

Realism, Feminism and the Northern Irish Women

Playwrights of the '80s

Subsequent to the publication of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* in 1968 female academics concentrated increasingly on deconstructing patriarchal representations of femininity in literature. In Britain in 1976 Michelene Wandor published *Understudies* critiquing the representation of female characters in drama, focusing in particular on *Look Back in Anger*. At the same time actresses started to form women's companies, usually fringe groups working in a non-naturalistic vein. The eighties became the decade of the women playwrights: Caryl Churchill, Sue Townsend, Sarah Daniels, Pam Gems, to name but a few. The main thrust of the subject-matter was the oppression of women by patriarchal attitudes. And Northern Ireland was no exception: Anne Devlin and Christina Reid put women centre-stage.

Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* was produced, by myself, as part of the Festival of Irish Theatre in The Netherlands in 1990. Directed by Garry Hynes, it was as one critic put it a 'gritty and gutsy' production. However, the other critics were less well disposed to the play itself on the grounds that it was realism, an outdated form which reifies content over innovative structure. At the time I hotly defended the production, incensed that the critics, and the theatre industry in general, were more interested in form than in what a play had to say.

Feminist critique has been disseminated widely since then, and in retrospect Devlin's play poses certain problems for the feminist critic. The cultural materialist Catherine Belsey and the film critics Laura Mulvey and Teresa de Lauretis have written extensively on realism, postulating that it supports the dominant ideology and prohibits women from taking up a subject position. As Jeanie Forte inquires in "Realism, Narrative, and the Feminist Playwright – A Problem of Reception": can a realist play also be a feminist play? (Keysar: 1996. Ch. 1)

Feminist analysis has identified an oppressive discourse of engendered representation that constructs the woman as 'the other', the non-male. This is predicated on Lacan's analysis of our social and cultural environments, the symbolic order, as a site of signification, the central signifier, necessary to contextualise

the sign system, being the phallus. The male, therefore, is constructed as the subject of discourse in the symbolic order and the female is 'the other' or the object of signification (Rose and Mitchell 1982). Belsey points to Lacan's notion of the split 'I' in literary contexts: the 'I' who speaks and the 'I' who is represented in the discourse. Realism, as a text, belongs in the realm of the symbolic order. According to Belsey, it offers a stable positioning of the 'I', a fixed meaning and a move towards closure. Texts operating in the mode of realism seek to suppress the split in the interests of the stability of class society. However, if the male is the unified 'I' of realism, female characters will always remain 'the other' and this poses a dilemma for the female reader/spectator.

So women playwrights using the structure of realism would seem to have a quintessential problem in putting the woman in a subject position. For example, in Sarah Daniel's *Masterpieces* the female protagonist is clearly 'the other', her sexual identity objectified by the construction of feminine sexual representation in pornography and patriarchal attitudes. As an objectified woman she cannot be the stable subject in realism as a male protagonist can be. She is a split 'I', the 'I' who speaks and the 'I' who is represented as a victim of male desire. It could be said that engaging the audience with the objectification of women and indicating the split 'I' as a condition of the social construction of femininity validates the use of realism by women playwrights, but the objectification of the passive sexual female and the split in identity that ensues on the construction of femininity were the themes of *Masterpieces*. In other plays realism is an impediment to the subject positioning of women as protagonists. In *Ourselves Alone* Devlin attempts to put women in the subject position.

According to Belsey's definitions of realism, *Ourselves Alone* follows a standard of realist plot. The natural order is disrupted and re-ordered in the final scene. It is Frieda in the very first scene of *Ourselves Alone* who disrupts the natural order. She is in a Republican club rehearsing for a performance. The masculine preoccupations of the natural order are evident. There are photos of the ten hunger strikers on the wall and men are coming and going. Frieda stops in the middle of a song with a traditionally male-oriented Republican theme.

Armoured cars and tanks and guns

Came to take away our sons

Every man should stand beside

The men behind the wire.

This is the natural order in this social environment. And there is no mention of the women involved as mothers or wives. But Frieda objects to singing about men: 'I'm fed up with songs where the women are doormats'. The male order has been disrupted by the intrusion of a female perspective. But Frieda's own song is called "The Volunteer" and is concerned with a woman who wants to be an activist: to take part in the male order.

Her sister Josie is an activist, albeit in a typically female supportive role. She did once plant a car bomb, but she was helped by a 'man she would go to hell for' as she puts it herself. The man is her lover of ten year's standing, Cathal O'Donell, and he is an intrinsic facet of Josie's activist aspirations. O'Donell has a significant position with the Provisional IRA and spends most of his time in hiding in the South. He is also married. He spends just enough time at home with his fiercely loyal wife to get her pregnant every year. Ten babies, one for every year of Josie's affair with him. Josie makes her first appearance in the second scene and she is waiting in the dark. Josie spends a lot of time waiting, waiting for Cathal to come to her. But her first line in the play is a reference to her father, the man she couldn't wait to get away from. Soon however she is talking about Cathal. 'I can't live like this any more. I sit here night after night wondering will he come tonight'. Her friend Donna replies: 'We're all waiting on men, Josie'. Donna lives with Josie's brother Liam, but he is in Long Kesh serving a four-year sentence.

So far so good. The position of women in this particular patriarchal environment has been established. It is the theme of the play. But Josie continues: 'Love? It's such a silly word. We've never spoken it. It's just that when I'm totally me and he's totally him we swap' (p.16). Josie's love for O'Donell is predicated on her need to become O'Donell. Only by doing this can she take up the subject position. And in the process O'Donell is feminised. But this can only take place in an illusionary world in which 'the bed is like a raft and the room is all the world to us' (p. 16). In the outside world, the symbolic order, the relationship cannot even be acknowledged. Josie is denied her sexual identity; it must be suppressed. However, Josie's sexual identity is dependent on her swapping with O'Donell and it is a release from her usual objectified position in her social environment. And there is another consideration to take into account: his wife.

Josie says: 'She's not important to him' (p. 17). Donna replies: 'Wives are always important' (p.17). In order to maintain her illusions about her relationship with O'Donnell, she has to objectify another woman. His wife, the mother of his ten children becomes in her mind 'the other': the other woman.

Josie is articulating her striving for subject status, but can we regard her as a unified and stable 'I'? Is she the subject of the dramatic action or the object? This question pertains to audience reception theory. In the traditional realist narrative, the reader of the performance text is constituted as a stable and unified subject, and in doing so it supports, according to Forte, the dominant ideology. And if one accepts Lacan's proposition, that the central signifier of the symbolic order is the phallus, female protagonists in narrative realism, which deals by definition with social interactions, will always be contextualised as 'the other'. To encroach on patriarchal ideology and subvert the object status of women in representation, one would need a resistant reader. The female spectator of a realist narrative such as *Ourselves Alone* is confronted with her own objectivity; she cannot be a stable, unified subject unless she identifies with the male subject and in doing so regards the female characters through the gaze of the male.

Teresa de Lauretis has engaged with formalist and structuralist approaches to show how narrative strategies are engendered: how the 'male' initiates the quest, but the 'female' can only be the object of that quest (1984: Ch.5). The sphere of action in the traditional narrative positions the passive female as a site of transaction between the actants which are males. In the process of the drama Josie passes from her father, to O'Donnell, to Joe Conran and back to her father. These might seem like actantial choices, as if Josie were the questor in search of the passive and objectified male. However, her journey from man to man is inseparable from her quest for subject status and on each count she fails. Her attachment to Joe Conran starts when she realises that he is going into the Provisional IRA to win back his wife. She wants a man who is willing to make a significant gesture for love of a woman, the type of sacrifice she has made for O'Donnell. But as with O'Donnell she is competing with another woman. Josie's journey takes her from being an IRA activist who is fighting for the thirty-two-county worker's republic to being a woman for whom the crushing of a foetus is a tragedy. She wants to hear the breathing of a child in the dark. Leaving aside the fact that this is an essentialist representation of womanhood, Josie's quest is doomed to failure. Even her baby will not be her own. As Malachy states in the final scene: 'It's my baby now'. She is the object of transaction between

men who negotiate between her and their Republican goals, and in the negotiation process she is an appendage. A female spectator who identifies with Josie will be forced into a recognition of her own object status in patriarchal society, but a female spectator would be more likely to be critical of Josie and regard her from the false subject position, because Josie's identity is predicated on associations. She fails to achieve individuality, or, in fact, even to set it as a goal.

As far as reception theory is concerned it would be fair to assume that the average British theatre audience in venues producing social realism would be middle-class and liberal. Devlin's male oppressors are framed by their terrorist activities, and are set apart from the spectators. There will be no resistance to a reading of them as oppressors. However, there are two men in the play who can focus the gaze of the audience, and while they are minor characters they take up the position of unified subjects in their scenes. John McDermot, Freda's friend and later lover, is an educated liberal with which the spectators might engage as a representative of male subjectivity. He is an activist, a member of the Worker's Party, seeking the unification of Ireland through peaceful means, which will only be precipitated by the conjoining of Catholic and Protestant working-class interests. In the stage directions his house is full of political posters indicating as Devlin does that for him the personal is political. Nonetheless, his desire for Frieda is framed by his need to shape her. Her childlike nature is described for the audience:

Listen to me. I'll miss you. I'll miss your messing up the house. I'll miss you leaving all the dishes for me to wash. Leaving all the lights on. Running up the heating bills. I'll miss you letting the fire go out, and then not being able to re-light it. I'll miss your awful singing in the bath. Being rude to my friends, particularly when they're women. Most of all I'll miss the way you change your mind. You're so much trouble.

p.61

His capacity to love a woman who is so obviously incapable of negotiating the stereotypical role of domesticity is a part of his liberal credentials, along with the beating he takes from her father's cronies when he goes in search of her, which he does out of concern for her well-being. Nonetheless, this representation of Frieda, rendered authoritative through the gaze of a unified subject, represents her as childlike and irresponsible. Frieda is the object he will mould. And Frieda is an accomplice in her own objectification. She objec-

tifies herself. When she is forced to leave her family environment, she says to McDermot: 'You are responsible for me now'. She joins the Worker's Party without knowing what it stands for. She doesn't even read the pamphlets she hands out in the street. She makes reckless choices because she is not very good at making decisions.

Moreover, Frieda colludes with the male gaze. She needs to show herself, to be the object of the gaze: '...there's this voice in my head' she says, 'Nobody knows you. Nobody knows you exist. You've got to make yourself known'" (p. 21). Her singing is all about being in the spotlight, the object of the gaze. Unfortunately, while Frieda is the character with the most incisive analysis of her the women's status within their environment, she is incapable of acting on her insights. Devlin's representation of her in the play, particularly as seen through McDermot's eyes, impedes her capacity for agency. Christopher Murray claims that Frieda liberates herself by making the decision to leave Ireland. This is another of Frieda's reckless decisions. As she says of exile: 'I'd rather be lonely than suffocated'. Evading suffocation might be a step in right direction but, but loneliness can hardly be equated with liberation.

Joe Conran is an upper-class Englishman of mixed Irish ancestry. Educated at public school, at Trinity College, Cambridge, from which he has a PhD, and Sandhurst, he has transformed himself into a left-winger with some considerable clout within international revolutionary-socialist alliances. While Joe has already been interrogated thoroughly in Amsterdam, Josie is given to job of performing the final interrogation. Unbeknown to Josie, they are being watched by O'Donnell and Malachy. It seems as if she has the upper hand, by virtue of the extensive information she possesses regarding his movements. However, our appraisal of Josie's commitment to the Republican movement has been coloured by a story she related concerning a school-fellow who had the money to go to Dublin to buy shoes. Joe tells her she is not a Republican but a shoe-fetishist. He offers her money to go the Dublin to buy shoes. He mocks her from his position as the subject of the interrogation, but takes up the subject position in the scene. Josie is 'the other'. Her espousal of the thirty-two county worker's republic is relegated in his estimation to a typically feminine whim, as femininity is constructed by the patriarchy, a preoccupation with fashion. It is a clever put-down.

The only episode in the play which could empower women with a subject position is Donna's monologue: a non-naturalistic device in a realist narrative. It is odd that the monologue should be given to Donna,

the most objectified woman in the narrative. She is the 'doormat', her house continuously raided by the army, used for storing weapons and as a hide-away for men on the run. Her life is a continuous trauma, and yet she accepts it out of love for Liam. In the monologue she describes the devil who appears to her in dreams causing severe asthma attacks. The devil is a symbol of the patriarchal oppression she has internalised. In the dream she recounts how she tells the devil to leave her alone. He acquiesces and, much to her amazement, disappears. But she fails to carry this through into her life with Liam. In the following scene she allows his bullying to drive her to desperation. She gives him a knife and tells him to kill her. She can't go on any more.

In the final scene the play reaches closure, in Belsey's terms the re-establishment of the natural order. Josie's baby becomes Malachy's baby, Donna re-establishes her relationship with Liam and all that entails. The two are left waiting: Donna for visits from Liam and Josie for Joe, who might never return. Frieda recollects a night when they went skinny-dipping as children:

And we sank down into a calm water and tried to catch the phosphorescence on the surface of the waves – it was the first time I'd seen ever seen it – and the moon was reflected on the sea that night. It was as though we swam in the night sky and cupped the stars between our cool fingers.

(p. 90)

This is an escape from the symbolic order, where they are signified as objects, into Lacan's Imaginary phase where the possibility of a subject identity still seems possible. But it is short-lived.

And then they saw us. First Liam and then John, and my father in a temper because we'd left our swimsuits on the beach. And the shouting and the slapping and the waves breaking over us. We raced for cover to another part of the shore. We escaped into the shadows and were clothed again before they reached us. We lay down in the sandhills and laughed.

(p. 90)

It is a lyrical moment, shortly before dawn, when the women in the here-and-now of the plays time-scale escape into a time before the symbolic order had fully positioned them in relation to a male-oriented envi-

ronment: when laughter could be subversive and dismissive of that authority. 'How quietly the light comes' Donna says, and then the stage direction indicates (*Darkness*). The play ends while the women are in the thrall of the nostalgia, because the day heralds the return of the natural order.

As I have tried to indicate, Devlin's play, structured as realism, fails to allow the women to take up status as a unified, stable subject, because in fleshing the characters out, to make them real within the context of their social interactions, they become constructs of femininity, their identities oppressed, their individuality psychologically confined by the construction of femininity they have experienced and internalised.

During the seventies, women's theatre companies emerged as splinter-groups within the socialist fringe movement. They adopted the model used for socialist theatre, which is defined as the Brechtian model. Christina Reid works within this framework. In *Tea in a China Cup* she deals with the Protestant working-class women in a community of Orangemen. The play is constructed of episodic scenes, flash-backs from Beth's memories, each of which is self-contained. These are framed within a present-day timescale, 1972, in which Beth's mother is dying of cancer and subsequently dies. Beth steps out of the action to speak directly to the audience allowing herself to be seen to have developed a critical awareness of the past.

The memories are represented in such a way that the audience will also acquire a critical appraisal of the family of women who disempower themselves by empowering the Protestant ethos. These women keep the community ticking over while the men march on the 12th of July and march off to war, to be killed or maimed for an idea: the idea of Britishness. The men are feckless: gamblers, drinkers, absent from the hearth. And to the women this is their natural disposition, so they accept their own positions as guardians of the Protestant way of life. They are proud of it: proud of the cabinet that contains the china tea services. No matter how poor they are, they will still drink tea from a china cup.

Sectarianism also plays a role in the women's disempowerment. They would rather remain poor than ask for their entitlements from the government because Catholics are always 'mouthing off' about poverty, but good Protestants retain their respectability by pretending they can get by. Beth's Catholic friend, Teresa, goes to a grammar school, because her parents get a grant to buy the uniform. But Beth's mother, Sarah, refuses to be like a Catholic and apply for a grant. Beth is forced to go to a secondary school. Beth's aunt Maisie is a fierce one for Protestant standards being maintained. She comments:

They say this Butler Education Act is a great thing for the workin'-class children. Me eye it is. What I want to know is why kids like Theresa Duffy can get their fees paid to go to a Fenian grammar school, and one of ours has to miss out... No good'll come of this subsidised education, you mark my words. The Catholics will beg, borrow and steal the money to get their kids a fancy education. This country'll suffer for it in years to come when well-qualified Catholics start to pour out of our Queen's University expecting the top jobs, wantin' a say in the runnin' of the country.

(p. 31)

Aunt Maisie is being remembered by Beth in this scene, and memory is coloured by perspective. Beth's stance has become critical. Maisie is objectified, she is the object of our gaze, but it is a framework which promotes a critical gaze. There is no need for the reader/spectator to be resistant as there is with realism. Beth can take up a subject position for us, which, I should comment is not really Brechtian, because we take part in her critical reappraisal of her past experiences.

Female sexuality is also a crucial theme in the development of the plot itself. Beth's introduction to menstruation is given representation. Her mother, standing with her back to her at the ironing-board tells her that one day soon she will start to bleed. She doesn't tell her why, nor give her any information about sex or pregnancy. Nice girls keep their 'privates', 'what's down there', to themselves. The scene, played out by the embarrassed mother and the uncomprehending child, observed by a knowing audience, is funny, and there is a great deal of humour in the play in general, but the consequences are far-reaching. When Theresa leaves for England she is still in the dark about sex. She recounts how she intended to ask her sister. However as she says:

She came back from the honeymoon with such a stunned look on her face that I hadn't the nerve to ask her...Do you ever notice the way that women giggle a lot before they're married but they don't giggle much afterwards? I wonder why?

Beth says: 'I suppose we'll find out'. And they do. Theresa's experimentation with her sexuality leads to pregnancy and Beth marries a rich man for whom she has no feelings to please her mother. Beth's sexuality is contained within the construction of female sexual identity prevalent in her community.

In fact, Beth has never done anything for herself, allowing her identity to be constructed in the manner of a good Protestant girl to please her mother. And she dreads her mother's death when she will be forced into agency on her own behalf. Her husband, another feckless male who depends on rich aunts, has left her to escape his debtors and she is forced to sell up and move on. When the mother dies, surrounded by the noise of the Orangemen practising for their parade, a staunch Protestant to the very end, Beth has just made her tea in a very special china cup, part of an old Belleek service she inherited from her husband's aunt. The mother has never drunk from the cup, but when Beth brings it to her it is too late.

When Beth leaves the house for the last time she leaves behind the framed photographs of her grandfather, her uncle and her brother in their British army uniforms, but she takes the cup and saucer with her in her handbag. There is no closure here. Beth moves off into the future but she takes her past, her memories of generations of women's story-telling with her, symbolised by the china cup and saucer. But having observed that past filtered through Beth's critical awareness, we recognise that she understands women can collude in their own oppression. The Beth who takes part in the playing of the scenes is a split 'I', the 'I' that speaks and the 'I' that is represented. But the Beth that steps out of the action, the 'I' that speaks to the audience is a unified 'I', the author of her own story.

During the ensuing fifteen years or so, feminism as a unified movement concerned with a simple deconstruction of the patriarchy has been splintered into feminisms, or even post-feminism, dependent on your viewpoint. Women like Cixous are pursuing new theories of feminine writing, such as 'writing the body', and women theatre practitioners are looking for non-naturalistic methods of representing female subjectivity. Devlin's realism, with its emphasis on verisimilitude, seems like documentation. With its closure, a re-establishment of order, it offers no prospects. It seems dated, unlike *Tea in a China Cup*, with its validation of memory, and its critical perspective on the past, both so crucial in an Irish context, which offers a way forward.

Jackie Fletcher, 2001