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The Theatrical Representation of Incest in Marina Carr’s *On Raftery’s Hill*

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Abstract
Marina Carr’s writing in *On Raftery’s Hill* (2000) is the most recent, most relentlessly focused and complex of responses from an Irish dramatist to the issue of incestuous sexual violation. In her play she creates a world astray, full of obsession, havoc, mutilation and disgust. Eighteen-year old Sorrel Raftery is a young woman, living with her sister (Dinah), grandmother (Shalome), brother (Ded) and her father (Red). Sorrel is engaged to Dara Mood and just prior to her wedding her father rapes her. As the drama progresses it is discovered that Dinah is not Sorrel’s sister, but her mother. Father and daughter, who was twelve at the time, were brought together by Dinah’s own mother and now many years on, nobody intervenes when Red attacks Sorrel.

Carr grapples with the issues of power, sexuality, secrecy, shame, dysfunction, inferiority, indignity and addiction at the core of sexual abuse. Should the incestuous abuser be regarded as mentally ill, morally reprehensible and/or a criminal, she queries? Can we distinguish between sexual and psychological gratification? She confirms for an audience how a negative bond can be as strong as a positive one, how family victims of violation can be antagonistic, almost rivals towards each other, and seldom allies, and how the victims of abuse through processes of internalisation and identification with the abuser can accommodate themselves on one level to situations and circumstances, even as self-esteem is slowly peeled away through threat and apparent powerlessness. In this play there is no morality; it is a world at times almost without the mantle of humanity. The capacity to survive that experience is superbly captured by Carr, the complexity of the bond between the family members is brilliantly achieved, but for the first time in one of her midland’s plays the life of the central female character does not end in suicide. There is optimism in the basic survival of the victims of the Raftery curse.

Key Words
Theatrical Representations, Theatre and Society, Incest and violation, The Pleasure/Pain dialectic, Survival/ Recovery?

Introduction
Since the mid-80s, Ireland, like all other first world countries, has been made aware of and began to acknowledge increasingly and more openly emotional, psychological, physical and sexual violations against many young children and adults within family homes, churches, schools, sports clubs and within some residential care institutions that were supposedly obliged to protect the innocent, young and the vulnerable. The broadcast and print media made numerous abuse revelations and obliged many people, despite defence mechanisms that ranged from the subtle to the downright hostile, to pay attention to the actuality of the past
and, just as importantly, the reality of the present. Many harrowing stories did the rounds, ranging from the Kilkenny incest case to the Madonna House and McColgan family investigation, from the X-case to the paedophiliac activities of Brendan Smyth. The historical abuse of children is well documented, ranging from murder, assault, victimisation to mutilation and sacrifice (See Renvoize: 1993, 29-33).

In the face of such revelations the contemporary playwright countenanced a huge dilemma. What interventions should he or she make on such issues, given that the relationship between theatre and society is a complex one, one that can never be about theatre reflecting, or mimicking broader society. Theatre itself has very definite limits in terms of finance and audience attention span on the broader scale, and theatre texts demand specific structures in terms of time, character, style, image and space, so, as I have argued elsewhere “the relationship between the performance text and reality can be, at best, a selective, tangential, condensed, interventionist one, filtering and echoing patterns of a specific reality, editing out indecisiveness and finding points of greatest dramatic poignancy that are not necessarily the moments of greatest intensity” (Jordan: 2001a). Moreover, a theatre of horror or pain is not an enticing one for many, especially as theatre’s immediacy relies on the presence of an actor before a live audience. Pain on stage, while never real, still can disturb in a way that cinema, with its additional frame of distance, may not. Indeed should the writer dramatise such events at all, and how does one deal with such brutal incidents on stage and give on some level, an “authenticity” to it? (There is the added difficulty of getting an actor to play first of all and secondly, to do so convincingly, a sexually abusive character; murderers are no problem.)

On the one hand, it is possible to keep the particular incidents of gross violation off-stage and to have the incidents hinted at, inquired into or to have them reported or narrated. On the other, to dramatise the complexity of sexual violence requires not only great skill, but also something much more besides. The question for the playwright is how to create such situations in a way that is dramatic, in a way that is different from a novelistic/narrative (See Mills’ Another Alice) account and in a way that is not just documentary. In other words, how does one tap into the ritualism at the core of theatre?

These questions are compounded by another problem. When it came to rape or sexual abuse, throughout the late eighties and early nineties, film and television, in works like The Accused (1978), Festen (1998) and Happiness (1999), the first instalment of Prime Suspect or in Cracker or EastEnders with the Kathy Beale story, have dealt with rape and the impact of rape with some merit. Earlier, a previous generation of Irish playwrights had made space for pain and in a sense accessed the naming of specific pains, thereby consolidating the attestation/substantiation of pain, which was part of the validating process that led to some form of healing for victims of abuse, and none so better than Frank McGuinness’ exceptional play Baglady (1985), a play that combines within its monologue format, stalled storytelling, bits of abstract narrative and symbolism of bridges, windows, glass and water, children’s games, wedding rituals and deceptions to reveal the hidden story of his baglady character who had been raped by her father and who later gives birth to a child that is taken away from her and drowned by him. By telling her story, baglady finds some release, but no simplistic escape from her dire social/psychological circumstances (See Jordan: 1997, 35).

In general, Irish theatre writing practices had begun to shift radically since the mid-80s, firstly, with the demise of the history/memory play and, secondly, with the decreasing significance of Britain as a substantial structure of consciousness within the Irish psyche. Furthermore, we had a society demanding renewed openness, transparency, accountability and revelation as part of its truth quest, while we were also moving like most first world countries, in our writing practices at least, within a postmodern consciousness that rendered
little or no value on truth and that stressed the dilution of difference, while, at the same time it placed more value on simulation, repetition and the sheer instability of identity. In addition postmodernism has little time for deliberations on victimisation or violation. Victimisation, justified primarily by history, began to lose its safely demarcated social and textual status and significance. On top of this, as the revelations of physical/sexual abuse emerged from Irish society, almost ironically, for a time in the mid-eighties, many Hollywood films were sold to an audience that was absorbed, fascinated and excited by the extremes of torturous violence.

Then there began to emerge, around the mid-90s, another body of work from mainly young male playwrights that was significantly influenced by popular culture and a new type of cinematic practice. In this work by the younger dramatists there was a substantial blurring of any distinction between pleasure and pain, while at the same time society itself was coping strenuously with the ramifications of pain and the denial of it. Now, pain, in this new work, in many ways began to be decontextualised, as pain moved outside of a given or specific reality. Such a change in part is down to an incomplete transition from a post-colonial to a post-modern consciousness (and not necessarily a first/third world dialectic), where issues of community, the pastoral, hierarchy and power are all embraced (See Jordan: 2000: xxxvi-xlvi). The post-colonial/postmodern mix is complex because it unnerves, “on the one hand nostalgia, defiance, marginality, the pain of loneliness and sense of place are dealt with in almost a humanistic way; and on the other, they are stifled by stereotypes, daunted by intertextual pressures and disabled by a celebration of parodic violence, which is shaped by a playful -- knowing -- irony” (Jordan: 2001b,npd).

A type of ambiguous, parodic violence, extremity of image and description and a need to locate plays in situations where violence was gorily inevitable, which grew out of the Quentin Tarantino phenomena, led in many ways to a de-contestation of violence. The incomplete and complex shift is a move from attempts to create authentic pain on film to the use of ambiguous, parodic pain. However, violence in Tarantino was neither cartoon/parodic nor just violence for violence’s sake, instead having a dangerous double-edgedness that challenges.

As I have argued elsewhere:

Under postmodernism, subjectivity supposedly has mutated into commodified individuality or into something which is not fixed but circulating and volatile (reality has been textualised to a high degree). But to be seduced by such a scenario is erroneous, principally because it tends to casually obliterate history, deny difference in the proper sense of the word, and more importantly to refuse either to value or validate change. For me writers are still flirting with the energetic possibilities of such postmodernist thinking without embracing it completely; they are letting go of post-colonial awarenesses and actualities without fully grasping either the substance or significance of them (Jordan: 2001b,npd).

The simultaneous occurrence of all these things made for interesting developments, particularly in the dramatisation of rape, violation and sexual abuse. But if this was the main trend within the writing practices of young male writers, Marina Carr was doing something else, giving pain a context through the presence of myth or the grotesque. And the most recent and the most relentlessly focused play on the issue of sexual/incestual abuse has been Marina Carr’s On Raftery’s Hill (2000).
Eighteen-year old Sorrel Raftery is a young woman, living with her sister (Dinah), grandmother (Shalome), brother (Ded) and her father (Red). Sorrel is engaged to Dara Mood and just prior to her wedding her father rapes her. This happens towards the end of the First Act and the Second Act deals with the consequences, implications and fall-out from the attack. As the drama emerges it is discovered that Dinah is not Sorrel’s sister, but her mother. Carr grapples with issues of power, sexuality, secrecy, shame, dysfunction, inferiority, indignity and addiction that are at the core of sexual abuse. Should the abuser be regarded as mentally ill, morally reprehensible and/or a criminal? Can we distinguish between sexual and psychological gratification? She confirms for an audience how a negative bond can be as strong as a positive one, how family victims of violation can be antagonistic, almost rivals towards each other, and seldom allies, and how the victim of abuses through processes of internalisation and identification can accommodate themselves on one level to situations and circumstances even as self-esteem is slowly peeled away through a sense of powerlessness.

So Carr dramatises not only the horror of incest but she also captures in this instance a cycle of violation that complicates somewhat the relationship between victim and aggressor as it is confirmed during the final moments of the play that Red himself, is the child of an incestuous relationship between his mother and his grandfather. (At his grandfather’s funeral a woman came up to him to say that Red was the “split a him” (Hill: 57). Briere identifies seven categories of abuse related problems: “posttraumatic stress, cognitive distortions, altered emotionality, dissociation, impaired self-reference, disturbed relatedness, and avoidance” (Briere: 1992, xvii-xviii). Carr seems to work with all of these issues. The impact of abuse has a number of dependent factors including the “duration and frequency of the abuse”, “multiple perpetrators”, “presence of penetration intercourse”, “physically forced sexual contact”, “abuse at an earlier age”, “molestation by a perpetrator substantially older than the victim”, “concurrent physical abuse”, “abuse involving more bizarre features”, “the victim’s immediate sense of personal responsibility for the molestation” and “victim feelings of powerlessness, betrayal, and/or stigma at the time of the abuse” (Briere: 1992, 5-6). By capturing the intergenerational abuse at the core of the Raftery family and by displaying a range of violations Carr successfully brings together these issues in a most accomplished way.

The capacity of a male authority figure to break or dominate a child/young person is nothing knew in Irish theatre. Synge offers its eventual reversal in The Playboy of the Western World (1907), J. B. Keane in The Field (1965) with the Bull McCabe captures the desperate savagery of the male character and Tom Murphy in A Whistle in the Dark (1961) dramatises the damage inflicted on the siblings by their father’s (Dada’s), perverted and anomalous value system. Patriarchal power figures know how to control, shape, limit and deny others their wishes, and just as importantly they have the capacity to structure needs, pleasure and rewards. Dinah tells Sorrel that Red “knew how to build up a child’s heart.... never forgeh him for thah” (Hill: 40). If they build you up, they can also most certainly, take it away.

Red’s power is almost fitfully omnipotent. It is revealed by his obsessive confidence, if you could call it that, and by his ability to strike terror into the heart of his son, Ded. Carr delivers one brilliant scene between father and son. She captures the power of Red to generate utter confusion in Ded’s mind. Ded just wants to know what his father wants him to do, but the capacity of the authority figure to demand and insist upon contradictory things is firmly established. This device debilitates and confuses the weaker party to the exchange. Such is the direct intention of the authority figure, whose stipulations remain obtuse, shifting and remorselessly demanding. Ded begs: “Just lay down the rules, don’t kape changin them. Don’t. I don’t know what to do to make ya happy” (Hill: 27). Shalome regards Red as a
killjoy: “Shalome: .... he never liked to see people enjoy themselves, a big smuth on him when everyone else was happy. Daddy was the same” (Hill: 16), yet towards his mother Red is almost playful, acknowledging her near madness and comforting her somewhat. Towards Sorrel initially Red plays the role of commanding authority figure, making requests, demanding of her and mocking her a little and towards Dinah there is an knowingness and a demanding tension that initially, at any rate, masks the violatory bond between them.

Carr humanises Red in a way and evades stereotyping, as she establishes his past history, not to downgrade Red’s responsibility but more to establish the complex cycle of abuse from which he has been the by-product. She hints, as it often is, that offspring of incestuous relationships have been genetically predisposed to some sort of maladjustment or madness. While it is impossible to tabulate the statistics surrounding intergenerational abuse, many studies suggest “as few as one-third of people who were abused as children become adults who abuse their children” (Jankò: 1994, 50). Thankfully, two-thirds resist the perpetuation of the cycle. Furthermore, individual pathology is not just a distinct problem, but is something that is symptomatic of wider social issues, how women are treated in a society and of what is prevented, promoted, unconsciously agreed to and frowned upon. Nigel Parton argues that “For many men, sexual abuse may be an attempt to compensate the abuser for their sense of powerlessness in other areas, particularly with regard to the dominant notions of masculinity in society” (Blyth et al.: 1990, 19). Red’s destructive relationship with those in his household is replicated in his relationship with his surroundings. Isaac is disturbed by the stink of dead cattle that are just left “maggotin the fields” (Hill: 19).

Carr captures brilliantly the capacity of Red to disassociate from his behaviour, to minimise and re-negotiate his deed, his capacity to bribe, reward and induce silence, and his ability as abuser to “normalise” the situation, best seen in Dinah’s on-going “relationship” with her father, where Carr most successfully blurs the consent/violation of binary oppositions. (Dinah, once a victim, might now be seen by some as some type of quasi-active participant.)

Carr deploys a strained, midlands, non-naturalistic, lyricism in her dialogue to move the play from the world of the real onto, not so much a surreal plain, but an emblematic/impressionistic one. The direction of Garry Hynes and the stage design, almost Rothkoesque, by Tony Walton, that included a substantially blacked stairs, in the first production at Town Hall Theatre, Galway, gave emphasis to this consciousness. The play’s setting shared more in common with the marginalized settings found within the underprivileged, saturated realities in the work of the American playwright Maria Irene Fornes, than it does with the average contemporary Irish farmer with such a sized holding (three hundred acres), where computers, technology and European Union documentation in all probability play some part in everyday living. Likewise, while Red has some wealth, as demonstrated by his capacity to hand over a sizeable cheque, the setting reflects the squalid and dysfunctional psychological conditions of the household.

Studies have shown that while there is a connection between poverty and child abuse, especially in terms of reportage, no such connection exists between poverty and sexual abuse. But the harsh reality is that it is often easier for a spectator to think that abuse happens predominantly outside his or her social class. Working-class housing estates have often been the location for plays that contain sexual abuse. To Carr’s credit, she locates the play within a certain socio-economic class, yet blurs specific class issues.

The grotesque in Carr’s work, just like that of J.M. Synge’s, serves a significant function, in that it disorientates. Previous Irish dramas relied on a writing system that seemed to establish two value systems in opposition and it was always easier for an audience to side with the
merits of one over the other, however complicated the overlap. Red’s friend Isaac offers further details in the establishment of a network of bizarre detail. Isaac’s relationship with his cat and his sharing of a bed with the same animal is a little weird and after the cat dies, Isaac’s intention to turn the hide of the cat into a waistcoat, says something strange about his personality, regardless of the fact that Red wants to give the intention a sexual meaning, by remarking, “So ya can stroke her from time to time” (Hill: 43). Isaac’s confession that he shared the same bed with his dead wife for a number of days after she had died, as they were trapped inside by a fall of snow, is an additional detail that unsettles.

Ded is utterly marginalized as he lives in the cowshed and he eats his food with dirty hands. De-humanisation has been his way of protecting himself. Carr’s stage directions describe him as “long haired, bearded, filthy: cowdung all over his clothes” and a little later she adds that he is “beaten to the scut” (Hill: 13). Once he was, according to Dinah, “Daddy’s golden biy and Mother’s darlin”, but now he is in a desperate state (Hill: 15). Dinah remarks to him: “I allass knew wan of us wouldn’t make ud” (Hill: 15). In her eyes, he is the broken one and she is the one who has survived the ordeal. Little do we know of the terms of her survival at this early stage of the drama. Shalome has this fantasy of getting to Kinnegar and back to her father; her desperate and ineffectual attempts to flee her present surroundings provide many of the play’s grotesquely comic moments. The de-realisation of the play depends on details like this to move the drama into an alternative reality, and likewise, is something that makes the play tolerable, from a distance point of view, to the spectator.

Here in On Raftery’s Hill the grotesque is the reality of their living habits; it is the trap and the violation. This I suppose is one of the play’s great difficulties. The claustrophobia and the confinement of the play resulted in many people feeling uneasy because of the play’s thrust in performance. One of the most sinister and disturbing features of the play in performance was an audience’s uneasy readiness or compliance to laugh, at two different performances of the play that I witnessed, at the dark and sarcastic humour of Red in the Second Act of the play, knowing him to be a rapist.

Carr’s By the Bog of Cats (1998) a re-working of the Medea myth, could shift between the worlds of dream, fantasy, reality and the grotesque, such as the wonderfully bizarre wedding at the opening of Act Two, whereas here in On Raftery’s Hill, there is no escape route, no alternative reality. The dialectical structure available to her in all of her other work to date was made forcefully absent by the play’s very theme. Here all an audience was left with was the precision of the writing, the emerging story and a loose sympathy for some of the characters. Neither the tender romance between Sorrel and Dara Mood nor the comic presence of Isaac, could counter the overwhelming reality of incest. Because there are so few dramatic/mythic precedents, Carr’s attempts to draw on the Greek myth of incest, between Zeus and Hera, fails. There is a difference between a Greek myth of origins and of populating the world and reality of the pain of incest, so that the play never has the comfort of a mythological dimension. In mythology, Zeus and Hera (Juno is her Roman counterpart) were brother and sister. She is queen of the gods, the daughter of the Titans Cronus and Rhea. Hera was the goddess of marriage and the protector of married women, so she is both earth Goddess and Goddess of childbirth. Zeus courted her unsuccessfully and then turned to magic, changing himself into a dishevelled cuckoo on whom she had sympathy, holding it to her breast. He then raped her and out of embarrassment she agreed to marry him, giving birth to six children. (And in Greek myth the cow was Hera’s sacred animal, the one that Red butchers in his own fields.) Zeus was renowned for his affairs and she avenged many of them. But Raftery’s hill cannot be Mount Olympus. A myth of origins, of incest and sexual licence
fails to help in this instance. Carr re-invigorates the Medea myth in *By the Bog of Cats* as murder is ritualised through distancing and dancing, whereas in *On Raftery’s Hill* myth becomes unsanctioned and unviable. Myth is a liability, rather than a process of legitimising. (Likewise Freud’s theories of the Electra and Oedipus complexes, that draw on Greek myth, have been utterly discredited.)

During the First Act Isaac is not long in the house before he witnesses Red’s aggression towards his family. But Red’s gruffness and excitement may come across as his need to impress on his friend that he is the man of the house. There is quirkiness and an exorbitant excessiveness in Red’s acute observations and strange, buoyant perspectives that make him initially an almost tolerable crank. But soon after, when Dara reveals that the father of Sarah Brophy’s still-born baby is her own father. (Sarah Brophy goes to the grave and attempts to feed her stillborn child. Her father wants her home but she won’t leave without it. He allows her to take the child home, but Sarah herself dies in her bed also. Brophy breaks down, admits, according to Dara Mood, that “he only ever went near her the wance, thah he wanted to die as well” *(Hill: 23)*. Brophy ends up in a mental hospital in Ballinasloe.)

Red’s response to Dara’s account is not what might be socially acceptable, but is frighteningly apt in the circumstances. “Red: Don’t belave ud. Don’t belave wan word of ud. Sarah Brophy goh whah was comin to her... Ud’s gossips like you destriys a man’s good name and reputation” *(Hill: 23)*. And he adds, “Ud’s only your word again our beliefs, thah righ Sorrel?” *(Hill: 23)* Notice the rejection, the challenge and his tactic to get Sorrel involved in the debate.

Earlier, Red, in accusative tones, tells Isaac that Dinah wants “to banish everywan and have us all gloatin round her” *(Hill: 24)*. The emphasis on “gloatin” displays Red’s perverse take on things. Late in the First Act, Red’s attempt to attract the attention of Dinah, who is in her bedroom, is sublimely represented by Carr. He sings, offers to bring her up a whiskey and is annoyed by her rejection. Their exchanges are remarkably candid, brutal and full of a knowingness and familiarity that one might expect from disgruntled partners in a heterosexual relationship or marriage, but not father and daughter. Furniss argues that sexual abuse is addictive, that it “does not primarily create a pleasurable experience but serves tension relief”, that the process is “driven by repetition compulsion”, and that “the sexual gratification of the sexual act serves reality avoidance and supports a low frustration tolerance, weak coping mechanisms and weak ego-functions” *(Furniss: 1991, 32)*.

The following exchange between Dinah and Red ends with Dinah telling him “Don’t touch Sorrel” *(Hill: 30)*. The warning dramatically signals what is to come. Before the spectator witnesses the rape scene, two further exchanges occur. One is between Shalome and Red, during which Red complains about his deceased wife. “Red: I married a lunatic with an antique violin and an eternal case a migraine. If Christ heself slid onto the pilla she’d plade the migraine” *(Hill: 31)*. Another throw-away remark made by him, as much out of self-regret as anything else, “... ya can do nothin to women these days,” is an aptly appropriate indicator as to his state of mind *(Hill: 31)*.
When the young lovers return to the house, Red is upstairs but overhears their conversation. Carr allows the young lovers their innocence and passion and grants them a casual and comfortable freedom between them. Dara is from a poorer class, but he has his dreams to own one-day Raftery’s Hill. He plans to gain it not by marrying Sorrel but by hard work. Dara wants to move on from the “stingy silences” of his own father and the “perverted rages” of Sorrel’s (Hill: 33).

Red’s ageing, his fear of his own imminent death as announced by Sorrel, his jealousy of the young lovers and his distaste for the young adults being in charge of their own lives mean that Red is overwhelmed by the future. There is no real “trigger event” for his behaviour and there is a serious irrationality in Red’s accusations made to Sorrel about her and Dara scheming against him. Carr monitors superbly his frightful rage, his interrogation techniques and the manner in which Red begins to give himself permission to become more and more dominant and violent against his daughter. Previously, Sorrel was not capable of gutting the hare. Now Red begins to enact the activity, only that he does so, demonstrating with his daughter’s body the process. Producing a knife and holding her down, he cuts away her clothing, without nicking the flesh. He rapes her on the kitchen table. His justification for his assault is because his daughter has betrayed him by talking badly about him, because he has been “too soft on” her and because she has been “prancin round like the Virgin Mary” (Hill: 35). Nobody intervenes, despite Sorrel’s pleas for help.

While the First Act mapped the territory of the family, the conspiracy of silence that existed between them and Red’s assault on Sorrel, the Second Act, three weeks on, deals with the consequences of the rape, with the manner in which the household denies the incident and in the way by which questions and attempted disclosures or revelations are policed by members of the family. Instead of Dinah acknowledging the harrowing event, she has been ignoring Sorrel, and by implication, placing a degree of unfounded responsibility on Sorrel’s shoulders.

Sorrel’s disturbance is unsettling the other family members. She bathes all the time, barely eats, cries constantly and her dress sense changes from being reasonably contemporary and youthful during the First Act to baggy, loose-fitting clothing that swamps her body. Sorrel, as a woman, challenges her objectification. On top of this, Sorrel rightly accuses Dinah of being her mother. Dinah cannot deny it, and is probably glad that the issue is out in the open. Later, Dinah openly challenges Red for his assault, accusing him of destroying the “wan perfect thing in this house” (Hill: 45). He denies the extent of his wrongdoing. “Red.... I barely went near her” and a little later he claims he was “only puttin manners on her” (Hill: 45). He even goes so far as to accuse Dinah of being jealous of the physical contact that took place between himself and Sorrel. To wrap things up, Red seeks an apology from Sorrel and Dinah encourages them to make up, as if it has been some small fracas or fall-out. Red wonders if Sorrel is “goin to start spreadin lies?” (Hill: 46) Truths are lies, lies are truths in this twisted, maladjusted, grotesque reality generated so convincingly by Carr.

The final exchanges of the play are fabulously written. Carr correctly, from a dramatic point of view, holds over the major conversation between Dinah and Sorrel until late. Rightly,
Sorrel rejects the apportioning of any blame on her. Brilliantly, Carr captures the complexity of Dinah’s emotions. Dinah is enraged by the fact that nobody protected her, that Sorrel showed no thanks for the care and safekeeping provided up to that point by Dinah, for such care and protection may have come at Dinah’s personal expense. But why might Dinah have not intervened? Is it that she does not really care? Is she replicating the pattern of irresponsibility that was practised by her own mother? Is she unconsciously wishing the same pain for another sibling and/or does she take some relief in the fact that the emotional and traumatic burden is shared? Does she need to witness the event, as a re-enactment or a re-framing of her own pain, in such a way that it becomes accessible through the witnessing of another going through the same thing? Does she do so, in order that she can be even harder on herself?

Sorrel hears of Dinah’s predicament at twelve, when she felt obliged to sleep with her father at her mother’s behest. (What shapes an adult to behave in this way? Had she herself been abused as a child? If so, the offspring of the Raftery household have come through a history of trauma.) So why does, Dinah, as a mature, adult still participate in sexual activity with him as this, it seems, is not only for his sole pleasure? (While Dinah does not claim any great benefit from the bond and while she dismisses it as a sort of a tedious, indifferent inevitability, nothing can really prepare an audience for the complicated bond that exists between Dinah and Red. The self-discipline of Dinah and her capacity to conceal and conspire with Red is frightening in its own right. In effect through the resoluteness of Dinah and its accumulative impact on Sorrel, Carr captures the way abuse is compartmentalised within the minds of victims and how personalities, through the experiences of incomprehensive and consistent trauma, disassociate from pain and can mentally split, leading to multiple personality disorders.

Sorrel distinguishes between the rape of a child and silent intimacies in the dark of night shared by Dinah and Red, between past and present. Sorrel wonders how the “relationship” continues occasionally into the present and queries how violation becomes curious comfort? Dinah cannot fully explain it without drawing on the world of children’s games: “’Ud’s just like children playin in a field ah some awful game, before rules was made” (Hill: 56). She is a perverse partner in a relationship that carries an unbearable cost. Bagley and King quote Cohen who suggests that:

The incestuous family cannot be viewed only as a sexually abusing and deviant unit, nor can the psychoanalytical explanation suffice in understanding the phenomenon. It appears that perhaps all of the members... are emotionally deprived and that the tabooed sexual relationship is a manifestation of a basic search for warmth, comfort, and nurturance (Bagley and King: 1990, 46).

Cohen moves incest away from violation and power towards intimacy. Others would disagree with Cohen. They would stress more the violatory aspect whereby the thrill of power or delight in spreading fear and terror in others is the more pressing need. Despite whatever warmth and comfort are on offer, abuse can lead to a prolonged cycle of degraded infantilism or regression to an infantile consciousness.
Dinah wants Sorrel to be safe, and simultaneously, she is certainly jealous of her, is angered by her possibilities and despises her chance at freedom through marriage to Dara Mood, regardless of the fact that marriage, as textual resolution or salvation has been resisted by many feminist critics, as a feasible dramatic device. Red has put up the cash for Sorrel’s wedding. “He can be very good, Daddy, can’t he now?”, Dinah reminds her sister (Hill: 39). Sorrel promises Dinah not to come back after she is married. Dinah will have to come and visit. Marriage may be a solution, but it will be stopped at all costs by the end of the play. (In By the Bog of Cats three wedding dresses plus a white communion dress appear, as Carr deliberately plays with the fetishisation of the wedding dress as a significant icon, and by sheer dint of the number of dresses, the proliferation is bizarrely unsettling. Red regards the relationship between the young lovers in threatening terms. He talks to Isaac of “the young fancier come to plunder the heart a me daugher” (Hill: 21). When Dara calls to take Sorrel out, Red delivers strange lines. “Red: Jay, Isaac, if eyes was hands the pair a them be stripped and pantin on the table” (Hill: 24). Red follows it up by saying “G’wan will yees, or are ya (Dara) a man ah all?” (Hill: 24). Again not only is the comment overstepping the mark, but it also expresses a competitive and unhealthy interest in the relationship between Dara and Sorrel. When the spectator witnesses the young couple together, their bond is one of comfort, familiarity and mutual attractiveness. As Sorrel and Dara go out, Red delivers a final quip: “G’wan young Mood and enjoy yourself while your guardian angel’s still around, for wan a these momins ya’ll wake and she’ll be gone” (Hill: 24).

After the rape, Red implicitly hopes to buy Sorrel’s silence by presenting Dara with the deeds to fifty acres and a cheque for twenty grand. Dara refuses it. After a brief stand-off between Dara and Red, Sorrel and Dara’s exchange is fraught with tension. Sorrel defends her father and takes on his opinions. She calls Dara’s family “scrubbers”, just as her father had done previously (Hill: 53). Sorrel expresses her confusion: “I don’t know. I don’t know anythin anymore... The world’s gone ouh like a light and I can’t see righ abouh anythin anymore” (Hill: 53). Now, instead of seeing Dara as a way out, Sorrel drives him away; a clear case of misappropriation and transference is in operation. Dinah’s intervention is to invite Dara to return in a few weeks when things might be a little easier. Next Shalome flees from the house in Sorrel’s wedding dress and nobody stops her. The absence of intervention is significant in its own right with the anticipated demise of the dress serving a symbolic function for all.

Towards the end of the play, Red returns accompanied by Shalome in the soiled wedding dress. The family all fill their final stage positions, ranging across the stage. Dinah makes small talk, Shalome raves and Red wonders if Sorrel had “talked some sense into young Mood”. The play in performance ends with Sorrel claiming “Daddy, don’t you worry. I sorted him ouh for evermore” (Hill: 57). Such a comment helps deliver an ambiguous ending. In the published version of the play there is an additional sequence. Red begins to clean his soiled gun with a strip from the wedding dress. This is a more harrowing, if negatively symbolic ending with the patriarchal figure, wiping the gun (phallic object) clean with a strip of material from a wedding dress that has been put beyond use (decommissioned), by being soiled beyond any dry-cleaning intervention, and by being torn by him. With this gesture, Red is allowed to consolidate his power, but also he is given the final words of the play. In the performance text, that final line is given to Sorrel, thereby, despite the aggressive ambiguity of the sentence expressed by her, it squarely is placing the focus and emphasis on her. Red is a seriously destructive patriarch. Isaac accuses Red of turning “this beautiful farm into an abattoir” (Hill: 19). Ded tells Sorrel that if “you were to
remove him (Red), ya wouldn’t know me” (Hill: 38). Red has not interfered with Ded. Ded states that he is “no girl to be played wud” (Hill: 38). Sorrel’s response is savage. “Sorrel: I don’t think Daddy’s choosy. He just wants to bate us all into the dirt” (Hill: 38).

Carr rightly moves the rape beyond the sexual dimension and into the frame of destructive and annihilatory power. But Red, during a conversation with Isaac blatantly wants to seek out the sexual angle to all things. Disparagingly, Red says of Isaac’s daughter, “Well, I can’t imagine anywan wantin to do anythin to Philomena” (Hill: 42). As sexual intimacy and affection, rape is tolerable for him. The siblings in the Raftery household are so distraught that they cannot pull together, they cannot empathise and they cannot fundamentally ease each other’s burden. There is little or no space beyond dysfunction. Ded wants to call the guards, but because of his participation in the delivery of Dinah’s child, Sorrel, he feels implicated by association. Red forced him to participate and Ded’s derangement may have been either caused or exacerbated by the experience.

“Depression”, “anxiety”, “hypervigilance”, “dissociation”, “disengagement”, “detachment/numbing”, “observation”, “amnesia”, “multiple personality disorder”, “impaired self-reference” are all responses to abuse (Briere: 1992, 23-45). The spectator’s concern is mainly for Sorrel, less for Dinah and less again for Shalome. Carr uses Dinah’s hardness to diminish somewhat empathy and likewise distance is forthcoming from Shalome’s attempts to flee, even if she cannot escape. It shows that she has resistance but no alternatives. She exhibits a profound helplessness, that is all the more disturbing because of the comic laughter from the spectator towards her dilemma.

To capture vulnerability, the shared and snared reality of their lives, the imagery of the hare is consistent throughout the play and in some of her other work. Isaac accuses Red of hunting unfairly, after he shot a hare and he then went into the lair and “strangled the leverets”, an action so symbolic of the way he deals with his own family (Hill: 19). Dinah also uses the hare symbolically.

Dinah: .... You’ll go off and marry Dara Mood and I’ll be left wud thah wan racin round like a march hare in her nightdress and Ded atin hees dinner like a dog at the duur and Daddy blusterin and butcherin all the small helpless creatures a the fields” (Hill: 18).

The animal is referred to twice here, suggestive of madness and defencelessness. When Red interrogates Ded he tells him to “stop blinkin will ya. You’re noh a hare a’ya” (Hill: 26). The symbolism builds further with Sorrel’s initial refusal to gut the hare and make hare soup for her father. As red rapes Sorrel, the significance of the hare becomes all the more apparent.

Red buys silence through his power to destroy, through his capacity to unhinge others from their reality and through his capacity to blend and blur distinctions between the human and the animal kingdoms. If the animal world is used to capture an essential vulnerability, it is also called upon to highlight savagery and a universe in chaos. But Dinah’s statement that: “Thah’s whah we are, gorillas in clothes pretendin to be human” is never enough to shift the play beyond the human (Hill: 30). Red delivers a somewhat similar version of the same thing: “We were big loose monsters, Mother, hurlin through the air wud carnage in our hearts and blood under our nails, and no stupid laws houldin us down or back or in” (Hill: 31-2).
When Isaac informs Red that Brophy had consumed a mug of weed killer, Red cannot understand the act, which Isaac seen as been prompted by the "lavins a Christian dacency" (Hill: 42). Late in the play Sorrel adds "We're a band a gorillas swingin from the trees", a line that confirms, just as Dinah's did, the manner in which victims internalise and echo the values and the prejudices of the violator (Hill: 56).

Carr urges us not to draw on the animal world as some sort of way of justifying what the spectator witnesses on stage and not to accommodate talk of repression as an unjustified limitation of the natural impulses or unconscious or id. Abuse has long term consequences for many, ranging from eating disorders to inability to trust potential partners, from depression and self-laceration to suicidal tendencies: fundamentally, it impacts on how one might view the world, how safe one feels in the world. For Dinah, who has suffered twenty-seven years of abuse, she only sees her life in negative terms: "No spring for me, nor summer aither. I had no summer in me life, Daddy. Just ahum. Christ, I'm goin to die on this Hill" (Hill: 29). Dinah states "all my life I've waited for my life to start. Somehow it never has" (Hill: 18). And most substantially, the cycle is perpetuation down through the generations and the inability to call a halt to it are the most disturbing features captured by Carr. Isaac claims that "Monsters make themselves", and while Carr is not fully aligning herself with such an existential position, she does give a context of cyclical violation in a way that complicates things (Hill: 43).

On the other hand, through the character of Dinah, Carr dismisses a tendency to simplify or blur the distinctions between pleasure and pain like many of her contemporaries have done; she articulates complication and prioritises one over the other. Dinah has been a victim for twenty-seven years; Sorrel has only been assaulted once. How do we sum up the extent of Dinah's pain? Carr creates a world astray, full of obsession, havoc, mutilation and disgust. The capacity to survive that experience is superbly captured by Carr; the complexity of the bond between the family members is brilliantly achieved, but for the first time in one of her Midland's plays the life of the central character does not end in suicide. By a hair's breadth or a hare's breath, there is a cautious optimism in the basic, pared-down survival of the victims of the Raftery curse.

References


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