

“Scratching Claw Marks on the Lid”: The (Dis)abled Female Character in Marina Carr’s *Portia Coughlan*

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the Irish playwright Marina Carr’s play *Portia Coughlan* and its eponymous character. Portia is a woman who does not fit in the traditional gender roles assigned to women in the Irish society. Due to her behaviour, strongly influenced by her craving after her lost brother, and thus different from the rest of the characters, she is deemed eccentric, strange, and excluded from the “normal” society, and labelled as a mad person. However, it is possible to argue that what “disables” her are, in fact, the social standards she does not fit in. In order to fully understand Portia’s “madness,” it is important to look at the matrix of intersecting social and cultural factors, in other words, to examine the character through the prism of disability studies, gender studies, the trauma theory and Christina Wald’s concept of the Drama of Melancholia.

Keywords: Marina Carr, Portia Coughlan, disability studies, gender studies, the Drama of Melancholia

Abstrakt

Artykuł skupia się na sztuce irlandzkiej dramatopisarki Mariny Carr oraz jej tytułowej bohaterce Porcji Coughlan. Porcja jest kobietą, która nie wpisuje się w tradycyjne role genderowe przypisane kobietom w irlandzkim społeczeństwie. Przez jej zachowanie, które znacząco różni się od pozostałych osób w jej otoczeniu i które wynika z jej tęsknoty za tragicznie zmarłym bratem, Porcja jest uważana za kobietę ekscentryczną i dziwną. Zostaje wykluczona z „normalnego” społeczeństwa i uznana za szaloną, jednakże to standardy, w które Porcja się nie wpisuje, a nie jej zachowanie, mogą być uznane za „nie-sprawniające”. Chcąc zrozumieć „szaleństwo” Porcji, należy przyrzeć się jej poprzez pryzmat wielu nakładających się na siebie nawzajem czynników, zarówno społecznych, jak i kulturowych. Innymi słowy, warto przeanalizować tę postać z perspektywy: studiów nad niepełnosprawnością, gender studies, teorii traumy oraz koncepcji „dramatu melancholii” Christiny Wald.

Słowa kluczowe: Marina Carr, Portia Coughlan, studia nad niepełnosprawnością, gender studies, „dramat melancholii” Christiny Wald.

Marina Carr is often seen as the one who refashioned the Irish stage, because she was among the first women writers who stood in opposition to “the traditional male hierarchy that had been predominant in theatre in Ireland” (Scaife qtd. in Sihra 2007, 204). Carr’s plays are mostly about women and are written from their perspective. These works can be juxtaposed with such canonical texts as, for example, Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which was, in fact, a play about women, but nevertheless, narrated from the male perspective (Sihra 2007, 208). Carr’s characters are usually subversive and they do not follow the traditional path of women which is limited to family life, children and the household. She tackles a number of women’s issues and frequently examines most difficult and traumatic experiences women deal with in their lives. Some of these problems are explored in *Portia Coughlan*, whose protagonist Sihra describes as “a woman who ultimately rejects the socially prescribed roles of wife, mother and daughter, finding solace in the Belmont River” (Sihra 2007, 209).

In her review of *Portia Coughlan*, Medb Ruane states: “*Portia Coughlan* is a brutal and passionate drama of family relationships and personal disintegration” (2003, 83). She later adds that “[w]hether physically or psychically, every character is damaged”

(Ruane 2003, 84). It is true that many characters in the play experience various problems, but not every character is labelled as “abnormal” or “cracked” (Carr 1999, 203) by society. With this in mind, I would like to argue that Portia, due to many reasons such as: the approach of society towards impairment, especially mental illness, gender issues, class issues, society’s perception of melancholia, and the personal experience of trauma, is a character who finds herself doomed and miserable at the end of the play.

In order to explain why Portia is considered bizarre, it is important to start with disability studies and to examine the social model of disability, with particular focus on the ways in which its assumptions are developed by intersectional analysis. As Konstantin Butz argues, intersectionality “uncovers differentiating categories that are used to discursively render everybody, i.e. literally *every body* identifiable according to attributes of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, ability, and so on” (2017, 100). Such an analysis is “politically informed and thus reveals precisely those axes of differentiation that have either oppressive or privileging effects for the body and its associated identity” (Butz 2017, 100). In this article, I would like to show how the aforementioned factors intersect and render the protagonist of Carr’s play socially disabled due to the ostracism she experiences because of the fact that she does not fit in the norms that are formed by the local society, which leads to her exclusion and demise.

In his article on the social model of disability, Tom Shakespeare explains why people with disabilities have started their struggle against oppression, bringing a new understanding to their problems. These problems “have been explained historically in terms of divine punishment, karma or moral failing” (Shakespeare 2006, 197). People with disabilities have often been treated as an underprivileged group since their impairments were believed to be caused by fate or God, and they have been seen as morally corrupted and deserving punishment. Such an approach to people with impairments is often called the religious model of disability. The medical model, which largely replaced it when medicine started, offered scientific explanation to certain disabling conditions, assumes that disability has to be cured and removed. It distances itself from the religious model and offers a more rational approach to disability. However, the approach that it represents is very limiting and does not allow for the idea that impairment does not have to be an obstacle. Thus, the social model, which Shakespeare elaborates on, is a third approach according to which “it is society which disables physically impaired people” (Shakespeare 2006, 198). If society was not prejudiced against disability and the built environment was more accessible to, for example, wheelchair users, we would not probably talk about disabilities at all. As Shakespeare concludes, “the disability movement has focused attention

onto social oppression, cultural discourse, and environmental barriers” (2006, 197). However, removing all the barriers is a utopian idea as it seems impossible to create such an environment that would be accessible to all.

In Portia’s case, when it comes to her being assessed by the people around her, it can be very interesting to, first of all, look at some instances of how her disability is understood by the society, which can be analysed referring to the religious and medical models of disability perspectives. Moreover, in order to widen the understanding of Portia’s condition, it is also important to take recourse to the social model of disability, which can be an analytical tool that will help examine the character beyond the scope of the local society’s grasp of her situation. The protagonist of Carr’s play struggles with the fact that society sees her as a person with a certain impairment that needs to be healed, but does not see its own disabling impact on Portia. What is more, Portia has some mental issues, mostly because of the fact that certain social roles are imposed on her, and the social prejudices against mental illness exclude Portia from a “normal” society. Additionally, most of her local environment sees her as deficient and odd because she is not a good mother and wife, and thus she is seen as “disabled” in the eyes of her family, friends and neighbours.

The protagonist is considered different by many characters in the play, just like her deceased brother was. When she meets with her lover Damus, and does not want to make love to him, but talks about the river, he ends their conversation with a statement: “You’re cracked as your twin” (Carr 1999, 203). Portia’s mother Marianne tells her husband Sly (Portia’s father): “[s]ometimes, Sly, I do wonder be that girl stable at all” (Carr 1999, 215), and thus hints at Portia’s, according to her, poor mental condition. When Marianne quarrels with Portia, she also uses phrases like “You’re not right in the head!” (Carr 1999, 248). Even Portia’s grandmother has some doubts concerning her granddaughter’s mental well-being: “[t]here’s a devil in that Joyce blood, was in Gabriel, and it’s in Portia too” (Carr 1999, 215). It seems like almost every character in the play considers Portia to be different, strange and even mad.

Such an understanding of Portia’s condition fits in well with the religious and medical models of disability. Portia’s grandmother reflects on the hereditary nature of madness or devilishness that has been passed down in their family, which suggests that some impairment hindering normal functioning in society was passed on to Portia by her maternal ancestors whom the woman describes as: “black-eyed gypsy tribe with their black blood and their black souls!” (Carr 1999, 215). Portia’s grandmother thus identifies mental illness with the action of some dark, unknown forces. Moreover, certain prejudices

connected with madness are clearly visible in the quotes in which Portia’s mother questions her mental wellbeing on the basis that she subjectively treats her as a bad wife and mother. When Portia talks about her longing for Raphael, her mother says: “If ya passed your day like any normal woman there’d be none of this!” (Carr 1999, 211). She thus suggests that if Portia carried out her duties as a mother, she would not fall into depression and madness. Moreover, Marianne’s statement parallels well with Damus’ comment: “If ya spent less time thinkin’ about that silly little brother of yours and more time on how I could please ya, you’d be a happy woman” (Carr 1999, 235–36). Thus, Portia is considered strange because she does not fit into the roles other members of the society would see her in. Everything is discussed from the perspective of Portia’s problem. Other people’s behaviour is not questioned at all. Additionally, Portia is treated mostly like a medical case, a woman who has mental issues and thus is not able to be a proper wife and mother, which automatically excludes her from the society and makes her an object of medical analysis. Such an understanding is suggested by the phrasing used by the characters in the play who describe Portia as being unstable, cracked, unwell, and as a woman not spending her day like a normal person. When Portia’s friend Stacia talks with her aunt Maggie, two women who seem to best understand Portia, she says: “She’s not well, Maggie May” (Carr 1999, 244). When Portia does not want to take care of her children, her husband says: “Portia, you’re not well” (Carr 1999, 234), or “It’s not normal the way you’re talkin’ and thinkin’, not normal at all” (Carr 1999, 234). He suggests that Portia should probably go to the doctor and try to receive treatment as her behaviour is far from normal. Moreover, she is considered strange and unusual, and her “impairment,” paralleling the religious model, is considered a character flaw and an unwanted trait, which was passed on her by some evil forces.

In Portia’s case, her otherness is constructed on the premise that she does not fit into the social roles prescribed for women, especially the role of a wife and mother. She is considered different, strange and asocial. She also lacks motherly instincts. As Sihra puts it, “[a] young woman in the 1990s, Portia Coughlan contrasts radically with passive and idealized images of femininity which present woman variously as symbols of nation, the maternal and the domestic” (2007, 210). Carr herself stated:

I don’t think the world should assume that we are all natural mothers [...] The relationship between parent and child is so difficult and so complex. There’s every emotion there. We mostly only acknowledge the good ones. If we were allowed to talk about the other ones, maybe it would alleviate them in some way. (Carr qtd. in Shira 2007, 211)

Portia does not fit in the role of a mother. She does not feel the need to take care of her children. She is not even happy to have them. In the scene in which Portia comes back home after Raphael has prepared dinner and has been waiting for her, they start to argue about her duties and family. She says: "I never wanted sons nor daughters and I never pretended otherwise to ya; told ya from the start. But you thought you could woo me into motherhood ... You've your three sons now, so ya better mind them because I can't love them, Raphael. I'm just not able" (Carr 1999, 221). Because of her being unwilling to take care of her children, Portia is automatically considered mad and damaged.

The issue of being psychically healthy is closely connected with fitting into certain gender roles like being a wife and a mother. When Raphael hears Portia saying that she would be happy if she were able to kill her children and that she also hates him, he says: "Portia... this isn't you" (Carr 1999, 222). He hence suggests that he does not want to take into account the fact that Portia would like her life to be different, but just dismisses her words as if they were mad talk. What is more, he does not want to do much about her condition or feels overwhelmed by it and, because of that, does nothing. Furthermore, when Portia is already dead, after her funeral, Stacia, her best friend, says: "Sure, I knew she was unhappy, but who isn't these days, must be a terrible state of mind to do what she done" (Carr 1999, 227). This hints at the fact that the society did not want to do much for Portia and help her. What is more important is the fact that she was recognized as leprous and odd, and that the people around her did not want to give her any help understood as, for example, friendly talk. She was perceived as a person who does not fit into the traditional female role of a mother minding her children, feeding and driving them to school. Probably, if she did so, but still felt inner disgust towards them, the society would believe that she is a good mother and she would be considered "normal." Nonetheless, Portia does not want to pretend and keep up appearances and is thus considered disabled.

As Lennard J. Davis observes,

we live in a world of norms. Each of us endeavours to be normal or else deliberately tries to avoid that state [...] There is probably no area of contemporary life in which some idea of norm, mean, or average has not been calculated. (2006, 3)

In order to fit into the society, everybody has to fulfil certain standards. By rejecting the norms, Portia condemns herself to a life of a disabled outcast, but, in fact, it is not so much her, but the society that makes her disabled and in need of being fixed by limiting her position only to the narrow role prescribed by social conventions.

Portia does not fit in what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls “the normate” and defines as

the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them. (Garland-Thomson 1997, 8)

Garland-Thomson stresses that the category is very oppressive as, in fact, “by peeling away all the marked traits within the social order at this historical moment, what emerges is a very narrowly defined profile that describes only a minority of actual people” (1997, 8). Approached from the perspective of gender studies, the ideal “normate” figure is a non-disabled, white, heterosexual, educated male who plays the central role in the patriarchal order. Thus, by virtue of being a woman who does not fit in with the mental “norm” and strongly resists all the normalizing forms of pressure exerted by those around her, Carr’s protagonist is instantly labelled as strange, different, and disabled.

When Portia meets Fintan by the river, she asks him if he remembers why the Belmont River is called this way. He mentions the woman whose story was connected with the river, referring to her as “a mad hoor of a witch... doin’ all sorts of evil round [there] but... [the people] fuckin’ put her in her place, by Jaysus they did” (Carr 1999, 219). Portia responds to his repulsive comment: “[s]he wasn’t a mad hoor of a witch! And she wasn’t evil! Just different, is all, and the people round here impaled her on a stake and left her to die” (Carr 1999, 219). This shows that Portia may herself feel like the woman from the legend, who was not accepted by the people around her, who eventually killed her. She thus knows how she should behave according to the standards and norms enforced by the society, yet she does not want to follow them and be a part of the system. What is also interesting is the fact that Fintan mentions that “the witch” was suppressed, suggesting that such “rebellious” women should always be tamed by traditional, Christian beliefs, and that what is normal for a woman is to stay within the realms of domestic and religious principles.

It is crucial to mention that Portia’s behaviour also results from her past experiences with her late brother, Gabriel. Portia had a very strong bond with him. She mentions that they were usually mistaken for one another and that they deliberately assumed each other’s identities: “[h]e used call me Gabriel and I used call him Portia. Times we got so confused we couldn’t tell who was who and we’d have to wait for someone else to identify us and put us back into ourselves” (Carr 1999, 241). The traumatic experience of his death

changed Portia, but her position in the society would probably be different, if she was not considered a woman with an impairment, which is regarded as a flaw in the character, according to the religious model of disability, as a moral depravity, and, additionally, as it was believed in Victorian times – a trait characteristic especially to women which shows in their madness. Portia's strong relationship with her late brother further disables her since as a result of her the trauma of losing him she often behaves strangely, and this even accentuates her "madness" as viewed by people around her.

Portia is surrounded by people who want her to be different, to fulfil either the role of a saint, or a whore. Her lovers would see her as "normal" if she made love to them. Her husband Raphael, by contrast, would see her as "normal" if she were a proper mother and housewife. At one point, he tells Portia: "[w]hen I first seen you walkin' by the river, I prayed to God to let me have ya, I showered ya with everythin' I thought a woman could want" (Carr 1999, 254). He thinks that since he proposed to Portia, gave her nice jewels, and had three boys with her, she should be thankful and happy. Such a scenario was supposed to be idyllic for her, and her dreams should come true. Portia should be "the self-sacrificing mother whose world was bound by the confines of her home, a woman who was pure, modest, who valued traditional culture [...] a woman who knew and accepted her place in society [and] served the purposes of the ruling Irish male elite" (Valiulis qtd. in Shira 2007, 211). Instead, Portia is a woman who "reject[s] male authority, seek[s] new lives beyond the strictures of the family unit, and refuse[s] to be haunted by the sick, dying and dead patriarchs in [her life] who left traumatized the women of the previous generation" (Singleton 2007, 186). Being such a rebellious woman, Portia excludes herself from the patriarchal society.

In the play, there are many characters who have some visible impairments, Raphael has a limp, Stacia, Portia's friend, has an artificial eye, and Blaize, Portia's grandmother, uses a wheelchair and is grappling with some illnesses related to old age, but only Portia is considered to have some disabling deficiencies. It can be argued that Portia's disability is invisible and thus rendered less serious and not considered a serious impairment, but a case of hysteria, or melancholia which can easily be healed. Yet, in order to fully explore her situation, it is crucial to take recourse to intersectionality and analyse Portia's case taking into account more factors.

Intersectional studies provide a broader context and show a matrix of factors that decide why a person experiences social exclusion and marginalization. The analysis of Portia's story makes for an interesting case with regards to class issues, trauma theory, and the notion of melancholia and gender issues. Shakespeare notes, "like gender,

disability is a culturally and historically specific phenomenon, not a universal and unchanging essence” (2006, 198) thus clarifying the similarities between disability and gender, which could be taken into account when speaking about the character of Carr’s play.

Christina Wald coined the term “the Drama of Melancholia” to denote plays whose “protagonists are unable to accept the loss of their loved ones, but resurrect the dead in their imagination and thus psychically preserve their presence. Freud describes this state of unresolved or disavowed mourning as melancholia” (Wald 2007, 161). This is precisely what happens in *Portia Coughlan*’s case. She is considered disabled and deviant because she does not fit in the stereotype of a virgin or a whore, but nobody ponders on the reasons of her melancholic state. She is instantly deemed unable to fit in the “normal” society, but no one examines the origins of her sadness. Some characters only acknowledge the fact that she is as different as her brother was, but even her husband does not seem to understand why Portia behaves the way she does. Raphael only says: “Portia, you’re not well” (Carr 1999, 234), or “It’s not normal the way you’re talkin’ and thinkin’, not normal at all” (Carr 1999, 234). Raphael uses some clichéd phrases, but does not try, and, maybe, does not want to fully understand Portia’s state and the reasons for her behaviour.

Christina Wald observes that another scholar, Naomi Schor, classifies “the current return of melancholy [as one that] exceeds any particular approach or single period; [and] would speak rather of the melancholy of the disciplines” (2007, 163). What is more, as Wald further argues, “melancholia in contemporary drama [...] becomes [...] a touchstone for subject formations, and in particular for formations of gender identity” (2007, 163). This leads to “Butler’s notion of gender as an inherently melancholic activity” (Wald 2007, 163), which should be examined as “the gendered reactions to loss depicted in the plays” (Wald 2007, 163), and Carr’s *Portia Coughlan* among them. Portia feels a strong bond between her and her brother: “[c]ame out of the womb holdin’ hands – When God was handin’ souls he must’ve got mine and Gabriel’s mixed up, aither that or he gave us just the one between us and it went to the Belmont River with him” (Carr 1999, 211). Portia feels a connection with her brother even after his death. She tells Raphael that she made love to her brother several times: “me and Gabriel made love all the time down the Belmont River among the swale, from the age of five – That’s as far back as I can remember anyways – But I think we were doin’ it before we were born” (Carr 1999, 253–254). Portia is not at all embarrassed or uneasy about the fact that she and her brother had an incestuous relationship. By talking so openly about it

she considers it as normal or, rather does it provocatively in order to question the established norms, thus highlighting the fact that they were close not only as typical siblings, but their relationship had also some romantic qualities. This can also accentuate the fact of the gender mix between the two. They were often mistaken for one another so the fact that they also had sex may draw attention to the homosexual aspect of their relationship, and the notion of some troubles deciding on their gender self-identity. The first quote where Portia suggests that her and Gabriel's souls were connected can imply that she also recognizes their genders as being mingled. The play features numerous hints at the fact that Gabriel was very feminine. In the conversation between Damus and Fintan after Portia is found drowned in the river, the connection they make between Portia and Gabriel is striking. They also highlight the blurring of gender lines between the siblings:

DAMUS Looked like a girl

FINTAN Sang like one, too.

DAMUS Aye – one thing I always found strange about them Scully twins.

FINTAN What was that?

DAMUS You'd ask them a question and they'd both answer the same answer – at the same time, exact inflexion, exact pause, exact everythin'. (Carr 1999, 224)

This suggests that the gender binary of male vs. female was blurred with regard to Portia and Gabriel. He was very girlish and very similar to Portia, while she also resembled him. The bond between them was both psychical and physical. Thus, such a relationship may have had an impact on Portia's behaviour after Gabriel's death. She shows symptoms of "melancholic incorporation" in which "the subject refuses to acknowledge the loss to the point of having hallucinations about the persistent presence of the lost one" (Wald 2007, 164). Portia has such hallucinations and is constantly drawn to the Belmont River where she hears Gabriel's voice.

Additionally, as Wald suggests, in the process of melancholic incorporation "the libido is withdrawn into the ego, where it establishes a narcissistic identification with the abandoned object" (2007, 164) and even "the subject desires to devour the object in order to incorporate it" (Wald 2007, 164). In the course of the play, we get to know that Portia witnessed Gabriel's suicide, and was initially planning to commit it together with him, but refrained from it at the very last moment and was unable to stop him. This can be the reason why Portia has, in a sense, incorporated Gabriel's soul and body into her own, and the fact that the Belmont River devoured his body can be seen as a mirroring

of Portia’s devouring Gabriel. Furthermore, this may also indicate a desire to come back to their initial phase when they were together in their mother’s womb. It can further be argued that Portia was the major reason why her brother committed suicide. She was very close to him up to the age of fifteen when the suicide took place, and on the day of the suicide she incorporated him into herself, thus creating two entities within one, and also incorporating his gender into hers. This experience empowered Portia, but at the same time, the realisation of the loss made her crave for the times when Gabriel was physically present.

Considered by society as dysfunctional and hysterical, Portia’s behaviour is exactly what Wald highlights in her analysis of the Drama of Melancholia: “[the characters’] reaction to the loss has melancholic qualities as described by Freud, because the protagonists hallucinatorily resurrect the dead and are unable to transfer their desire to a new object” (2007, 166).

Portia cannot love any other man, because as she claims many times, the only man she ever loved was Gabriel. She also admits that “the only reason [why she] married Raphael was because of his name, a angel’s name, same as Gabriel’s, and [she] thought be osmosis or just pure wishin’ that one’d take on the qualities of the other” (Carr 1999, 210), or she concedes that the only reason why she met with Damus Halion and wanted to make love with him by the river was because “he knew Gabriel” (Carr 1999, 213). Such behaviour disables Portia and makes her incapable of fitting the roles of a woman, lover, mother, and daughter. What is more, it is visible that her personal trauma is a dominant factor conditioning her behaviour and life.

Using Butler’s description of melancholic incorporation, Wald explains that “in the process of melancholic incorporation, the notion of ‘incorporation’ can be taken literally in the sense of an ‘incarnation’” (2007, 168). She later illustrates her point with a notion similar to “Freud’s concept of hysteric conversion, which assumes that psychic processes lead to physical symptoms” and that “this conversion can involve the literalisation of a metaphorical expression” (Wald 2007, 168). This explains why the fact that Gabriel is dead may have a direct influence on Portia’s state, and why the fact that the twins were different from the rest of the local community may lure the society into being sceptical of Portia’s well being.

Wald further suggests that the “fantasies of psychic and physical fusion of twin sister and brother in *Portia Coughlan*” (2007, 170) may be a trace of what Butler would call “a causal link between melancholia and gender, [which is why] melancholia in [Carr’s] plays can be regarded as a metonymy for gender identity” (2007, 170). This corresponds

to what happens in *Portia Coughlan* where Portia is similar to her brother, and he to her. They are both considered strange, Portia's mother responds to Portia's anger over the loss of Gabriel with the following words: "you're so dark Portia; always were" (Carr 1999, 210), or Sly, Portia and Gabriel's father, sees Gabriel as different: "Gabriel. Forget Gabriel, that unnatural child that shamed me and your mother so" (Carr 1999, 213). Even their parents recognize them as strange and different from everyone else in the community. What is more, as was already hinted at above, their genders seem to mix, just like their characters are similar, their genders change into one.

When Portia speaks about Gabriel, she often talks of him like of her lover. She says to Sly when he wants her to forget about Gabriel and busy herself with her family:

Forget Gabriel! He's everywhere, Daddy. Everywhere. There's not a corner of any of your forty fields that don't remind me of Gabriel! His name is in the mouths of the starlin's that swoops over Belmont hill, the cows bellow for him from the barn on frosty winter nights. The very river tells me that once he was here and now he's gone. (Carr 1999, 213–214)

When leading a love monologue about Gabriel, Portia often uses natural imagery and references to nature. This is similar to the biblical *Song of Songs* where two lovers talk about each other using imagery connected with nature and the natural environment. Portia thus treats Gabriel as an impeccable lover and an unattainable ideal male figure. Her craving for Gabriel and the fact that she often mentions that they were connected and often accidentally mistaken for one another may suggest that she also craves some attributes of the other gender, i.e. male traits. She ignores the other men in her life, as if she thought they are not only useless, but also too weak and too vulnerable to deserve to be her man. She often shows pride and superiority over them. Sometimes, she is not even afraid to show them that she needs them only to use them and dispose of them. When she meets Fintan for a date by the river and he proposes to take her out for dinner, she says: "[c]an have dinner at home, only want to fuck ya, find out if you're any good, see if there's anythin' behind that cowboy swagger and too honeyed tongue" (Carr 1999, 208). She often behaves like a macho who uses the other sex only to derive pleasure for himself. By such behaviour she puts on a mask in order to cover up her real traumas and problems and to fight with the society which assesses her cruelly for assuming a role which in a patriarchal society is connected with a position of power, not inferiority. Nonetheless, she is still deemed disabled, mentally ill and not fitting the social norms. As her mother tells her, trapping her yet one more time into the confines of gender, social, class, and

religious norms, “If ya passed your day like any normal woman there’d be none of this! Stop it! Stop it!” (Carr 1999, 211). By saying “none of this” she has in mind Portia’s melancholic state and weeping after the deceased Gabriel.

Wald aptly observes that Portia’s state can be considered melancholic on the basis of Freud’s definition of melancholia: “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings” (qtd. in Wald 2007, 185). Portia is treated by the society as an abnormal person who does not fit into the traditional female roles, and is thus deemed an insane person. Her behaviour is treated as infantile and deviant, hence she spends most of her time by the river where she hears Gabriel’s voice. As has already been mentioned, her mother suggests that Portia’s state results from the fact that she does not busy herself with household chores and activities typical of a mother of three children.

Gender issues show themselves both in Portia’s not fulfilling her role as a mother, and also in the fact that she sometimes seems to “confuse the boundary between masculinity and femininity and establish an androgynous ‘anatomy of melancholia’” (Wald 2007, 189). The fact that she cannot unite with Gabriel confuses her and influences her behaviour, which bears traces of melancholic apathy. If Portia were an upper-class lady, her melancholia would be considered eccentric or artistic. If she was born in the Victorian era, she would be treated for hysteria. She is a middle class woman and as such has a specific role to perform. She is not supposed to act like a rowdy lower-class girl, but cannot afford behaviour characteristic of an artistic and eccentric upper class lady either. Thus, Portia feels trapped and knows that no one understands her, and her “suicide shows how unliveable her fantasy of androgynous oneness is in the present-day rural Irish community” (Wald 2007, 214). In Portia’s case “melancholia [...] tends to be a malady [...] even a fatal malady” (Wald 2007, 223).

I believe that the madness/rebellion configuration subtly reinforces what has become an almost monolithic way of reading mental illness within feminist literary criticism, and perhaps in the larger culture of women’s studies scholarship. Elizabeth J. Donaldson criticises women’s madness as a form of rebellion against patriarchal rules, saying that “psychiatry, feminist critics pointed out, unfairly pathologizes women” (Donaldson 2011, 92). She claims that even though “in the face of [...] repression, ‘going mad’ might be considered the only sane response to an insane world” and that “the ability to ‘go mad’ also functions as a class marker of a higher sensibility”, “using madness to represent women’s rebellion has undesirable effects due primarily to the inevitable slip-page [...] between ‘madness’ and ‘mental illness’” (Donaldson 2011, 92–93). This is

what happens to Portia. Her individual trauma, which shows itself in her melancholic behaviour, is understood by other people around her as a mental illness, disability to cure and mend, but nobody cares to understand it and help her. When Portia tells Raphael in fury that she is so tired of her life with him and their family, and that her dream is to kill the children and smash their heads against the wall, he replies: “It’s not normal they way you’re talkin’ and thinkin’, not normal at all” (Carr 1999, 234), but he does not want to look deeper into Portia’s behaviour and thoughts. He seems to be uninterested in really helping her, understanding her grief. He never asks her how she feels about the situation she is in, how she truly feels about Gabriel. When she finally says that she only loved Gabriel, he just replies: “I’ve waited thirteen year for you to talk about me the way you’ve just talked about him. I’m weary of it all” (Carr 1999, 254). This, of course, can be understood as an expression of his breakdown and collapse, but if he wanted to help Portia, he could talk to her about her feelings, rather than reprimanding her for failing to take care of the children, or wash the dishes.

Thus, “[h]owever it is romanticised, madness itself offers women little possibility for true resistance or productive rebellion” (Donaldson 2011, 93), usually due to the fact that the society does not see their madness as a personal trauma, a problem, but only as a unit of medical characteristic which has to be treated with particular kind of pills and medications. Thus, as Donaldson observes, “theories that pay attention exclusively to the social causes and construction of mad identity while overlooking the material conditions of the body, and the body as a material condition, have a limited political scope” (2011, 95). Indeed, one could argue that when madness is used as a metaphor of feminist rebellion, mental illness itself is erased. Following this way of thinking, it is impossible to fully analyse Portia’s madness or melancholy only from one angle, such as the one offered by gender studies or disability studies. It is essential to look at such characters taking into consideration a matrix of factors, such as class issues, gender issues, melancholia, trauma, and disability. Here the intersectional model comes in handy, as it helps examine various factors causing social exclusion and oppression. As Donaldson suggests, what we need is a shift from “the model of madness-as-rebellion currently in circulation within women’s studies scholarship, and [there is needed] a more detailed analysis of some of the central terms and concepts of disability studies” (2011, 104).

Butz argues that “Intersectionality theory, I would like to think, will help us to produce and make way for such imaginings and *re-imaginings* as it deconstructs the coded barriers that hinder our imagination’s free floating development” (2017, 102). Intersectionality theory thus considers many different aspects of an individual’s situation. When

examining the (dis)abled protagonist of Carr’s play, it would not be sufficient to analyse her situation from a single perspective only. I would like to argue that only through a matrix of factors, which are, as I have already mentioned above, gender issues together with their feminist disability theorists’ commentary on the Drama of Melancholia, class issues, the religious, medical and social models of disability, it would not be possible to show that Portia Coughlan is disabled, meaning having very limited opportunities for self-development, being oppressed and discriminated which lead to her exclusion from society and, finally, untimely demise.

In order to position melancholia or madness as a disabling illness which the society tends to ostracise, it is important to think about mental illness in both medical and physical (and also social) terms (Donaldson 2011, 106). This also suggests using the intersectional model as a way of promoting a plurality of approaches which have to be examined in order to draw some conclusions. It is also important to mention that Portia is just one example of a character perceived as a patient with a mental illness, and that “the barriers confronting people with severe mental illnesses and cognitive disabilities are more complicated because they involve concept of the self that is the very foundation of our political system” (Donaldson 2011, 105).

Additionally, I would like to suggest that in the play, when it comes to Portia, there is more to her than just being a rebellious woman who tries to play pranks on the patriarchal society by refraining from fitting the norms. The problems lurking in the play and influencing her condition are also “the conflict of the idealized past versus the commonplace present” (O’Brien 2003, 203), “[t]he unhappy, unholy family [...] in the process of tearing itself to pieces” (McGuinness 2003, 79), or “helplessness (not quite total) in the hands of The Powers” (Mac Intyre 2003, 80). Claudia W. Harris aptly observes that Carr’s female figures fight for freedom and self-realisation, but in the end are conquered by prejudice and discrimination of the society and their struggle is like “scratching claw marks on the lid” (2003, 230). When analysing Carr’s play, it is rudimental to take recourse to many different categories which shape the understanding of the protagonist, and which are reflected in the intersectional model of analysis that takes into consideration a matrix of factors influencing the reading of the character, namely different models of socially constructed disability, gender issues, the Drama of Melancholia perspective or class conundrum.

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