

# M is for the Million Significations

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**DIANE STUBBINGS**

*Anglo-Irish Modernism and the Maternal: From Yeats to Joyce.*  
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Reviewed by

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**D**IANE STUBBINGS' BOOK, *Anglo-Irish Modernism and the Maternal: From Yeats to Joyce*, represents a significant and much needed contribution to Anglo-Irish studies: an in-depth analysis of the status of the maternal in Irish literature. As the title suggests, Stubbings' broadly cast nets cover the complex subjects of modernism as forged by Joyce or O'Casey and as it emerged in Yeats's/Lady Gregory's Ireland. Religious and political/nationalistic representations of mother and the maternal particularize the broader context of Ireland's domestic politics and culture. One of Stubbings' principal interests is "the response of male writers to the mother figure embedded within Nationalist and religious discourse" (15) and, to that end, she examines representations of the life-and-death struggle "realized as battle not simply for creative

space, but for that space in which subversive creation has its fullest potential" (15). The mother-figure constructed and sanctioned by the Irish patriarchal cultural tradition is "reified by the writers themselves in order to maximize their own access to those creative spaces which are, in essence, the domain of the Mother" (15). As Stubbings sees it, those spaces encompass both "the indeterminacy and 'crisis in representation' that was central to modernism, and the opportunity to counter the mother-figure as constructed within Nationalist and religious discourses and, thereby, belie her efforts to confirm the artist-as-child within the cultural tradition those discourses promoted" (15).

Thoroughly theoretical, Stubbings' study makes effective use of Lacanian/Kristevan concepts that underpin her interpretation of patriarchal societal dynamics at the onset of modernism. In that context, maternal space, seen as a threat to the socio-symbolic order, provides "a loose stitch in the symbolic fabric by which the individual may unravel" all the subjugating systems, and, as Stubbings points out, "it is these symbolic disruptions that the Irish modernists were able to exploit"

by effectively resisting and thus re-writing the mother-figure in their works (11). Thoroughly researched, Stubbings' book draws on numerous other studies that have posed complex questions about the emergence of Irish identity and Irish modernism vis-à-vis resistance to British imperialism. And if "the need to construct an alternative Irish identity or consciousness does not, in itself, explicate the means by which an imposed consciousness was resisted and its counter-consciousness represented," Stubbings asserts, "It is my contention that the unprecedented concentration of literary modernism in Ireland stems from both the prevalence of the mother-figure in the Irish cultural tradition and the constricting conditions that any relationship with that mother imposed" (8). One of the poignant sections of the introductory chapter, "Mother Ireland Calls Me," reminds the readers that discourses of Catholic and Nationalist agendas urged "familial mothers" to resist British imperialism by minding the hearth at home and by baptizing the children in the Catholic Church. Their subjugation to the "cause" stands in stark contrast to the privileged and venerated mythical mothers

such as Cathleen ni Houlihan and the Blessed Virgin Mary and, states Stubbings, it was "this privileged space that was promised to the familial mother for her service, a space with no inherent power, all power reserved by and for those who constructed and disseminated the myths" (6).

The three core parts of the book (there are five altogether, including Introduction and Conclusion) offer a complex and ambitious set of readings and interpretations of works by W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, J. M. Synge, George Moore, and Sean O'Casey. At first glance, the table of contents seems to suffer from excess of titling and subtitling, but, upon reflection, it may well be worth emulating (or, at least, it may be worth citing here) because it is detailed enough to provide prospective readers with a good sense of the book's scope and import.

Thus, after an excellent and erudite Introduction, the readers move to Part Two, "Social Spaces" which concentrates on early works of Moore and Joyce. Its two sections are divided into three chapters. The first section, sub-headed "Home and Hearth: the Mother's Social Boundaries," serves as an introduction to the two

chapters that follow and it discusses some of the stereotypical concepts of the mother, from the Victorian "angel in the house" to the devouring, castrating mother. It also frames Stubbings' discussion of Moore's and Joyce's work in chapters titled "'A slut among nations': the Mother's Procurement of the Child in the Works of George Moore," and "Eve's Curse No More: Yeats's Displacement of the Mother, 1889-1914." The second section of Part Two, sub-titled "Mothers and Martyrs," introduces its only chapter, "Denying the Mother: Escaping Confirmation in Family and Father in the Work of James Joyce, 1907-1914," and traces the inter-relations between Christian iconography of son's martyrdom and such tropes as "Parnell's fall," *mater dolorosa*, "mother of the martyr," "mother's sacrifice," "Blessed Virgin," (and all the proliferations of Mariolatry, motherland, and "Nation").

Part Three of the book, "On the Edge of Disorder," contains two-chapters on works by Synge and O'Casey, each chapter with its own introduction. The first introduction, "Origin, Space, Opposition: Constructing, Containing and Privileging the Maternal," contextualizes a chapter titled "Disclosing Ritual and Challenging the Symbolic: Synge's Marginal Mother." The second introduction, "Rebellion and Revolution: *Couvade* and (Self-)Creation" prefaces a chapter titled "'What's ni Houlihan to You?': Sean O'Casey's Construction of the Mother." In this preface (richly woven from many other works on Ireland that precede Stubbings' book), such concepts as "father as origin" and "His-tory" are examined from the vantage point of Kristevan critique of patriarchal socio-symbolic order. They allow Stubbings to reach some insightful conclusions about the Oedipal nature of the dynamics between such patriarchal constructs as revolutionary movements and the subversive practices that sought to undermine hegemonic symbolic orders. For instance, Stubbings asserts that in an Oedipal construct of the Easter Rising,

mother-Ireland is subsumed by the English-father's name—the English-cultural father unchallenged by the weak and

incapacitated Irish-familial father—with the child inexorably drawn into the ambit of the English-father's authority. The child, in broad terms the Irish people, able to express himself [sic] only in the alien language of the oppressor, reaches out for an alternative father, an authority rooted in Catholicism and Nationalism and accessed through mother-Ireland, mythologized as mother in chains of Pearse's rhetoric or the poor old woman of Irish legend. (117)

And if maternal sacrifice is represented in terms of "the renewal of land and nation personified as mother, *it is not the mother who is renewed*" by such a sacrifice but rather the very symbolic structure of the signifying process (117; emphasis added)—ironies like that do not escape Stubbings, who is thoroughly tuned to the effects of exploitive, patriarchal politics of representation.

In Part Four, labeled "Symbolic Spaces," the umbrella subtitle, "Modernism and the Maternal: Appropriation of the Mother's Space and the Breakdown of the Symbolic," serves as a theoretical introduction to the two chapters that cover the works of Yeats and Joyce: "Playing Her Part Too Well: The Mother and Her Construct in Yeats, 1917-1939," and "'Let me be and let me live': Wrestling Subjectivity from the Mother in Joyce's *Ulysses*." The introduction acknowledges the myriad of terms that describe modernist texts (from "fragmentation" to "crisis" to "flux," 139) and the variety of definitions of modernism, whose phenomenon "effected an essential renewal of language, myth and, more generally, representation" (140). Next, the Kristevan/Lacanian context is set for discussing Yeats's later poems and Joyce's *Ulysses*. Citing Kristeva after Grosz, Stubbings contends that "Artistic expression—representation—is, as Kristeva's work insists, 'a kind of index of social stability'" (140), whereby texts "produced by and within any particular culture will either reinforce or resist that culture; crises in representation may be mapped against social and cultural crises" (140). Thus, as the artists felt the need to free themselves from the hegemonic rule of the British "father" (to

be supplanted by the native-bred cultural tradition of Ireland), they sought to effect "a shift in patrilineage" by attempting to encounter a mother first. According to Stubbings,

to be subject to the desired father necessitated first dissolving subjectivity within an Irish mother, a mother-Ireland. Yet, as writers such as O'Casey, Moore and Joyce emphasize, such a transformation is doomed to defeat when there is no effective father within either Irish society or Irish lore, and when the dominant mother-figures within Irish discourse insist on the death of the child in order to preserve their own status. (140)

Likely to re-ignite interests in Irish iconography of the mother figure in all of its proliferations, Stubbings' book is as rich in provocative statements about the political dynamics between the home front and the public front of struggle for independence, as it is rich in interpretations of textual representations of those fronts by Ireland's literary sons at the center of her study.

And if the expectation of the conclusion is to tie all these subjects together, some readers may find this expectation mildly frustrated at first: subtitled "'sad and weary I go back to you, my cold father,'" the conclusion introduces—rather scantily and misleadingly—the new subject, the phenomenon of Anna Livia Plurabelle. Misleadingly, because the discussion of ALP is very brief (about five pages of the conclusion) and it is studded with thirty-one footnotes referring to the Wakean literature. The readers unfamiliar with the *Wake* scholarship are likely to miss Stubbings' complex arguments which, relegated to footnotes as they are, could well constitute an autonomous chapter (if not a separate book). The conclusion recovers, however, when it returns to tying up the multiple strands of discourse woven throughout the book, as it effectively sums up the book's focus: from Moore's representation of the dominant "inter-relationship between mother, child and church," to the "social realization of the mother-child-church dynamics taken up by

Joyce" (189); from Synge and Yeats, who "dealt with the mother-figure at the level of her dualities," encompassing both her "social and symbolic spheres" (190), to O'Casey, for whom the desired mother (prefigured in subjectivity), was "displaced by the *construction* of that mother-figure who would stand in opposition to the child's desired subjectivity" (190). The Anglo-Irish modernists, contends Stubbings, "effectively murdered the mother" (191) through representation; such a "deconstruction" of mother-figures served both "to deny the cultural tradition and discourses in which she figured, and to create the conditions whereby maternal spaces could be appropriated and utilized in fostering not only creativity, but the reconstruction and renewal of signification" (192).

Stubbings closes her book by proposing that there were good reasons why all this should have happened with such intensity in the *fin-de-siècle* Ireland: because Anglo-Irish modernist writers had developed in the atmosphere of the mother-figure-centered cultural tradition and because "profound social and political shifts" had produced a slew of "symbolic disruptions and representational 'crises' not previously experienced" (192). Only by rewriting the literary, historical and cultural traditions could the Anglo-Irish writers forge their own tradition, continues Stubbings, and it was the "ruptures in the socio-symbolic order [that] afforded these writers the means of effecting the symbolic subversion integral to modernism" (193).

Stubbings' is not an easy book though it is, ultimately, a very rewarding one. Its complexities are many, so is its potential for generating critical responses to her arguments. One emerges from studying *Anglo-Irish Modernism and the Maternal* not only with a renewed sense of the vastness of post-modernist and post-colonial theoretical re-readings of history, but also with the sense of how much there is still to be said about the complexities of Anglo-Irish modernism in all of its socio-political manifestations. \*

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