Marina Carr's "Heap of Broken Mirrors": The Mai *(1994)*

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Glory to Heaven for home and family:
a man, a woman, children.
Nurse in Euripides' *Medea*. Trans. Brendan Kennelly (13)

Abstract: *After writing several plays that showed great promise but were clearly derivative, especially of Samuel Beckett, Marina Carr arrived dramatically with the well-conceived, riveting The Mai in 1994. Her next play commissioned by the National Maternity Hospital in Dublin, Portia Coughlan (1996) also garnered many honors and a loyal following. But with the "Midlands Gothic" of By the Bog of Cats (1998) something appeared to go dreadfully wrong. Carr had begun to substitute rhetoric and violence for her formerly carefully plotted acts and well-developed characters. This unfortunate tendency holds complete sway over the stage Irish, melodramatic, over-wrought Irish kitchen drama, On Raftery's Hill (2000). With On Raftery's Hill a new assessment of Marina Carr's meteoric rise in Dublin and international theatre appears warranted, even required.*

Theatre goers in Galway, Washington, D.C., Dublin, and London were recently subjected to one of the most melodramatic, over-wrought contemporary versions of stage Irish in Marina Carr's Irish kitchen drama, *On Raftery's Hill* (2000). The *Guardian* reviewer described the play as "a blackly hilarious piece that suddenly descends into the horror of the enclosed, incestuous world of a widower and his two daughters," but nothing could be farther from the experience of most others watching from the audience. Yes, *On Raftery's* Hill is a tale of multiple incest, barbarous wanton cruelty, and killing, but the play also entertains one cliché after another making it indeed "blackly [and unintentionally] hilarious." The reviewer was certainly correct that the dominant movement of the evening was that of descent, but that sinking was into unrelieved melodrama. And the reviewer's comparison of Garry Hines' production with her internationally successful production of Martin McDonagh's Leenane trilogy is also apt as the earlier production also played upon the clichés of comic stage Irish characters and featured melodramatic plots. The difference between the two, however, lies in the plays themselves. McDonagh's trilogy does not pretend to be other than it is – a broad-based appeal to non-Irish theatre-goers as well as to those who attend popular theatre. Carr, on the other hand, would claim to be tapping the deepest depths of the Irish psyche using

elements borrowed from Greek tragedy. But on both counts *On Raftery's Hill* fails. First, the Irish psyche is far more resilient and vibrant than appears in this play and second, tacking-on references to Greek tragic myths in casual conversational dialogue where they are mostly irrelevant and out-of-character (*Raftery's* 43), does not create Greek or any other kind of tragedy. While there might possibly be enough material in the text for a minor one-act play, the play itself proved interminable as trapped audiences watched the playing out of an ancient curse on Raftery's Hill unto the third generation. One could only sympathize for the poor actors forced to speak their clichés and portray Carr's violently inarticulate characters that arouse little or no sympathy despite the best efforts by seasoned, respected actors. With this debacle, a new assessment of Marina Carr's meteoric rise in the Dublin and international theatre appears warranted, even required.

After writing several plays that showed great promise but were clearly derivative, especially of Samuel Beckett, Carr arrived with the well-conceived, dramatically riveting *The Mai* in 1994. Her next play commissioned by the National Maternity Hospital in Dublin, *Portia Coughlan* (1996) also garnered many honors and a loyal following. But with – what director Patrick Mason called – the "Midlands Gothic" of *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) (qtd. in Cummins 8), something appeared to go dreadfully wrong. Carr had begun to substitute rhetoric and violence for her formerly carefully plotted acts and dramatically developed characters.[1] With *On Raftery's Hill* this unfortunate tendency appeared to hold complete sway over the play. Scott T. Cummings accurately describes the main character Red Raftery from several different angles. "To put it morally, he is evil. To put it crudely, he is a jerk. To make a spectacle of his behavior without a broader context borders on the gratuitous and the sensational" (8) which it is. This is Nicholas Grene's "black pastoral" with a vengeance derived from melodrama.[2] As Cummings concludes having brilliantly summarized the play's short-comings: Carr's dramatic thinking . . . is murkey and incomplete. Like the family she writes about, the play falls in on itself" (8).

Rather than dwell on the "decline and fall" of a very promising young playwright who, after all, is still very much in mid-career and hopefully will recover from this bout with stage Irishness and go on to have a long and fruitful career in the theatre, I would prefer to return to what can now be termed her best play thus far, *The Mai*. For it, too, is controversial – a play by a woman playwright with an incredibly strong heroine as the title character, yet one that presents the character as caught in a tragic trap set by falling in love for a man unworthy of her. The play is told retrospectively by The Mai's daughter, Millie and is clearly a "memory play" as defined by Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1944).[3] Millie narrates events, much as Tom Wingfield narrates those in *The Glass Menagerie*. Unlike Tom, who appears on stage as both narrator and the central character in his story, Millie rarely appears as a character and then only peripherally, although she does also remain on stage as narrator throughout the whole play.[4] (Tom as actor is present in every scene of *The Glass Menagerie* except for Jim and Laura's conversation when his mother keeps him off stage in the kitchen doing the dishes.) Like Tom struggling with his memories of his sister and his mother, Millie calls up her

memories in order of their importance for understanding her mother's identity as a woman. Perhaps her most significant memory is of The Mai's suicide, since she spends much energy in attempting to account for it. Thus in the middle of act one, as she is telling of the summer of Robert's return, she leaps ahead to describe a trip to town she and Robert took "to buy a blue nightgown and a blue bedjacket for The Mai's waking. . . . No shroud for The Mai" (28). The play's complex sequence of events thus occurs not in order of their chronological happening but in order of their emotional impact on and importance for Millie's memory of her mother, The Mai. Part of this sequence includes "the act of shared memory" which Anthony Roche argues "is the play itself, the thread of affiliation which binds Grandma Fraochlán, the Mai [sic] and Millie together across time, space and the absence of death" ("Women" 162).

Since all memory occurs only in the present, as philosophers from Heraclitus to Augustine to Rosenfield have maintained, Millie at thirty-five narrates the play by recalling events into her present that she witnessed between fifteen and twenty-four years ago. The first thing she recollects is the grand house her mother built to bring her errant husband home or, more precisely: she recalls "a room with a huge bay window" (11). This visual image of the huge bay window dominates Millie's memory of her mother as it dominates the staging of *The Mai* from the raising to the lowering of the curtain. The window frames The Mai's expectations that are, she believes, fulfilled when Robert enters at the beginning of act one. It also frames the retrospective exposition of her longing for him and her summoning him back to her side heard at the end of act one, and it will frame the tableau of Robert with The Mai dead in his arms. In act two, the window frames Robert's betrayal – epitomized by the impersonal birthday card with, worse, a ten-pound note enclosed. And at the end of act two, The Mai will look through its panes one last time before either going to bed or going off to commit suicide by drowning herself in her own lake of tears.[5]

Commenting on the stage design of the 1994 Dublin production, Roche notes about the "dream house she has constructed" that "Its central feature in terms of the staging and Kathy Strachan's design is a huge window centrestage [sic] which gives out to Owl Lake, the pattern of the lake reflected around the stage" ("Women" 161). Repeated references to Owl Lake, which the window looks out on, coupled with the telling of its legend in such a splendidly dramatic fashion has the effect of having the lake, though invisible to the audience, increasingly and ominously dominate the scene. The verbal imagery coalesces with the powerful visual image of The Mai dead carried in Robert's arms backlit by a ghostly light and all framed by the window. Also, the sexual-sensual imagery begun with Robert playing the Mai's body with his cello bow followed by The Mai's appearing in her slip to get the whiskey bottle, culminates here with The Mai dead in Robert's arms in the same or similar slip. Her unattainable idealized love for unfaithful Robert now consummated in death – all framed in the very window she built to summon him back to her side. As the Latin satirist sardonically noted "When the gods want to punish us, they answer our prayers" as they answered The Mai's oft repeated prayer of "Come home – come home" (14).

Although he bears her dead body in the tableau, Robert could not bear The Mai's all-consuming passion. Like Hickey in O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (1940), Robert could not live with The Mai's faith in his ultimate fidelity. "There's a limit to the guilt you can feel and the forgiveness and the pity you can take!" cries Hickey (239).[6] Because Carr focuses on the wife and not, like O'Neill on the husband, we catch only glimpses of Robert's side of the conflict and these occur mostly in the arguments he has with The Mai. But surely he does share Hickman's guilt as well as his feeling the burden of forgiveness, especially in act two when Robert flaunts his tawdry infidelity before her and the small town where they live.

Act one's structure, therefore, is based upon the emotional significance various events have for Millie. As Isaac Rosenfield rightly asserts in *The Invention of Memory*:

> Emotions are essential to the creation of memory because they organize it, establishing its relative importance in a sequence of events much as a sense of time and order is essential for a memory to be considered a memory, and not a thought or a vision of some particular instant, unrelated to past events. (72)

Thus the first because most important event Millie brings forward into her present actually occurred when she was sixteen and her father, The Mai's husband, Robert returned. The second is Robert's departure five years earlier when she was eleven. Then in order of importance appear the events of the summer of Robert's return, after that The Mai's suicide by drowning, and so on through the act.[7] Added to Millie's recollection of events and people are other people's memories which go back another three generations in the family. As Millie tries to understand her mother, how she lived, and why she died, she establishes the criteria by which she admits events as valid, reflects upon how, where, and even why she knows what she knows about The Mai. In this process, she inevitably confronts her own identity as it is bound up in that how and why. Events that once appeared clouded for Millie when they happened appear clearer now years later. For instance, Millie believes she currently understands The Mai's motive for working in London. Similarly, events which appeared clear when they occurred now may seem ambiguous, such as the stories Grandma Fraochlán told of her lover/husband, the nine-fingered fisherman or those she told of her daughter, Ellen's husband or Ellen's marriage. Years afterward, tall tales about local characters have, perhaps, an unexpected relevance they lacked before, particularly tales about Sam Brady and his legendary cow, Billy the Black, which he would ride "like a horse . . . naked except for a pair of red bloomers" (50).

Dreams, whose content had been ignored or laughed at, over time prove hauntingly prophetic. The Mai's dream the night before she and Robert were married is especially significantly as it foretells Robert's desertion of her a decade or so later. In her dream both she and Robert are depicted as children: she smiling and waving and he passing her by saying, "Not yet, not yet, not for thousands and thousands of years." As

he disappears she "see[s] a black cavern and I know it leads to nowhere and I start walking that way because I know I'll find you there" (26). Robert is heading somewhere else, while she determined, dedicated, follows searching for him – all of which "leads nowhere" except to the blackness of her own death. And those ancient local legends about Owl Lake neglected in youth, now appear in retrospect as dire warnings of impending doom which Robert, The Mai, and Millie ignored at their peril as "like sleepwalkers along a precipice . . . [they] walked on and on . . . not listening" (42).

Chronology of events, as noted, becomes rearranged in memory, but Carr also strongly believes that the needs of her drama should shape the sequence in which events occur rather than the more usual notion of the sequence of events structuring the drama. In describing the way Tom Mac Intyre "plays with Time in the piece [*Good Evening, Mr Collins* 1995, revived 1996)]," Carr might well have been describing her own fantastic "playing" with time in *The Mai.* She emphatically declares "Time as we understand it, with all its imposing logic, is merely a construct of The Fallen World and therefore to be treated with suspicion" ("The Bandit Pen" n. pag.).[8] Similarly, in *The Mai*, precipitate non-mimetic shifts of subject, scene, and language occur – most memorably at the end of act one. There, immediately after she recalls a conversation between The Mai and her aunt, Julia about Ellen, The Mai's mother, and her marriage, Millie abruptly shifts subject and language to narrate the legend of Owl Lake. Following "this mythic narrative" (Roche, "Women" 162) an audience is dramatically confronted by the sudden, arresting tableau of Robert with the dead Mai in his arms, which is succeeded in turn by Millie's verbally interpreting the legend in relation to her mother, father, and herself in highly poetic language.

Carr, in writing of Tom Mac Intyre's story "the lap of hay" in *Good Evening Mr Collins*, describes vividly the quality not only of that story but of her own legend of Owl Lake as well:

> Firstly it's the lyricism of it, then it's the simplicity. Finally it's how Mac Intyre [Carr] uses the story, how it resonates through the whole piece, how all of Michael Collins' [The Mai's] life and death is in that story. This is craftsmanship at its best. ("The Bandit Pen" n. pag.)

Like almost all anglicized place names in Ireland, Owl Lake is an English misreading of the Irish name, "loch cailleach oíche, Lake of the Night Hag or Pool of the Dark Witch" (41; compare the many erroneous translations of Irish place names in Friel, *Translations*, 1980). "Every place on the earth's surface [including Owl Lake] is remembered in some way or holds the memory of events which happened there" (Matthews 16). "The legend goes that Coillte, daughter of the mountain god, Bloom, fell in love with Bláth, Lord of all the flowers" and they lived happily through the spring and into the summer. Then "one evening approaching autumn," he mentioned that he had to go to "live with the dark witch of the bog." He would return in the spring which he did do, but too late for by

that time the Hag had pushed Coillte into the lake formed from the copious tears she shed on his leaving (41). The legend parallels the story of The Mai and Robert falling in love, marrying, having children, his sudden leaving and equally sudden return. In the image of the god's daughter drowning herself in her own lake of tears, the legend also foreshadows the play's conclusion when The Mai will go off to drown herself in Owl Lake. The startling visual image of Robert with The Mai dead in his arms which follows the legend confirms this ending: "Ghostly light on the window. ROBERT stands there with THE MAI'S body in his arms, utterly still. MILLIE watches them a minute. Ghostly effect" (42). Immediately after the tableau, Millie eloquently articulates the implications for The Mai, Robert, and herself of the legend of Owl Lake in language often elevated as is appropriate to such legends. Her warning of dark inevitable things to come verbally underlines the visual tableau:

> I knew that story as a child. So did The Mai and Robert. But we were unaffected by it and in our blindness moved along with it like sleepwalkers along a precipice and all around gods and mortals called out for us to change our course and, not listening, we walked on on. (42)

The tableau with which act one concludes appears far out of order in the sequence of the play's chronological events. By placing the suicide – the penultimate event of the play's action – at the end of act one, Carr compels her audience to see all of The Mai's acts and words, including those still to come in act two, as leading inevitably to this tableau of her drowning. This is the kind of "daring and invention" that Ionesco praised as "freedom of imagination [which] is not flight into the unreal, . . . [and] not escape" (qtd. in Heeson 196), but rather a re-shaping of "the reality we thought real" (Malekin 41). Like Tennessee Williams she, too, scorns "the exhausted theatre of realism" employing instead various fantastic stage techniques and set pieces – such as the presentation of events in a non-chronological sequence, the use of mythic and/or prophetic narratives, the violent shifts of subject, and the sometimes arbitrary mixure of times, people, and places – all of which are fantastic in that they depart from what is acknowledged as "consensus reality" (Hume 21) in order to better explore the natural, the possible, the mortal as held in memory. In no sense, however, can *The Mai* be considered a fantasy which Colin Manlove, among others, has carefully defined as: "A fiction evoking wonder and containin a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms" (ixn).

Throughout the play, Millie uses memory to gain knowledge of how and why events happen in the way they did and how and why people behaved in the way they did. For example, although her father, Robert professes his undying love for her mother (27), Millie through recall realizes that he is no Romeo who, finding his Juliet dead, will commit suicide rather than face life without her. He is, instead, a latter-day Jason who for all his professions of love: such as, "you are and were and always will be the only

one" (27) will yield easily and repeatedly to temptation, especially if it is ego-flattering such as a younger woman's attraction for him.

At the beginning of act two an audience can neither evade nor disregard the palpable inevitability which now hangs over the play. As *Riders to the Sea* (1902) must end with the last man of all the men in the house drowned and buried in a coffin made of "the finest white boards" (5), so *The Mai* must end with Robert being unfaithful, The Mai drowned in the lake of her own tears, her dead body carried in his arms. This sense of tragic inevitability, against which the events play themselves out in act two, although it partakes of what Carr calls "the Greek idea of destiny and fate and little escape" (Interview C23), nevertheless differs markedly from that of Greek classical drama, such as *Oedipus Rex* or, more appropriately, *Medea*. Sophocles and Euripides could count on their audience knowing at least the outline of their story before they saw the plays thus instantly creating tragic irony as soon as Oedipus – "I of the famous name" – appears or fearful anticipation as Medea off-stage rages "Wronged, wronged, I am wronged / in every deepest corner of my being" (20). Carr cannot. But her invented legend of Owl Lake coupled with the tableau at the end of act one helps create in act two the "idea of destiny and fate and little escape" by establishing for the audience a memory of an event which has not yet occurred, an event still to come. As the Greek audience recalls the dead children from the legend of Medea throughout the play, so a contemporary audience – thanks to this fantastic stage technique – recalls the dead Mai in Robert's arms throughout act two.

The cause of The Mai's tragic death – her single-minded passion for Robert – is strikingly similar to that of a Greek heroine, especially when Robert proves incapable of returning such highly charged commitment. His wistful belief that "not everything has to be final and tragic... not everything" (25) rings increasingly hollow coming from a weak, philandering man, especially when spoken to The Mai, this strong, deeply ardent and totally committed woman, for whom events will prove both "final and tragic." Grandma Fraochlán sees Robert as a man who leaves, returns, and leaves again. When he objects, she recalls how "Ya'ar own father left ya'ar mother, didn't he?" To which Robert replies by drawing a fine distinction between one who leaves never to return and one who, like his father and himself, leaves, then returns: "He never left her! He went to America for a few years. It was after the War, he had to get work, but he came back, didn't he?" His argument falls on deaf ears, for as Grandma Fraochlán points out:

> "An' thousands sted, war or no war, or brung their wives an' childer wud em. Buh noh you, no, an' noh ya'ar father, an' sure as I'm sittin' here, ya'll noh be stoppin' long, because we can't help repeatin', Robert, we repeah an' we repeah, th' orchestration may be different but tha tune is allas tha same." (23)

Grandma Fraochlán's contention that "we repeat and we repeat" rests on the Sophoclean assumption of fate as character. Against this fate humans are, if not powerless, then at

least close to helpless. Millie attempts to understand the impotence her parents experienced in the grip of fate by puzzling through the various remembered incidents and recalled stories of her mother's life; such as The Mai's leaving her four children with another woman who already had ten of her own in order to work in London "as a sweeping girl in an Arab hairdressing salon" (45, 46). There she met an Arab princess. She and The Mai "were two of a kind, moving towards one another across deserts and fairytales and years til they finally meet in a salon under Marble Arch . . . Two little prinesses on the cusp of a dream, one five, the other forty" (46). Only years later did Millie understand that her mother in the grip of an all-consuming passion, left her children in order to work to finance her dream: "nothing was going to stop that house being built for Robert" (46). With the grand house completed, The Mai sits in the window "her temples throbbing as her lips formed two words noiselessly. Come home – come home" (14). Everything will be sacrificed for this passion, this dream – even the children.

"Memories," as Rosenfield contends, "are the procedures that are responsible for the organization of perceptions. They are therefore generalizations of previous experiences, ways of organizing sensory stimuli that permit them to be related to past experience" (62). What emerges for Millie out of this process is her understanding of the total desire and complete unwavering commitment of these women for their men.[9] At one hundred years old, Grandma Fraochlán had always dwelt on her great love, her husband, the nine-fingered fisherman then dead some forty years. Asked to choose between him and her children, she would always chose her lover:

> "There's two types a people in this worlt from whah I can gather, thim as puts their childer first an' thim as puts their lover first an' for whah it's worth, tha nine-fingered fisherman an' meself belongs ta tha lahher a these. I would gladly a hurlt all seven a ye down tha slopes a hell for wan nigh' more wud tha nine-fingered fisherman an' may I roh eternally for such unmotherly feelin'." (69-70)

Medea, Grandma Fraochlán, and The Mai all put their lovers first above their children, but only Grandma Fraochlán never regretted doing so.

The Mai is, therefore, not like Ibsen's *The Doll's House* about "the new woman" or like so many contemporary plays about the difficulty of being a woman in the contemporary world. It is, rather, a play about memories of a woman trapped in a one-sided relationship which can only, inevitably end in disaster. The Mai will come to a tragic end no matter what she does or does not do, no matter how well she builds her house, raises her children or selects and keeps her friends, because the object of her monopolizing passion is clearly not worthy of her. The man is weak where she is strong, he will betray her again and again whereas she will choose to remain loyal to him. Medea, confronted by the infidelity of a similarly weak man, Jason, turned her great

passion from love to rage and enacted a horrible revenge on him by killing their children to spite him.[10] The Mai in an almost identical situation discovers her passion turning to despair and so commits suicide: "The ground is gone from under me," exclaims The Mai. "I'm forty years of age... I'm on the downward slope... I'm trapped" (54).

Even the cello playing with which the play opens – beautiful and rich in the Dublin productions of 1994 and 1995 suggesting elegance, romantic lushness, civilized behavior, and order becomes transformed into something ugly, vicious, mechanical as the trap closes in on The Mai. The opening romantic sound image is overtaken by an overtly erotic, physical, sexual one as Robert shifts from playing the cello to playing The Mai's body with his bow – "softer," she enjoins (11). Both images contrast in intensity with the cello playing later in act two where The Mai does the playing in one of the play's most unforgettable, violent visual-verbal images:

> She moves around the study, sounds a note on the cello, takes the bow, begins screeching it across the cello to annoy ROBERT . . . THE MAI sits down and plays a few phrases expertly. . . . She branishes the cello bow all over the place.
>
> ROBERT Look, will you put that down, you'll break it.
>
> THE MAI And so what, you'll replace it, you're good at replacing things.
>
> She taps the bow along her toes, stops, pulls a string from it, looks at Robert, looks away, resumes playing herself: knees, thighs, stomach. Then she stops to snap a string as it suits her. She plays her breasts and makes notes on her throat with her other hand. (48-49)

The Mai's anger over Robert's betrayal evident in the sound image of the screeching bow and the verbal image, "you'll replace it," precedes the visual image of her frustration caused by his indifference in her playing her body which itself culminates in the highly charged sexual image of her playing her breasts while fingering the frets of her throat illustrating sex and violence, intimating possible self-mutilation or destruction.

Assembling these memories, Millie comes to understand that The Mai loved beyond measure, beyond reason, beyond thought, and far beyond the advice of her well-meaning, devoted friends and family. She deliberately eschews moderation

> heaven's fairest gift,
> the very sanity of the gods, . . .
> Moderation keeps
> the demons of excess at bay,
> and makes us grateful for the gift
> of limits. (*Medea* 49)

No one would willingly place themselves in The Mai's unenviable position outside "the gift of limits," but part of her tragedy is that she believes she has no choice but to love this unfaithful man. As she says to Millie at the end of act two " ...no one will ever understand how completely and utterly Robert is mine and I am his, no one – People think I've no pride, no dignity, to stay in a situation like this, but I can't think of one reason for going on without him" (72). The passions and their inevitable tragic or pathetic outcome at the center of *The Mai* are the stuff of myth and legend. If ordinary people do not behave that way, those in the grip of fate, such as The Mai, Oedipus, or Medea, do. Oedipus did kill his father and marry his mother, while, as Iocasta noted, most men only dream of doing so – Medea did kill her and Jason's children because "passion strangles all my love" (66), and The Mai did choose suicide rather than going on alone without Robert.

Grandma Fraochlán, the one hundred year old matriarch of the family, ignoring the parallel to her own all-consuming passion, speaks for many viewers and reviewers when she says to The Mai: "Ya survived this long withouh him, why'a ya bringin' all this an ya'arself agin?" (16). This question or one like it may well have motivated Millie to try and piece together from her and others' memories the story of The Mai. As *Medea* concluded at the end of Euripides' drama:

> .... there's nothing
> left but memory. Some griefs deepen
> with memory, become more real
> than when they happened first. (74)

To tell this story of "griefs deepen[ed] with memory," Carr violates chronology disrupting the sequence of events to better create the link of memory between Millie and her mother "across time, space and the absence of death" (Roche, "Women" 162). As Rosenfield argues: "memories are not fixed but are constantly evolving generalizations – recreations – of the past, which give us a sense of continuity, a sense of being, with a past, a present, and a future" (76). In developing this sense of continuity through knowledge of the past in the present – however partial or incomplete – through Millie's search for the truth about her mother and herself, Carr emphasizes this essential human attribute.

In a letter to Olivia Shakespeare written in 1929, W. B. Yeats declared: "A deep of the mind can only be approached through what is most human, most delicate" (768). In *The Mai* (1994) Marina Carr approaches such "a deep of the mind" through what is arguably the most human and the most essential of all human properties, memory. Through memory, this play presents an attempt to recover and understand that most mysterious of all subjects, another person—an attempt that also proves essential for self-understanding. Millie discovers that not only is she linked by blood and experience, but more importantly by memory to her mother and through her to her great-grandmother. As Jorge Luis Borges so eloquently wrote in "Cambridge":

Those odds and ends of memory are the only wealth
that the rush of time leaves to us.
We are our memory,
we are this chimerical museum of shifting forms,
this heap of broken mirrors.
(lines 43-47)

Notes

This essay draws upon some material published earlier in the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies.*

1 For a critique of *By theBog of Cats* and Carr's pandering to stage Irishness, see Vic Merriman, especially 313-15.

2 Grene introduced this term in an essay given at the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures in Barcelona in 1999 and apparently also used it to discuss *On Raftery's Hill* at a Washington, D. C. symposium "An Unpredictable Past: Theatre and History in Contemporary Ireland" May 2000 (see Cummings 7-8).

3 Carr says she has read Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* many times (Interview C23). *The Mai* was voted the Best New Play of the 1994 Irish Life Dublin Theatre Festival. Already acknowledged as one of the brightest new Irish playwrights (See Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama*, 6 and see especially 286-88), her early plays were, however, clearly derivative of Samuel Beckett. With *The Mai* Carr found her own voice leaving behind what she described as "my Beckett phase" (Interview C23). For a clear discussion of contemporary research on mind and memory, see Rosenfield whose book has greatly influenced my thinking about memory.

4 Other well-known instances in contemporary Irish drama of an on-stage narrator who participates in the action are Michael in the successful Brian Friel play, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990, for further comparison see Roche, "Women" 160), and the weak Hugh Leonard play, *Stephen D* (1964), a dramatization of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* conflated with *Stephen Hero*. For a full discussion of the failings of *Stephen D* see Lanters, especially 31-43.

5 The 1995 production differed from the published playscript in that The Mai did not "turn and drift from the room" (72). Instead, she clearly looked through the window, then went outside to reappear directly behind the window. Thus, the audience's last glimpse of her was as seen through the window when she walked outside the house presumably down to Owl Lake to drown herself.

6 Robert, like Hickey, wanders, seeks out other women because of boredom, curiosity, or no reason at all except they are there and available to him. The key distinction between the women lies in Evelyn's pathos as opposed to The Mai's tragedy. Evelyn's naive, if unshakable faith in Hickey's willingness and ability to reform: "you couldn't shake her faith that it had to come true – tomorrow!" (238) contrasts with The Mai's finally understanding Robert's weak personality and her acknowledgment of his self-deception.

7 Chronologically, events in the play occur as follows: 1. The Mai and Robert fall in love, marry, have children, and after years of marriage Robert one day leaves. 2. She works in London to earn money to build her house (early in act two). 3. Five years later Robert returns (opening scene of act one). 4. The Mai "celebrates" her fortieth birthday (opening scene of act two). 5. The Mai talks with Millie (closing scene of act two). 6. Robert carries the dead Mai in his arms (closing scene of act one). 7. Millie and Robert drive to town to buy a blue bedjacket to wake The Mai in

– "no shroud for the Mai" (middle of act one). 8. Millie tells of her life after the death of her mother and of her attempt to understand events in her own life.

8 In *Portia Coughlan* (1996) Carr continues playing with time by radically rearranging the sequence of events.

9 There is, however, a great difference between Grandma Fraochlán's passion for a husband who returns her love, even performing a heroic feat to be with her in childbirth and Robert who does not return The Mai's ardor and who can offer only a lame excuse for not showing up when their son, Stephen was born.

10 Brendan Kennelly in his introduction to his translation of *Medea* reveals that he began his translation at the imperative suggestion of a woman who meeting him in the Peacock Theatre after the production of his translation of *Antigone* admonished him: "You understand women's rage. Do *Medea* next. Many people say the play is about jealousy. It's not, it's about rage" (6). Kennelly adds: "This is the rage I tried to present in *Medea* . . ." (7). His version was first performed on 8 October 1988 and revived in July 1989. Marina Carr's play clearly parallels Euripides' in Kennelly's translation at several points, as discussed in this essay.

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