Teenagers' "Gender Trouble" and Trickster Aesthetics in Gina Moxley's Danti Dan

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Abstract: *Recently a type of drama has emerged in Ireland with characters representing isolated social groups that were overlooked or considered as marginal. It includes plays with teenagers as protagonists, conceived by writers who seem to be inspired by the realization that the treatment of, and possibilities for children and youth are indicators of a society's moral health. Christina Reid's* Joyriders *(1986),* Brownbread *(1986) by Roddy Doyle, and Enda Walsh's* Disco Pigs *(1996) are a few notable examples.* Danti Dan*, Gina Moxley's 1995 play is set in rural Ireland during the summer of 1970, with the parents not yet conscious of the fact that their children respond to a rapidly changing world and its sexual challenges in ways very different from the traditional patterns.*

The present paper applies the trickster aesthetics as its main theoretical position, to create a discursive space for the investigation of a set of issues surrounding and underpinning the central concern of the play, the "gender trouble" of teenagers in the particular Irish context which has a still largely patriarchal structure. As a parallel, the analysis relies on the trickster signification in Toni Morrison's novel Sula *(1973), deploys the feminist psychology of Nancy Chodorow, and draws from Teresa Lauretis's discussion of gender representation in "Technologies of Gender."*

Context and Introduction

Charting the three main trends in the history of twentieth century Irish drama Fintan O'Toole argues that by our time Ireland itself has ceased to be "one shared place" (57), but is regarded as one stratified and plural. This changing view seems to be catalytic

to the evolution of a type of drama in which the characters represent relatively isolated social groups that have been overlooked or considered as marginal before, for instance immigrants, class, gender, or other minorities identifiable by profession, status, or age. Some recent plays choose teenagers as their protagonists, and expand the scope of Irish drama through negotiating the space available to children and young people as an indication of the society's moral functioning. Using this particular focus, the plays offer a considerable variety of situations in which the interaction between groups or individuals so far neglected in the theatre, and their social environment becomes highlighted and problematized. Christina Reid's *Joyriders* (1986) addresses sixteen- to eighteen year-old youngsters' common vulnerability and lack of adequate economic prospects in the Troubles-ridden context of Northern Ireland; *Brownbread* (1986) by Roddy Doyle presents how a few teenage boys abduct and hold a priest hostage by way of rebellion. Set in the uninspiring milieu of a run-down Cork neighbourhood, Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs* (1996) portrays the fragility of two seventeen year-olds' emotional relationship.

In *Danti Dan* (1995), actress Gina Moxley's first play, all the five characters are young people in their teens. The whole action is set outdoors, on and near a bridge with a low parapet, signifying the characters' transitory space between childhood and adulthood, reinforced also by the quotation from Derek Mahon's poem "Girls on the Bridge," which serves as an epigraph. Apart from its overt symbolism, Moxley's choice of this outside location for her drama about teenagers evokes a sense of freedom but also a measure of insecurity, due to the absence of a home in terms of shelter which, according to Hanna Scolnicov, can be "redefined as the child's space" in contemporary women playwrights' work "concerned with the well-being of children" (159). The emotional homelessness of Moxley's youngsters is further enhanced by the fact that no adults appear on stage whom they could rely on for help or guidance. In rural Ireland, where the action takes place during the summer of 1970, most parents were as yet completely unaware of the intensity with which their children responded to a fast changing world and its diverse challenges, including the consequences of the sexual revolution, and continued to presume unsophisticated innocence and expect "no accountability" as Moxley remarks in her afterword to the play (73).

Left to their own resources, the teenage characters of *Danti Dan* become entangled in various sexual activities and the unfolding story climaxes in a catastrophic event. Sixteen-year old Ber(nadette), who is going out with eighteen-year-old Noel, soon must discover her unwanted pregnancy. Her younger sister, Dolores is friends with an uncommonly intelligent thirteen year-old girl nicknamed Cactus, who eagerly tries to involve her in the sexual games she initiates. The fifth of the cast is fourteen-year-old Dan, a mentally retarded boy with a functioning age of eight who plays cowboy, and can easily be manipulated. Cactus and Dan emerge as central characters: in spite of their well-marked intellectual difference, they both experience isolation and loneliness which gradually locks them in a fatal connection. Bribing the boy to perform whatever she wants, Cactus uses him as an accomplice to satisfy her sexual curiosity and, finally,

enraged because Dan no longer keeps their secret, pushes the capping stone off the pillar of the bridge where he is standing. Witnessed by all the others, Dan falls into the river with a thud and drowns there.

A notable parallel to the strategically gendered tragic outcome of Moxley's drama can be traced in the contemporary ethnic American novel. The crucial early scene of Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973), also set in summer, has twelve-year old bosom friends Sula and Nel, for whom "the new theme" (55) is the discovery of men, watch boys at swimming, and become intoxicated by the lushness of nature in the forest. In this context of sexual awakening, by an act both performative and transformative, the excited Sula helps a small boy, nicknamed Chicken Little for his awkwardness, to climb high up on a tree and gain satisfaction and pride through the adventure. Then, grabbing him by the hands, she swings him outward, and while he is shrieking in "frightened joy" (60) she releases his hands to let his body fly in the air, only to see him, together with Nel, fall and sink in the water of the nearby river in the next minute.

Re-Gendering Victimization: Enter the Trickster

In Moxley's drama it is a girl who hurts and humiliates a boy, and even causes his death in the process of, and as a result of, adolescent sexual activities. John Fairleigh, a critic of the play rightly observes that here the playwright "reverses the gender stereotypes usually associated with stories of agressive sexuality" (xi), by contesting the conventional, male representations of the issue, in which the girl's body becomes the site of victimization. For the latter kind of treatment Frank Wedekind's *Frühlings Erwachen* constitutes a classical example which, in 1891, shocked the audience with its dramatization of the highly unorthodox subject of uncontrolled adolescent sexuality, entailing the death of a girl caused by an unprofessionally performed abortion. Revolutionary because of its theme, yet Wedekind's portrayal can be challenged by applying the propositions of Teresa De Lauretis about gender representation. Admitting the influence of Michel Foucault's theorizing of sexuality, she claims that gender is (a) representation, it is constructed through representation, therefore is the product of various "institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life" (2). To select the girl as victim in *Frühlings Erwachen* was in accordance with mainstream ideologies, ingrained social stereotypes, and a range of other aspects of the ethos of the author's time, which determined the ways that femininity was constructed/represented.

Moxley has chosen a different path, in that she experiments with the representation of gender in *Danti Dan*. By introducing new configurations into the portrayal of young people, the play subverts the expectations that conventional narratives about the subject of gender relations tend to evoke. The dramatic strategy she deploys is best assessed in terms of Jill Dolan's formulation:

> Theatre might become more of a workplace than a showplace. Our socially constructed gender roles are inscribed in our language and in our bodies. The stage, then, is a proper place to explore gender ambiguity, not to expunge it cathartically from society but to play with, confound, and deconstruct gender categories. If we stop considering the stage as a mirror of reality, we can use it as a laboratory [...]. (Senelick 7-8)

Considering the theatre as one of the "social technologies" (De Lauretis 1987, 2) that produce gender through ways of representation and self-representation, the individual character of a play can be discussed in view of his or her relation to the process.

The reversal of the stereotype of the victimized teenager as a girl is reinforced through Moxley's investing Cactus, the young female victimizer, with certain traits of the trickster figure. The present article applies the trickster aesthetics as its main theoretical position, to create a discursive space for the investigation of a set of issues surrounding and underpinning the central concern of the play, the "gender trouble" of teenagers in the particular Irish context which has a still largely patriarchal structure. As in the Irish cultural tradition the trickster has been male and adult; the choice of a female teenager for a similar function underscores the subversive nature of the strategy. On the one hand, the girl's trickster features will be seen against the author's native heritage that Alan Harrison's book, *The Irish Trickster* analyzes. The parallels between Cactus and Sula, on the other hand, facilitate the consideration of Moxley's character as a dramatic realization of the postmodern trickster, recurrent in the fiction of contemporary American ethnic women writers like Morrison, Louise Erdrich, and Maxine Hong Kingston, as discussed by Jeanne Rosier Smith's study *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*. According to Smith, the use of trickster figures like Sula makes sense when "embedded in a cultural context" (xii). Though without ethnic signification, Moxley's drama provides a unique context for the revitalization of the trope, insofar as Cactus is member of a kind of minority culture in her society, namely of youth.

The trickster character in literature is usually presented as an outsider who does not fully belong, refuses to conform, and, therefore, incites and mobilizes certain feelings and attitudes in his/her community. In the Irish context, where the tolerance of otherness is still relatively fragile, the outsider's anomalous status can serve to expose the nature of individual reactions, and the underlying communal values for scrutiny. Unmistakably, Cactus bears the mark of being an outsider on several levels. Her deliberate eccentricities manifest themselves even in her looks and clothing, since she has the kind of "ragged appearance" that Harrison attributes to the trickster (77), entering in the third scene "*tomboyishly dressed, [with] sticky out hair*" (7) and later "*in her usual duds, and wearing sunglasses*" (37) beside Dolores who, as required by the occasion, is wearing her Sunday's best. Moreover, like that of Sula, Cactus' behaviour shows disregard if not overt contempt for most social values (see Smith 115). On her first appearance in the play she busies

herself by carefully arranging slices of ham along the parapet of the bridge, as if in mockery of the practice that the grocery shop of the village is eager to sell out the meat goods because of the uncommonly hot weather. In addition, Cactus is treated as an outsider right from the beginning: the first reference to her contains Ber's abusive label "that snobby little bitch" (7), and the wish that she and Dolores cease to talk to each other. Even the two teenagers closest to her own age, Dan and Dolores, form a party that excludes her: she arrives at the bridge in scene seven to find that "*They shoot at her from either side*" (30) for a joke. These details involve unsubstantial prejudice, as well as an amount of insensitivity toward Cactus as a person.

Cactus' difference must be, to a considerable degree, bound up with the loss of her mother, which corresponds to the twelve-year old Sula's disappointing experience of overhearing her mother say: "[...] I love Sula. I just don't like her" (57). While never mentioning her father with whom she lives, Cactus, in her turn, remembers her mother's figure a couple of times, once mentioning that she "didn't want me" (21), which suggests that she probably never got emotional support from her. In want of a reliable and caring mother figure or at least the memory of having had one in the past, both girls' female socialization can be seen as meaningfully deviating from the ordinary process that Nancy Chodorow studies in which women are "initially brought up in a feminine world, with mothers seemingly powerful and prestigious, a world in which it is desirable to acquire a feminine identity" (41). The feminine training of Sula and Cactus primarily just to "be" like most other women remains, thus, incomplete, and they appear to wish to retain the "natural inclination" of their early childhood to "do" like men, create, "risk their lives, have projects," in the manner that Simone de Beauvoir distinguishes the two contrary positions (qtd. in Chodorow 33). They embody restless characters who have no reverence for qualities like loyalty, acceptance, and motherly caring for the weaker.

Ostensibly existing on the margin of her social group, Cactus assumes the liminality and spirit of wandering attributed to the trickster figure, which gains visual representation in the drama. Able to move between spaces and levels with uninhibited freedom, she favours to occupy or cross threshold-like passageways and territories, climbing through the gate that leads from the bridge to the riverside and the cornfields, or perching herself on its capping stone. Broken and dangerously loose, the stone signifies the link between her precarious situation and, as she implies in her final denial of responsibility for Dan's death, the County Council's neglect to have replaced it, which she summarizes by the judgement that "Something was bound to happen" (70). Her capacity to transcend also the boundaries of time in trickster fashion as discussed by Harrington (25) is indicated by her lack of concern about time. She does not allow herself to be confined by a schedule of social duties, in opposition to the other characters whose conspicuous obsession with time derives from the deep-seated sense of obligation to observe the rules and expectations of the surrounding culture. Ber, Dolores, and Dan frequently check their own or someone else's watch, so as not to be late for their respective occupations and programs, even when it means just having the afternoon tea in the

family circle. Cactus' professed lack of hunger at teatime (8), so unlike a teenager, invites being interpreted in terms of Lilian R. Furst's consideration of the signifying potential of disorderly eating habits. It seems to function as "a vehicle for self-assertion as a rebellion against a dominant ethos unacceptable to [her]," and reveal the compulsion to "exert pressure on others" (Furst 1992, 5), which becomes more and more manifest in the girl's behaviour.

Cactus embodies the paradox of being simultaneously heroic or powerful, and liable to be degraded into a scapegoat, an aspect of the trickster pointed out by Smith (1997, 22). The unwavering belief in her own unique power: "I'm like God, I see everything" (21) enables her to gain influence and control over Dolores and Dan. In initiating and organizing intricate sexual games that involve the other two, she appropriates the skills of the director, a role in drama Sarah Wright links with the trickster, who tries to imitate the power of God (25). When Dolores has brought a sentimental novel with her it is Cactus who takes the lead and reads out the detailed account of a fictional couple's amorous encounter and embrace from the book with great relish to arouse themselves. She also invents new rules for playing poker with Dan, which call for the performance of a range of sexual acts at certain stages of the game. Despite their unease and fear, probably even hatred of Cactus, the other two adolescents succumb to her commands, both lacking the stamina to assert themselves as her equal. Dolores, because she is dominated by the older women in her family, and Dan, because his vulnerability is further aggravated by the fantasies Noel feeds him. Unemployed, the older boy is lounging about bored and hungry for adventures, or at least for talking of imagined ones, and incites the mentally handicapped teenager to cherish the outdated dream of emigrating to America: "Maybe the two of us should fuck off out west together Dan, what do you think, huh? Saloons bursting with young ones called Lulu, their tits falling out of their frocks" (25). Believing in the attainability of this glamorous prospect, Dan is ready to do anything for its fulfillment.

The power of Cactus is shown at its height in a carnivalesque scene where she reverses Dan's solitary cowboy game by riding on the boy's back and slapping him on the bottom with the rope he had been using as a lasso, then dances around him as a kind of prey. Dan's subjection is brought into focus by mentioning his body parts in a way of fragmentation, with special emphasis on his nose, an important site of corporeal openness to outside effects. Clearly, the boy's body functions as "the vessel for domination" in the scene which collapses sexual desire and violence as a characteristic of the carnival, to borrow from Wright's observations (111-12). Yet the celebratory nature of the carnival deriving from Cactus' absolute power over the boy is disturbed by a touch of anxiety and hysteria, the corollary of the breaking of boundaries and moral taboos by force. Under the pressure of her commands and threats, the vulnerable and simple-minded boy consents to act out her scenario of kissing as well as fumbling each other now in the open and no longer under the bridge in secret, but his reaction is just revulsion from her body:

> CACTUS. [...] What are you afraid of? I told you, everyone does what I tell them to do. Did you forget? Hmmm? Did you? Come on, I haven't got all summer you know. Do it Danti-dan.
> *He kisses her, his arms stiffly by his sides. She thumps him to make him more active. [...] She gropes in his pockets and down his trousers. Dan starts coughing and breaks away.*
> DAN. I'm suffocating. (53)

Inversion and disorder do not evoke here the benign character of the carnival understood in the Bakhtinian sense; the boy as the object of uninhibited as well as cruel mockery and insults does not represent any authority figure, but one definitely marginalized by his society on account of his mental backwardness (see Morris 22). Whereas disruptive of rules and sanctified customs, the carnivalesque action in Moxley' play, as part of the trickster aesthetic, manages to foreground and give expression to a cluster of contradictory feelings and sensations like pleasure, disappointment, ambivalence, humiliation, as well as pain, latently present in the gender relations of the teenager community.

Regarding the negative side of the paradox informing Cactus' trickster character, in the both restricted and restricting cultural milieu the mysterious deviance of the girl tends to provoke her peers to blame her for (mostly) imagined harms and evils. Ber's case is telling in this respect: stepping on a sizeable bundle that she finds lying at her foot, she takes fright because the object reminds her of the carcass of a discarded and abandoned baby. On having learnt that the suspicious-looking bundle contains just Cactus' swimming suit and towel, the older girl, suffering from bad conscience because she already senses her own pregnancy, vents her anger on the younger one without a thought: "It's after putting the heart crossways on me. [...] I'm in no humour now. What's she doing leaving her togs here, stupid bitch. I wouldn't be surprised if she did it on purpose to scare the lard out of me" (14). Apart from pointing to the psychological roots, and to both inconsiderate and biased routines of scapegoat formation, this incident of the play serves to bring into focus a disturbing phenomenon of rural Irish life continuing well into the 1970s and 1980s, as testified by the notorious discovery and concomitant media representations of two secretly murdered infants in county Kerry.

Rhetorical Agency and Cultural Critique

Smith contends that "tricksters are not only characters, they are also rhetorical agents," and their "linguistic operation has serious ideological implications" (14) or "signals a cultural critique of the most radical kind," while being central to their strategy of resistance (2, 14, 16, 155). An inquiry into the idiosyncrasies of Cactus' discourse and style finds them permeated with both subtle and distinct manifestations of this aspect of the trickster positionality. Moxley has her employ subversive strategies to mock the

linguistic routines of the other characters, which are shaped and influenced by the inculcated complacencies of the mainstream culture and its worldview.

In general, Dan's retardation and vulnerability are not paid due attention by the teenagers, except for the cliched phrase "Ah God love him" (8, 41) that Dolores keeps on repeating. Cactus ventures to ridicule its meaningless irrelevance by imitating the other girl: "You sound like your Granny, 'sure gawney love him' " (8). The parody here targets the practice of responding to the handicapped state of a person in a way that does not seem to have changed for generations, despite the rapid changes in the other, mainly material aspects of life. Abandoned to do whatever he chooses as long as he does not harm himself or his environment, the treatment Dan suffers in this community is acutely summarized by Noel's stigmatizing the boy as "mental" (27) because of his strangeness. While apparently neglected and ignored as a person, the boy is subject to certain social obligations imposed on him by his parents, whose constrictive nature is ruthlessly unmasked by another of Cactus' ingenious turns of language in the following:

> DAN. I have to get Trigger [his imaginary horse] and go home. I have to go in for my tea.
> CACTUS. You don't have to do anything Danti-dan, except die (44).

By the same stroke, Cactus' insight complicates her trickster function in that it presents the girl as a "potential visionary" due to her "dissociation from the social fabric," to borrow from Smith's discussion of *Sula* (119).

As a rhetorical agent Cactus demonstrates uncommon concern for precise wording as well as sophisticated phrasing, which offers a sharp contrast to the careless slang expressions, grammatical errors or even vulgarities frequently occurring in the other characters' talk. In the following exchange Cactus dares even to correct Noel. Though she is evidently right, she earns only a rude retort from him to silence her, as his manly pride could by no means allow him to give credence to the superiority of a girl with regard to the use of language, the tool of patriarchal authority:

> NOEL. You should go on away in home girl and take them togs with you.
> CACTUS. Those togs. Not them togs, those togs.
> NOEL. Watch your fucking lip you, I'm warning you. (16)

Another scene places Cactus' correction of Dolores' misuse in the context of 1970s Ireland, allegedly less "permissive in sexual matters than other Western societies" (Greene 1994, 365), where girls are expected to carefully guard their virginity until marriage. Nevertheless, highly paradoxically, the teenagers appear to be misled or left ignorant about basic questions of women's healthcare:

> DOLORES: Use tampoons.
> CACTUS: Tampons, isn't it?

BER. Mammy'd kill me if she caught me with Tampax.
CACTUS. Why?
DOLORES. 'Cause you are not a virgin anymore after them or something like that. (23)

Here the off-stage mother's implied attitude calls attention to the parents' responsibility. The family, considered to be the "the primary social context [...] given pride of place in the Irish Constitution" (Greene 1994, 357), is shown by Moxley as having become disfunctional, unable to offer sufficient emotional and intellectual support for the teenagers. Ber and Dolores mention their mother as an agent of authority, who expects proper behaviour and obedience. Her vigilant control of the children is complemented by the father's clatters to remind them of domestic rules and requirements whenever he judges it appropriate. In this respect, Moxley's play harks back to the dual focus of Wedekind's *Frühlings Erwachen*, insofar as it also contains allusions to the conservativism and hypocrisy of both the parents and the school system. Miss McInerney, a teacher of the local school is said to have difficulties when referring to sex, which signals the traditional Irish evasiveness about the subject of intimate relations going hand-in-hand with the lack of adequate, let alone progressive sexual education for adolescents, since it "is not an official feature of the primary or secondary school curriculum" (Greene 1994, 365).

In addition to her linguistic manoeuvres that stir up some vital and critical aspects of individual discursive practices as they are entrenched in a world of fossilized customs and patriarchal ideologies, Cactus is also the character who refuses to keep girls' secrets according to convention. Unwilling to promote hypocritical behaviour in the interest of keeping a boyfriend, when Noel joins their company she casually blurts out that Ber is in the habit of talking about their plans of marriage to other people, and has even a mock engagement ring hanging from her neck underneath her dress. Moreover, she hints at the so far tactfully concealed suspicion of Ber's pregnancy in front of the boy. These revelations infuriate Noel first to verbal, then to physical abuse, and put Ber on the defensive to the extent that she starts begging him not to be cross with her. For Cactus the erupting conflict of the two qualifies as just a "good hack," and Noel "a gutty boy" (52), their relationship being, at least to a great part, based on lies and pretensions.

In Harrison's view "the erotic play on language" constitutes one of the typical elements of the traditionally male trickster discourse (82-83). Cactus' penchant for verbal games and gimmicks involves the varied use of word plays, and the inspired concoction of puns, which demonstrate her joyful revelling in the possibilities of language to allude to sexuality and gender configurations in unusual ways, turning conventional attitudes to these on their head in the meantime. The lines below from the girls' conversation points to Cactus' ability to blur the boundaries between the terrains of fear and sexual experiences, suggesting that they may actually overlap:

BER. You give me the willies sometimes, you do.

CACTUS. I thought it was Noel was giving you the willies.
DOLORES. That's a good one. Never thought of it like that.

Cactus's pun on gender alternatives, "Lesbe friends and go homo" elicits a response from Dolores which, with a tinge of derision in it reduces the creative ambiguity of the phrase to a one-dimensional, simplifying interpretation: "Haha, very funny. You think you're it don't you" (38). The girls' exchange lends a particular edge to the embedded critique of the limits of the culture whose values underwrite Dolores' indignation. The playful "confusion in gender" such a pun may involve is not recognized by her, neither does she appreciate its potential "to reach out and complicate the smooth face of binary oppositions," to deploy the terms which appear in Wright's discussion of the stylistic means of riddling difference (102).

Androgyny: Sexual Excesses and Crossing the Boundaries of Gender

The liminality of the character of Cactus is present also in her androgyny, an alleged feature of the trickster, which facilitates the character's mastering as well as crossing the boundaries of both gender roles and prescribed sexual behaviour, as interpreted in Smith's discussion (xii). Cactus practises the notorious sexual freedom of the Irish trickster (see Harrington 26) first with a girl, her reluctant friend Dolores, then with the childish Dan as a male partner, inventing more and more daringly licentious forms and games of bodily contact. Her "unrestricted sexuality" makes Cactus resemble Morrison's Sula, who "recognizes no common morality and no social boundaries, asks people rude questions" (Smith 118) and, most importantly, switches from one sexual partner to another without feeling of shame, and the least consideration for the human consequences, even when they affect her best friend, Nel. As in the case of Sula, Cactus' socially unacceptable and iconoclastic sexual behaviour, which falls well within the trickster paradigm, develop from her personal experiences. Significantly in this respect, she proves to be a keen and sensitive observer of the gender roles as performed by the other characters. De Lauretis's view that gender is the representation of a set of social relations, therefore it is " [...] a primary instance of ideology" (9), provides a framework to delineate the broader implications of her peers' attitudes for Cactus.

Granted no space to have its normal privacy in the society since the lovers are not married yet, Noel and Ber's sexual activities take place in the open, usually on the nearby cornfields, therefore more or less on display for the eyes of the younger characters. On the whole, their relationship enacts a kind of gender representation fitting the conventional patterns of a fundamentally patriarchal society. During their first encounter on stage, witnessed by the hiding Cactus, the boy urges the girl to have bodily contact: "put your hand in me pocket there a minute. [...] The front one, you fucking eejit" (13). Instinctively, Ber takes the inferior position by accepting the rude label uttered in his

fury over her own clumsiness. In her turn, she fantasizes about the engagement ring she wishes they will soon buy, and wonders where the wedding reception should be held.

Noel is more than eager to construct himself as the irresistible, *macho* type male, who attracts any woman, and can conquer all female hearts in his environment. Manipulating Cactus' alert *voyeurism*, his manhood derives satisfaction from deliberately arousing her:

> [...] Cactus watches Ber and Noel as they approach.
> CACTUS. Oh God. He has her bra open. That's... oh God... look... Dan, Dan?
> *She continues to watch them. It's clear that Noel is doing this for Cactus's benefit.*
> (29)

What further sharpens the adolescent girl's curiosity is that Noel's exchanges with her abound in ambiguities that sexualize her self as well as commodify her body, while they do not fail to provoke her imagination either. The addresses "And look at you, two fucking blackberries up your jumper" (15), and "you little prick teaser" (27) from his mouth effectively tell on his attitude toward her. At another point of the action Cactus asks Noel a question, but he just tickles her, complementing the unmistakable gesture with a remark which carries the tone of both patronizing contempt and depersonalization: "She's very fucking funny this one, isn't she?" (48).

The fact that Noel considers the female partner as a sexual object and unquestionably inferior to him as male in a relationship is well demonstrated by his reaction when he hears about Ber's pregnancy. Tellingly, Noel employs a style and vocabulary similar to the one in which he refers to the accident that has recently happened to his dog, whom he chose to name Naked Lady, woman and dog being of the same category for him. His disdain for the wounded and obviously suffering animal summed up in the abusive phrase "poxy dog," he comments on the misadventure: "Stupid fucking cunt, got her leg caught in the trap [...] only fit for the Chinese place [...] Sweet and sour naked lady and chips" (48-49). Yet the news about Ber expecting their baby fuels his rage even more, and he instinctively takes the view that the girl must have conceived a child on purpose, to hook him for a husband. Feeling outmanoeuvred, he assaults the girl: "You lying little pox bottle. [...] Even if you are [pregnant], don't think I'm marrying any ol' flah bag who's after getting herself in trouble" (51). He denigrates both dog and woman through applying the label of a disease, pox, which grossly disfigures the skin and renders the patients' looks ugly and despicable. The two are not merely objects for the misogynist Noel but also abjects who, considered in light of Julia Kristeva, insult his superego with their acts of corruption and misleading (15): the dog has failed to win the Bitch Classic competition for him, and the girl's condition imposes unexpected duties on him.

Ber's femininity is represented in such a way that it embodies the complementary opposite to Noel's masculinity as "its extrapolation," underpinned by "the patriarchal or male-centered frame of mind," to deploy De Lauretis' terminology (14). On the one

hand, she allows him to dominate and bully her as long as marriage to him is in sight, since she "Can't wait to move out, to give up work" (22). Noel, in the meantime, envisages their prospective marital life with himself as a domestic tyrant of unquestionable power: "[...] then I can flah you crosss-eyed whenever I like" (12). On the other hand, the self-effacing character of Ber's femininity is revealed by her ambivalent attitude to their sexual relationship. Listening to her proud narrations of their affair, Cactus is curious to know about the details of lovemaking, and the sensations involved, asking what Noel does to her during their encounters. The older girl's tentative or evasive replies to such questions testify to the lack of self confidence and a personal voice concerning the subject, a possible result of adolescent girls becoming aware of "[...] the crushing realities attached to the culture's definition of womanhood," and that less value is placed on them than on boy children in Ireland, as Sheila M. Greene's analysis points out (365). Under the circumstances Ber, though regularly having sex with her boyfriend, is still immature both emotionally and sexually. Her relative lack of interest in the subject of sexual fulfillment renders her passive and careless, not bothering about the possible consequences of unsafe sex. At sixteen she considers herself "far too young for that [pregnancy]," and calms herself by the thought that "Anyway, it was only standing" (23). Her response to sexual experiences parallels the findings of Rachel Thompson and Janet Holland's research about lower class British teenage girls' behaviour in their culture which privileges male sexual pleasure. The scholars reveal that these "[...] young women who are unsure of their own sexual potential and agency" become easily disadvantaged in their relationships (28).

Cactus remains disappointed with Ber's unimaginative references to sexual pleasure, but has to find Dolores an equally, if not more uninspiring partner with whom to explore the field that fascinates her so much. Advanced in the process of her female socialization, Dolores is shown to develop her attitude to both the subject and practice of sex by adapting the model that her elder sister mediates to her. Submissively, she accepts Cactus' leadership in the game of kissing that the other girl initiates, and it is only after some embarrassed hesitation that she admits that the whole thing leaves her indifferent at best:

> CACTUS. [...] what did it feel like to you? [...] Did it make you want to go to the jacks?
> DOLORES. Eh... no. For a pee like? No.
> CACTUS. And what about your chest? Did you feel anything there?
> DOLORES. In my chest? A while ago, you mean. Eh... no.
> [...]
> CACTUS. And that's just with you. God. (35)

Characteristically, Cactus' chief interest lies in the details which are closely linked with the sensation of orgasm. Yet this is the area where she runs into the walls of silence, and becomes further dismayed by the blunt refusal to discuss sexual intimacies as an

unmentionable subject in relation to Ber's lovemaking with Noel. In her unbridled curiosity Cactus inquires of Ber "Did you have to touch his thing? His knob! [...] what did 'it' feel like?" (40). Before the older girl could fabricate some irrelevant answer, Dolores eagerly attempts to terminate Cactus' further questioning by the curt interference: "Ah stop, the thought of it" (40).

Cactus' experiences of the hierarchical structure of gender roles, and disappointingly conventional attitudes to sexuality inherent in the practices and discourses of the given culture provoke a kind of self-representation from Cactus (see De Lauretis 19) which diametrically opposes that of the other female characters. Instead of assuming a submissive position which, in her case, would be waiting for a partner to approach her, and also for some time to pass because she is still too young by the standards of her community, she empowers herself to initiate bodily contact with whoever she can. Her recklessly free sexual experimentation, which never weighs the human consequences, corresponds to the style of the amorally licentious trickster. Confronted with the kind of masculine gender construction offered in the figure of Noel, she begins to mimick him by choosing a partner of the opposite sex as object of her desire, and also her abject, whom she despises for his weakness, and treats violently whenever she fancies to do so. Her act of mimicry exposes the oppressive tendencies inherent in the masculine model Noel represents, rooted in the patriarchal society. Dan, whose childlike and gullible character evokes features traditionally attributed to the female by the male gaze is the only compliant person available for Cactus with whom to practise her wildest sexual fantasies, since he hopes to have his own dream fulfilled in the bargain.

Chaos and the Restoration of Order

Harrison's analysis points out that the traditional trickster is "[...] devious, deceitful, and ruthless, [...] destructive for the sake of being destructive, and for his own whimsical amusement" (24), characteristics which are well recognizable in Cactus' actions. By psychologically manipulating, and even dehumanizing a helpless boy as an instrument of her whimsical sexual experiments, her asocial and disruptive acts come full circle, and culminate in inevitable disaster. The chaos she has created is illustrated most expressively through the breakdown of Dan's confession into incoherent images of horror, and shreds of thwarted hope under stress, when the games of the teenagers have been eventually found out about by Ber: "She made me... made me take out my winkie. The man's going to give me money for my books. For Fort Knox. She was pinching it" (67). Like the traditional trickster character as viewed by Harrison's study (71), Cactus falls into her own trap, and suffers humiliation by Ber's open cross-questioning and investigation of what must have transpired between the adolescents.

In her interpretation of Sula's tricksterism, Smith contends that her "evil" ways "actually make the community stronger, as they unite against her as pariah. [...] and the

trickster's amorality sharpens the community's sense of a moral code. By constantly violating societal norms, Sula paradoxically helps to define the social fabric" (116-17). Morrison reports about these changes in terms of moral improvement: "Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst" (117-18). Moxley's drama registers comparable individual and communal changes as well as processes by way of resistance to the disorder created by the trickster. While intent on revealing Cactus's transgressive operations, Ber manages to secure her feminine identity as a grown-up woman shortly to be married, and assumes authority to question the younger girl. Recalling the famous Wildean aphorism that daughters always replicate their mothers, Ber's behaviour testifies to the completion of her feminine socialization in the same patriarchal mould, as observed by her fiancé: "She's the image of the mother when aroused" (65). From a teenager who definitely crossed certain boundaries when starting to practise premarital sex Ber, confronted with a situation that upsets her notions of order, Ber grows into an adult whose interference reinforces societal rules and requirements opposed to unruly behaviour. On his part, now a young man who has found a job, Noel denies he has anything to do with Dan's fatal ambitions to collect money by whatever means for his journey to America.

The epilogue part of *Danti Dan* suggests that although Cactus' trickster deceits and mischief-making have led to tragedy, the community assumes strength, and even renews itself. Dolores claims to belong to a swimming club now, where she probably meets several other teenagers, and can make new friends. Dan's funeral and the prospective wedding of Ber and Noel are mentioned as significant events that, according to established communal traditions, bring people together and strengthen the bonds among them through sharing grief as well as celebration. These events also function to exclude Cactus, the outsider, who is not allowed to, or has no chance to participate in them. Her father, hardly just by accident, is said to have got a transfer and the family will soon move to a distant town. By casting out the troublemaker, the community manages to renovate itself which, however, does not seem to involve any humanly significant change in their ethos and practices. In fact, the conditions that engendered the tragedy are likely to become reproduced. Yet the drama ends on a note of mystery, not unlike Morrison's *Sula*, where Nel gazes at the trees in search of her dead friend, Sula, whispering her name. The intangible yet somehow powerful ties of a shared girlhood assert themselves in the way Cactus and Dolores "*stare at each other*" (71) as a coda to *Danti Dan*.

Conclusion

Realizing trickster features, functions and linguistic operations, Cactus's rebellion in Moxley's drama reflects the roots and routes of the crisis an Irish teenager may experience, as if through a magnifying glass. The youth culture to which the girl belongs

to is recognized as a distinct one within the larger society mainly through consumerism, a fact the great variety of pop songs played in the drama highlights. Notably, however, they are rarely if ever in tune with the complex relationships, and concomitant feelings of the teenage community in general, and Cactus in particular. Forming another kind of the "social technologies" De Lauretis refers to (2), the music transmits superficial, soothing gestures that reinforce institutionalized norms, conventional gender roles, as well as romantic notions about love and sexuality. Caught between the other teenagers' gender representations which, in spite of their urge to contradict them just reproduce old patterns, and her own ambition to achieve autonomous subjectivity, Cactus is left without a viable model for radical gender revisioning. Her choices to enact resistance are made within the confines of the patriarchal structure, but operate through modes of inversion which entail danger, disruption, and even destruction.

Smith's conclusion to her study of Sula applies also to *Danti-Dan*, emphasizing that the trickster aesthetic offers a culturally aware, and also socially critical approach, which links "fluidity and specificity, individual and community, alienation and intercourse, and substance and form" (152). Through its provocative subject, and technique drawing inspiration from the native Irish traditions while reaching out to international postmodernism, Moxley's drama interrogates a network of contentious issues regarding the unevenness of the changes affecting Ireland in the recent decades. The "hospitality to different voices within the old structures," which has been characterizing contemporary Irish drama as much as its great antecedent works in the words of Christopher Murray (246), forms an inspiring context for innovative ventures of this kind.

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