursues greater personal autonomy, rebelling against the confines of societal expectations. This act of defiance challenges the traditional notion of liminality, transforming it from a mere transition to a destination.

Her liminality is further highlighted through her oscillation between the behaviors of a fierce and a vulnerable woman. When examining the play and the shifts Hester undergoes—caught between asserting her roots and surrendering to reality—we can observe a recurring pattern of transitions. At the onset of the play, during her conversation with Monica, Hester fiercely asserts, 'If he thinks he can go on treatin' me the way he's been treatin' me, he's another thing comin''.²¹ During her first encounter with Carthage, she declares, 'You were nothin' before I put me stamp on ya and/ ya'll be nothin' again I'm finished with ya.' However, her tone soon shifts to that of a frightened woman: 'Tell me what to do, Carthage, and I'll do it, anythin' for you to come back...anythin'.

¹⁹ Ibid. 57.

²⁰ TURNER (1970: 101).

²¹ CARR (1998: 16).

Carthage, anythin', and I'll do it if it's in me power'.²² Additionally, her intrusion at Carthage's and Caroline's wedding is marked by an indifferent attitude and vicious remarks; she shouts, 'Yees have taken everythin' from me,' but then pleads with Carthage for mercy, saying, 'Just let me stay in the house, Carthage. I won't bother anywan if yees'd just lave me alone'.²³ This shift highlights Hester's internal conflict as she moves from a position of power to one of subjugation.

Her swinging between a fierce and a weak woman is further shown when she goes back to the bog and fulfills her vicious war against Carthage's cattle and property, boldly declaring:

Well, Carthage, ya think them were only idle threats I made? Ya think I can be flung in a bog hole like a bag of newborn pups? Let's see how ya like this — Ya hear that sound? Them's your cattle howlin'. Ya smell that smell? That's your forty calves roastin'. I tied them all in and flung diesel on them. And the house, I burnt the bed and the whole place went up in flames. I'd burn down the world if I'd enough diesel — Will somewan not come and save me from meself before I go and do worse.²⁴

But afterward, when she is about to kill little Josie, her maternal instincts awaken, and she experiences remorse for what she is about to do. Hester tries to comfort Josie first. Josie tells Hester, 'I'd be watchin' for ya all the time 'long the Bog of Cats. I'd be hopin' and waitin' and prayin' for ya to return,' which prompts Hester to reply, 'Alright, alright! Shhh! (*Picks her up*) It's alright, I'll take ya with me, I won't have ya as I was, waitin' a lifetime for somewan to return, because they don't, Josie, they don't. It's alright. Close your eyes'.²⁵ Her oscillation between being a savage

²² Ibid. 34.

²³ Ibid. 55–6.

²⁴ Ibid. 59.

²⁵ Ibid. 78.

slayer who kills her daughter and a concerned mother fearful that her daughter will suffer the same fate of longing further reveals her liminality. Trapped between guilt and fear, she struggles to reconcile these opposing forces within herself. This internal conflict not only highlights her deep emotional turmoil but also underscores the tragic inevitability of her actions as she tries to protect Josie from the same despair that has consumed her own life.

The liminal Irish identity

‘Writing about contemporary Irish society has become a problem of gauging a never-ending transition’,²⁶ as Tom Boland notes. The deep divisions between the South and North of Ireland appeared to have ended with the signing of the peace agreement in 1998, and critical issues like gender, sex, ethnicity, and the like took their place.²⁷ Following Ireland’s globalisation initiatives in the 1970s, this change became increasingly evident, leaving the country constantly changing as a result of ongoing challenges to the status quo. The globalisation efforts of that period were characterised by ‘a raising of consciousness about civil and human rights, feminism, environmentalism and disease eradication’,²⁸ among other notions that began to shake the country’s conservative social fabric and introduce liberal alternatives. Thus, Ireland eventually became more attentive to global influences, and its cultural engagement gained even greater visibility. As Casey states, ‘the 1970s saw the beginnings of multiculturalism and postmodernism. Writers like Alvin Toffler (Future Shock) believed the change to a post-industrial society caused much stress and disorientation’.²⁹

²⁶ BOLAND (2010: 68).

²⁷ *Ibid.* 67.

²⁸ CASEY (2010).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Another event that factored in Ireland's global engagement was joining the EU in 1973; this eased trade between Ireland and European countries; and, therefore, contributed to the cultural enrichment of the country. The EU not only sought to involve Ireland more culturally, but it also attempted to address the enduring Irish British conflict. In 1984, the European Parliament took the first steps towards resolving the on-going conflict by authorising the Haagerup report. This historic report proposed a one-state solution, indicating the EU's dedication to finding a resolution. The EU sought to resolve this conflict by integrating identities, echoing Victor Turner's concept of a liminal space where identities blend, rebuild, and cooperate with one another. Katy Hayward argues that 'as the border became the locus and the focus of Irish/British differentiation after 1920, so nationalist/unionist disagreement as to the border's legitimacy became fundamental to individuals' political, economic and social identity'.³⁰ The differences in perspective between states started to fade away following the ratification of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, leading to a stronger sense of unity and shared aims between the two nations.

However, Hester Swane, emblematic of the Irish individual, struggles to acclimate herself to these newly established surroundings. Her encounter with the ghost of her murdered brother, Joseph, implies that the state of Hester, the 'state of the ritual subject (the "passenger") is ambiguous',³¹ existing simultaneously in both realms, the dead and the living. Caught between her previous, dying identity and her emerging reality, Hester battles to enable these conflicting identities to coexist. This vague tension places her in a liminal space, unable to wholly belong to either world. As a result, her sense of self is fractured, further deepening her disconnection from reality.

³⁰ HAYWARD (2006: 264).

³¹ TURNER (1970: 94).

Richard Kearney proposes that the solution to such conflicts might necessitate 'a new configuration of identities' and contends accordingly,

Contemporary Ireland is in historic transition and calls for new modes of self-definition in keeping with an overall move towards a more federal and regional Europe. In the new European dispensation, nation-states will, arguably, become increasingly anachronistic. Power will be disseminated upwards from the state to transnational government and downwards to subnational government. In this context, future identities may, conceivably, be less nation-statist and more local and cosmopolitan.³²

The endeavor to assimilate Ireland into a mosaic of existing blended identities reflects on societal norms and scrutinises them. Turner calls liminality a 'nay to all positive structural assertions, but in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise'.³³ Subsequently, as Hester delves deeper into this transitional space and scrutinises the customs and conventions of her society, she is met with fresh prospects. However, these newfound opportunities ultimately drive her down a path of ruin, as her actions spiral out of control by the end of the play.

It is also important to note that in a society like the bog, 'the only debate is how to best maintain that community, not to change it or to progress on to a new state',³⁴ but change is inevitable. The Catholic Irish have a strong desire to maintain their identity and resist change; they are continuously searching for the remnants of Ireland's rich history, 'at the same time the media, particularly TV, also began to open up new hori-

³² KEARNEY (2002: 13).

³³ TURNER (1970: 97).

³⁴ DINGLEY (2006: 265).

zons and change attitudes, tastes, and culture. New ideas and a general revolt against the old engulfed many western societies in the 1960s'.³⁵ This state of liminality, which emerged globally following the Industrial Revolution, was further intensified by the struggles of colonialism.

By 1998, The Good Friday Agreement represented a crucial milestone for Northern Ireland, signaling the end of a long-standing armed conflict. Nevertheless, according to Lorenzo Bosi and Gianluca De Fazio, it did not fully address the fundamental issues and divides that had fueled the conflict in the first place. In their astute observations, they note that the agreement may have merely silenced the guns rather than mending the deep-rooted tensions. They argue that 'the Good Friday Agreement (1998) finally created a "devolved government in a power-sharing executive supported from both communities". However, this has not signified a complete solution to the conflict'.³⁶ Carr's powerful work serves as a reminder of the enduring aftermath of the conflict. As we watch the tragic finale of Hester Swane taking the lives of her daughter and herself, we are confronted with a haunting parallel to the unresolved tensions simmering underneath the surface of this divided and colonised society.

Conclusion

Marina Carr's play thoroughly explores the theme of liminality through the complex character of Hester Swane. Hester serves as a symbol of the ever-changing Irish individual within a society undergoing constant shifts. Drawing inspiration from Victor Turner's concept of liminality, Hester's existence is characterised by a continuous state of in-betweenness, stemming from her abandonment as a child and her upbringing

³⁵ Ibid. 268.

³⁶ BOSI-DE FAZIO (2017: 19).

on the bog. The bog, once a familiar and comforting landscape, transforms into a heterotopia, serving as a physical manifestation of Hester's own metamorphosis and struggles with identity and societal expectations. As Ireland underwent significant social changes, including the effects of globalisation and colonisation, Hester faced the daunting task of finding her place in this rapidly evolving society. Caught in a liminal state on the edge of social acceptance, she struggled to adapt to the new reality that had taken hold. The impact of trauma on seemingly peaceful communities was amplified, showing how the fragile peace brought by the Good Friday Agreement failed to address fundamental issues. This harrowing act serves as a haunting reminder of the underlying tensions and unresolved aftermath of conflict, societal shifts, and the complexities that remain long after peace is declared. Through the character of Hester Swane, Carr's play serves as a commentary on the enduring consequences of conflict and transformation.

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